

**The Awakening of Navi Septa**  
**Book Two**  
**The Mountain Mouse**  
**by Linda Williams**

**Contents**

Prologue

**Part 1 – The Tiger’s Sword**

- Chapter 1      An Overprotective Friend
- Chapter 2      Becoming Partisans
- Chapter 3      Visiting the Zaminders
- Chapter 4      Finding a Master
- Chapter 5      Old Friends Revisited
- Chapter 6      Rajay’s Tests
- Chapter 7      Queen Jansy

**Part 2 – Uncrowned King**

- Chapter 1      Friendly Persuasion
- Chapter 2      The Bathing Party
- Chapter 3      Fortune Tellers
- Chapter 4      Crossings Fort
- Chapter 5      Valya
- Chapter 6      Useful Information
- Chapter 7      Luring the Enemy
- Chapter 8      Help from the Tigers
- Chapter 9      The King and the Pirate
- Chapter 10     Port Volcan
- Chapter 11     The Aftermath

**Part 3 – The Wheel of Fortune**

- Chapter 1      Life at Court
- Chapter 2      Dealing with Coroso Raspatto
- Chapter 3      The Calm and the Storm
- Chapter 4      The Blacksmith’s Pass
- Chapter 5      Advice from Lionheart
- Chapter 6      Nobility in Defeat
- Chapter 7      Alliance with the Enemy
- Chapter 8      Subtle Forces
- Chapter 9      In Search of Robin
- Chapter 10     The Crocodile’s Lair
- Chapter 11     The Laundry Basket
- Chapter 12     Fugitives
- Chapter 13     The Holy Brother

**Part 4 – Ends and Beginnings**

- Chapter 1      Flying Horses
- Chapter 2      Back to Work
- Chapter 3      Provocation
- Chapter 4      Danard Fulfils his Vow
- Chapter 5      Positive Destruction

Chapter 6	The Circus of Doom
Chapter 7	Namoh and Lee, Ahren and Robin
Chapter 8	Refugees
Chapter 9	Another Surprise
Chapter 10	The Tour of the Country
Chapter 11	Celebrations
Chapter 12	New Beginnings

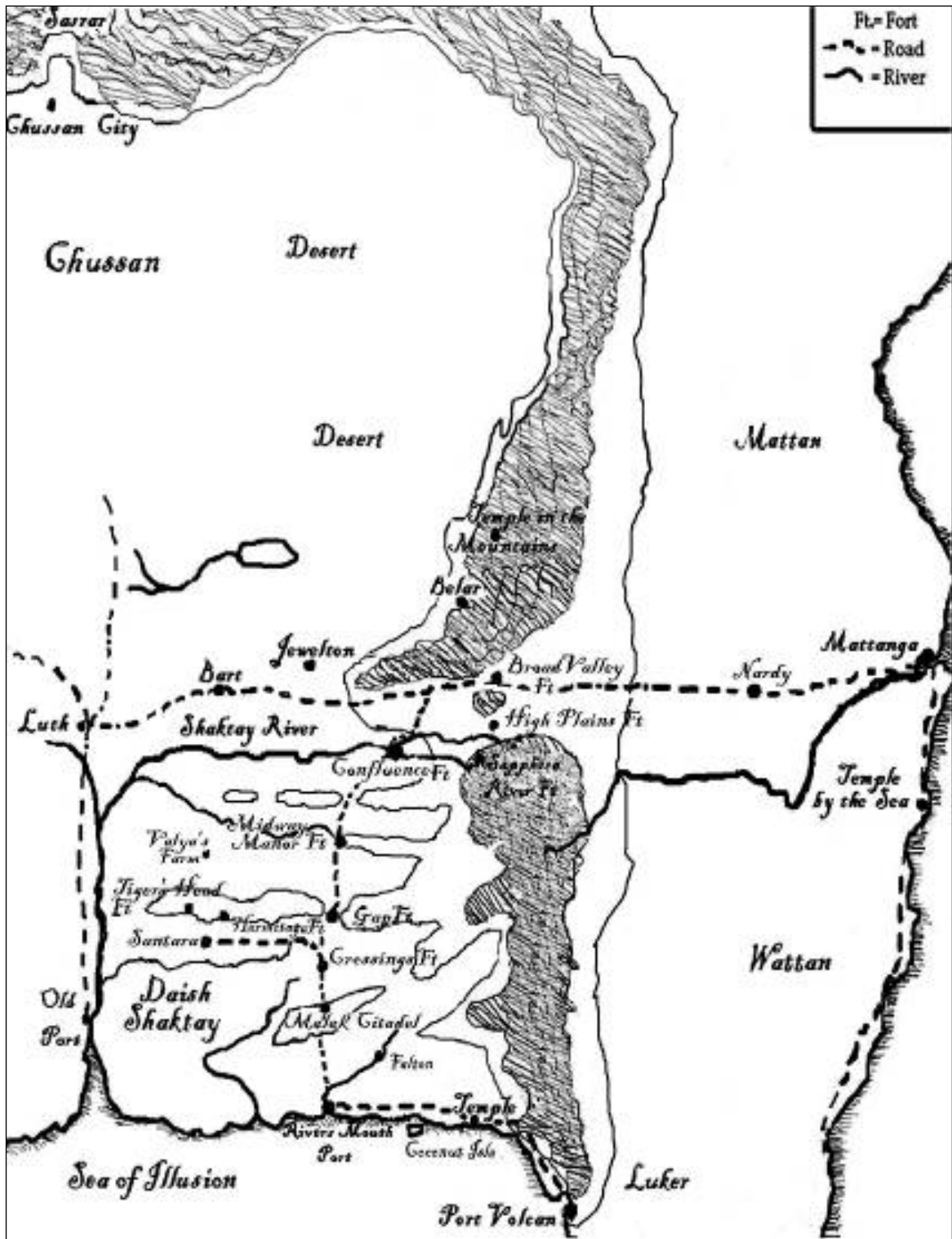
## Prologue

The first part of this story is related in *The Keys of Wisdom*. Raynor, then eighteen and the oldest of us seven, found an ancient prophecy which said some young people would travel to a northern country, where they would find spiritual powers to help them overthrow the evil Sorcerers, High Priests as they called themselves, then ruling Teletsia, where we lived. We had to run away from these devilish rulers and finally reached Sasrar, much further north, two years before this part took place.

By this time we had figured out that we were the young people foretold in the prophecy. Raynor married the oldest girl, Tandi. Lee, my intelligent cousin, Ahren, a formerly a wild country boy, and I, had now finished our education. My brother Derwin and his contemporary, Conwenna, a girl of eleven now, were still at school. We always had certain abilities, which in Teletsia we had to conceal. We could go into a state of inner peace, joy and stillness, and could not be hypnotised or terrorised by the Sorcerers. We also discovered that when we were in this state and asked ourselves a question, if the answer was 'yes' we would feel a coolness on the palms of our hands and if 'no', it would register as heat. This saved us time and again.

We also discovered that everyone had a subtle, inner 'Tree of Life'. The root of the tree is at the base of the backbone and its top at the crown of the head, and in between are five subtle centres placed at various points in the body. These centres correspond to different parts of the body and different aspects of a person's personality, but the tree had to be awakened for one to be conscious of it and to use its subtle powers, and in Sasrar everybody knew about this. The first thing we learnt there was that the Mother Earth has a Tree of Life and different countries corresponded to different subtle centres. Then there were the Keys of Wisdom, that we had come upon in extraordinary ways, and each key had the power of the subtle centre and country it matched. They were vital for the success of our journey. In Sasrar we learnt more about our inner selves, our powers and how we could use them to help ourselves and others.

As in the earlier book, *I, Asha Herbhealer*, am the narrator, and again there are some chapters where I was not personally present, so they are written in the third person. This second book begins just over two years after the end of the first one, I have also done some more pen drawings, which hopefully give the idea of the scenes better than a description could, and below is a map of the lands involved in this section of the trilogy.



A map of Eastern Chussan, part of the Mattanga Empire and Daish Shaktay

**Part 1 – The Tiger’s Sword**  
**Chapter 1**  
**An Overprotective Friend**

I had a vivid dream. I saw a road running through a narrow valley and along it came a baggage train – mules loaded with goods, and a number of fine horses being led and ridden. Some soldiers were guarding it and I recognized the livery of the official Chussan army – Chussan being the country to the south of Sasrar, where we lived. A band of young men appeared from behind some rocks, ambushed the soldiers and put them to flight. The grooms attending the horses also ran away, leaving the baggage train and most of the horses behind. One of the attackers had been killed and their leader, distraught, knelt by the body. This young man had beautiful vibrations, especially from his subtle heart centre. I knew my friends and I had to help him in some way.

I woke up, damp and cold from sleeping in a flimsy tent in the mountains, because we were spending a day or two at the southern end of Sasrar, high up in a small valley surrounded by snow covered peaks. Above us were some pine trees, and our tents were pitched up against the steep mountainside. Our ponies were tethered nearby, happily munching the short grass. This range spread along the north of Chussan and all the life giving rivers flowed from it onto the dry plains below.

I was now eighteen. Lee and Ahren were also both nearly eighteen and were sitting on the ground talking with Robin, four years older. He had straight, coppery brown hair, brown eyes and the light skin of the northern people. He was tall, strong and fit, and had an open, smiling face. With his quiet, courteous manner, one would not have suspected that he was the chief freedom fighter of Lord Albion, the rightful king of Chussan, at present living in exile in these same mountains. His flying horse, which he used to fly over the mountains between Chussan and Sasrar, was not with him and like us he had come up here on a pony.

Since coming to Sasrar Lee had grown up and although still stocky he was now taller and brawny. His dark hair still stuck out like a brush and our honey coloured skins contrasted with those of the locals. Ahren, another of our group from Teletsia, was no longer the tall gangly youth of two years before and he too had filled out and was well muscled. Raynor was also with us. He was now a schoolteacher at the local school in Kedar, but it was holiday time so he was not working. Tandil, Raynor’s wife, had not come, because she was not feeling well, but Conwenna and Derwin were with us.

‘The astrologers want to see you,’ began Robin, after we had finished breakfast some time later, and Conwenna and Derwin had gone off somewhere.

‘That’s all very fine, but how are we to get out of Sasrar?’ asked Lee. ‘You’ve got your flying horse, but Ahren’s might not want to take him over the mountains yet and I haven’t even started training one. There’s no other way out that I know of.’

‘There is,’ Robin went on. ‘That’s why I asked you to come up here on this border patrol. I had a message the other day from a shepherd on our side of the mountains, who was looking for some lost sheep and discovered they’d strayed right into Sasrar, through a cleft in the rocks. It’s round the corner there, under those crags. We can go out through it and then blow it up, because if shepherds can get in, then others who are less friendly could as well.’

‘I thought evil people could never get through these mountains.’

‘In theory they can’t, but you never know. Anyway, do you want to go and see the astrologers?’

‘If they’ve asked us, we must,’ said Raynor.

‘There are problems in the countries above the Sea of Illusion,’ Robin continued. ‘Something about an evil king, who has dreadful ogres doing his dirty work, and he also has a large army. Trouble is, it means any groups of people trying to come to Sasrar will have a hard time getting through, especially if they come from the Eastern Ocean.’

‘Being as those countries are connected with the subtle centre of the heart, it’s no wonder I’ve been feeling a dull ache there,’ I added.

‘You’re not the only one. I reckon the astrologers want the boys to help fight these ogres. This isn’t for you, Asha.’

‘Did they actually say that?’

I looked at the beautiful ring I was wearing, a present for my recent birthday. It was gold, and engraved with the four petalled flower which represented the first centre of the inner Tree of Life.

One of the qualities of this subtle centre was the ability to overcome all obstacles, including, I thought, those created by this over-protective young man.

'No, but girls don't go to war, do they?' Robin turned to the others, 'We should leave soon. Asha, can you take the young ones home?'

'I suppose so.'

The conversation moved on and I sat listening in silence, plotting my next move. Robin might have been a brave and ingenious partisan, used to outwitting the forces of the Chussan government, but I was not going to let him get the better of me so easily. A little later I went to find Derwin and Conwenna. They were now down the valley, gorging themselves on the plentiful wild fruit they had found. Our dogs, Nog and Kootie, were with them, playing with each other and chasing the occasional hare or rabbit they put up in the heather and other bushes.

'Listen, I want you two to help me,' I munched some plump, tasty raspberries.

'OK. What's it this time?' asked my brother.

'Robin says the astrologers want us to go and help in one of the countries further south. He doesn't want me to go, but try the vibrations: should I? I felt cool, but see if you feel the same.' Conwenna and Derwin put their hands out and asked the question in their hearts.

'It's so cool for you to go!' insisted Conwenna.

'You've got to!' agreed Derwin. 'How are you going to get there? We can't get out the way we came in. The door shut tight and became part of the mountain after we'd come through it.'

'Robin has found a sort of cave. He'll go out through it with the boys, then blow it up behind him so no one else can get in.'

'So?' said Conwenna.

'I'll go through it some time before they leave and hide until they've blown it up. Then they can't send me back.'

'But surely they'll go along with the vibrations if it's cool for you to go?'

'Don't be too sure. They always want to protect me from danger.'

'Why can't we come?' asked Derwin.

'You've got to finish your schooling. You can't go through life semi-literate,' I did my big sister act.

'I suppose you're right,' Conwenna, put her hands in front of her again. 'There aren't any cool vibrations when I ask for us - my hands are warm and tingling. What do you want us to do?'

'First, get yourselves and the dogs home without me.'

'That's easy! It's not far to the Channum's farm and we can stay with them any time,' said Derwin.

'Secondly don't tell the boys or Robin my plan. They'll leave soon, on their ponies. I'll pretend to feel a bit ill and say goodbye now, and tell them I'm going to ride slowly on down the valley with both of you. In fact, I'll take my pony through the cleft in the rocks. I don't want to lie, but the vibrations are the highest truth. They always try to stop me doing what they call wild and dangerous things, especially Robin; he can be a bit too much sometimes. He doesn't know what we went through on our journey here.'

I won't repeat what Lee said to me when I appeared from behind a boulder on the path beyond the rock cleft and cave after Robin had blown them to smithereens. Lee always looked after me like a brother, so had some right to be incredibly angry. Robin was also extremely short and not his usual congenial self. Raynor, so extraordinarily honest, simply couldn't believe I'd been a bit free with my definition of 'down the valley'. Only Ahren was amused.

'If the vibrations were cool for you to come,' he chuckled, 'come you will. I know you, Asha.'



The next day, after a fearsome ride on narrow tracks that clung to the sides of deep valleys, we trotted into the yard of the astrologers' summer home. Some of Robin's friends came from the village of Upper Dean to help us with our ponies and then we went to see Mrs Pea-Arge in her kitchen. She greeted us as if we had only been away a month, not two years, and sat us in the staff hall with hot drinks.

'My goodness, you've grown, Lee!' she began. 'And you Ahren. You look like one of those partisans young Robin's been training. And Asha, pretty as a spring dawn now you've put on a bit of weight!'

She was a bit too flattering about my looks, but I no longer had the tense expression and skinny beanpole body of two years before. Mrs Pea-Arge asked warmly after Derwin and Conwenna, and about Tandi's marriage to Raynor. When we told her we were possibly going south again, she said, 'Raynor, you can't just go off and leave Tandi alone like that. You might be away ages.' Raynor was silent because he had forgotten to test on vibrations to see if it was cool, therefore alright to come.

The next morning we were in the rose garden in front of the rambling mansion on a warm summer's day. Robin and the three astrologers joined us; Lord Albion was not there because he was off on some partisan quest. We stood up, bowed our heads slightly and pressed our palms together in the gesture of respectful greeting, then we all sat on the lawn between the flower beds, surrounded by fragrant roses of many colours. The valley stretched out below us, and far above were the high, snow covered peaks.

'It's a pleasure to see you,' began the eldest, who had a beard and a dark skin.

'It's a great honour that you've called us, sir,' replied Raynor.

'Sasrar has done you all a power of good,' continued the middle-aged man, who always wore white, 'but now, if you like, it's time to go south again. Not to Teletsia; you're not ready for that yet, but to Daish Shaktay, above the Sea of Illusion. What are your commitments in Sasrar?'

'Ahren and I have been doing our share of border duty, as has Raynor,' contributed Lee.

'I'm working as a school teacher,' said Raynor.

'I've been looking after my brother Derwin and the little girl, Conwenna,' I added.

'And the older girl?' asked the youngest astrologer.

'She's now my wife,' Raynor replied.

'This mission is not for you,' he continued. 'It could be a one-way trip, because it will be dangerous. There are problems in Daish Shaktay. The young man who should be king there is called

Rajay Ghiry. He's an awesome freedom fighter and his enemies can't catch him, so far. They call him the Mountain Mouse.'

'What can we do?' asked Lee.

'The vibrations indicate that you three, Lee, Ahren and Asha, could help him. For you boys there may be some fighting. Are you up to that?'

'We'll do our best, sir,' said Lee. 'Robin has been training us.'

'Good. What about you, Asha?'

'Robin is adamant that as I'm a girl I shouldn't fight.' I looked at Robin but he avoided my gaze, staring pointedly at an eagle wheeling far overhead. No one commented so I went on. 'The most important thing I've learnt in Sasrar is how to awaken the Tree of Life.'

'Could you give this to people in Daish Shaktay?' asked the middle-aged man.

'Yes, I think so, but I'm nervous of making mistakes.'

'Don't let that stop you – we all make mistakes,' laughed the youngest astrologer.

'How are we going to get you there?' mused the oldest man.

'I'll take them across the desert,' Robin was looking increasingly worried when it became clear that I was going too. 'It's the best way, but they couldn't make it alone.'

'So, young warriors of truth: this is your first assignment!' said the youngest of the three. I wasn't sure I could be a warrior of truth, but I'd let myself in for it now.

The middle-aged man turned to Raynor, who looked embarrassed. 'You did a great job getting your friends to Sasrar,' he said encouragingly. 'You need to be there a bit longer and you can go back through the mountain.'

That evening we were in the staff hall, enjoying strawberries and cream. We sat round the long wooden table and behind us a fire burned in the grate, because it was sometimes chilly here in the evenings, even in summer.

'We're going to have to disguise you again,' Robin chuckled, gleefully.

'Oh no! That awful hair dye took ages to grow out,' wailed Ahren. On our journey to Sasrar we had been transformed from brown skinned, black haired Teletsians into people vaguely resembling the fairer folk of this area.

'That bleacher really dried up my skin, and made me as wrinkly as an old apple for weeks,' I moaned.

'The Chussan troopers may still be after you,' explained Robin patiently. 'If *you* insist on coming, Asha, *I* insist you disguise yourself. I'd never forgive myself if you got caught.'

'OK, you win,' I conceded. 'Where's the beauty parlour?'

'I'll deal with Lee and Ahren, and Mrs Pea-Arge will transform you.'

There was no escape.

The next morning three brown haired, light skinned young people, and Robin, who always looked like that, set out for the plains south-east of the mountains. The story was that Lee, my brother, was taking me to my husband-to-be in the south, and the others were guarding us from outlaws. Robin had been in hiding recently and now lived with the astrologers when not travelling around the country secretly organising bands of partisans.

We wound our way through the high valleys and finally reached the plain, where we changed our woollen clothes for flowing cottons and kept one cloak each, to keep out the night chill. We travelled light and only took absolute essentials: two or three changes of clothing, money, weapons, food and water bags, in case any of the wells or water holes in the desert were dry. Often there was a day's journey between them.

We set off through the arid lands, where only coarse grass, aloes and cactuses grew, along with thorny bushes. It was dry, unfriendly and searingly hot. Well, hot in the day and freezing at night, so we travelled mainly at night. This empty, desert-like land was so still under the bright moons' light that we often talked as we rode steadily south and east. We had many interesting conversations and one I particularly remember concerned the nature of the guardians. Robin explained that they were highly evolved souls from another planet, who took their birth on this earth, but were neither invincible nor incorruptible and were susceptible to all the temptations that anyone else had to face.

Lee asked Robin how he first met Lord Albion. He told us that from childhood he felt a deep dissatisfaction with Chussan and longed to make things better, and knew he had to find someone to help him. When he was fourteen, a well-spoken young man came into the yard in Chussan City where Robin's father, Mr Markand, had their animal dealing business. He wanted to buy some horses and asked if someone could ride up into the mountains with him to help deliver them, so he and Robin set off, and once they were out of the town he introduced himself as Albion, the king in exile, and told Robin that he had come to find him, and the animals were only an excuse. He had been guided to the Markand's yard by the cool vibrations. After this Robin frequently went up into the mountains to be with Lord Albion. They often went to Sasrar on flying horses, Robin became a partisan and they went all over Chussan on secret missions.

True to his word Robin guided us perfectly. He led us to the often hidden water sources and we did not get lost once. We barely spoke to anyone except each other until we approached the southern side of the desert. Some rain fell on these mountains and there were a few villages on the banks of the streams that flowed from higher up and were used for irrigating the dry land. The people there told us that the two brothers who ruled Chussan had made an alliance with the ogre king and on one occasion, when Robin had gone to see some partisan friends for a short time, Chussan troopers had waylaid us three Teletsians and asked us our business, but our excuse, that they were taking me to my future husband, had been believed. By now our disguise had begun to wear off, but fortunately they did not notice, as they accosted us late in the evening when it was nearly dark. Another evening we were camping in a farmer's barn. The farmer knew Robin, but we stayed in the barn to hide ourselves, because this was safer.

'Asha, you must look more demure and shy,' Robin advised, 'like a village maiden going to meet the man she's to marry. You're much too open and confident.'

'Sorry, but we three have been around, a good way round the world, in fact,' I joked.

'It'll be some time before any of us really get married,' said Lee.

'Yes, we've got so much to do,' Robin replied. 'Me in Chussan and you - the astrologers said this mission will be a training, before you go back to Teletsia. We all have our vows to fulfil. Our lives are going to be dangerous for some time, and if we were married, that could hold us back.' We had told Robin about our vow, made in Teletsia, to try and free our country of the Sorcerers, and he had made a similar one. 'I'm going to leave you soon. We're across the desert now. The land around here doesn't belong to Chussan, although they do try to control it. I don't know it very well so I'm not much use as a guide.'

'You're always such a help and I feel so safe when you're with us,' I said.

'Thanks for the compliment, but I'm needed up north. Lee and Ahren can look after you.'

We rode on for another day and mercifully did not come across any more Chussan troopers as we crossed the parched plain, down a good road made of packed earth. Robin was wary and told us to watch out for the people who lived here, because they were a rough lot. 'We kill 'em first and ask their names afterwards,' chuckled one man, when Ahren asked how they got along with the troopers. Lee wondered if we had been foolhardy to come into this lawless area without any definite plan, and then we saw a village nestled up against the eastern hills in a valley, among some green, irrigated fields. We approached it and Robin said this was where he would have to turn back. He told us to go on to the village, where he would catch us up and we could have a meal together before he left. Meanwhile he wanted to see a mule breeder who lived nearby, one of his network of partisans. He went down a track onto the plain to behind a rocky outcrop, where the mule breeder had his farm.

We rode on into the village square in the late afternoon. The ground was dry and dusty, with a few tired trees eking out a living near the small stone houses surrounding the square. In one corner was a bullock, walking in a circle around a pole attached to a device for raising water from a well, into a channel which led to troughs and gardens. We went over and asked for a drink from a boy whose job was to hit the bullock with a stick periodically and urge it on when it got fed up with its endless circular quest. After being given water for ourselves and our ponies we walked over to a rail at the other side of the square, hitched them to it and went into the one food shop, as our stores were low. Some of the villagers who were standing together eyed us suspiciously, then looked away and went on



with whatever they were doing. We bought provisions for ourselves and grain for the ponies and as we packed our shopping into the saddle bags we overheard the villagers talking.

‘The Chussan troopers are after him and his gang...’

‘They say he’s from a royal family...’

‘Yet another band of outlaws, I reckon...’

‘He comes from Daish Shaktay. He captured a baggage train that was being sent to the ogre king, Karlvid of Mattanga, as tribute, from Chussan. He said, “Both Chussan and Mattanga have stolen so much from us and I need the money to pay my army.”’

‘Sounds like our man,’ whispered Ahren.

‘How do we find him?’ asked Lee.

At this moment a farmer arrived in his bullock cart, beating his lumbering animals into a reluctant gallop. He saw us, jumped off his cart and ran over to where we were standing.

‘Come here, quickly!’ he cried, and grabbed the boys. He pushed them round the corner of a house at the side of the square. I followed.

‘The troopers are just down the main road, coming this way,’ he began. ‘Get on your ponies and leave, right now. They know about you, because that young man with you is the most wanted rebel in Chussan.’ Ahren looked horrified. Robin had been risking his life for us, yet again. ‘Where is he?’

‘He’s gone to see a friend who breeds mules,’ Lee pointed in the direction that Robin had gone.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll hide him,’ the farmer added.

‘Which way do we go?’

‘Up into those hills. Follow the path by the stream bed, it’s quicker than the road. After three villages you’ll come to an old temple. Don’t be afraid of the weird shrieking noises, it’s only the wind in the rocks. We tell ’em troopers it’s ghosts so they keep away. Off you go,’ he hustled us towards our ponies.

‘But...’ protested Lee.

‘If anyone stops you, say old Pahari sent you. I’m the headman here and they all know me. Now go, and go fast.’ He took off to find Robin and we galloped up the hillside.

Afterwards Pahari returned to the square and called the villagers together. ‘We’re all enemies of those Chussan troopers, aren’t we?’ he began. There was a cry of approval. ‘So, if they ask, those strangers went along the road into the desert. If anyone tells the troopers where they’ve really gone, you all know what happens to people who betray us.’ He fingered the long dagger by his side.

## **Chapter 2** **Becoming Partisans**

It was the dregs of dusk when we reached the large, partially ruined temple. It was in a compound of a number of buildings and was surrounded by a wall which was tumbling down in places. Behind it we found a large cave with an old wooden door, in the side of the rocky valley. We hid our ponies there, after giving them water from a cistern and some of the grain we had bought, then walked through the gateway into the deserted temple compound.

‘Watch out for snakes,’ called Ahren from behind.

‘There goes one now!’ I warned, as a long thin tail disappeared into a hole at our feet. Fortunately all three moons were up and we could see where we were going. We stamped our feet as we walked and a variety of other reptiles and small animals slithered and scuttled into their homes. We explored the abandoned buildings around the edge of the walled compound and found the main shrine, a large domed building in the centre of the courtyard, sat on its steps and had our supper: bread, spiced dried sausage and some fruit.

‘I hope Robin’s all right,’ began Ahren. ‘I don’t feel any fear when I put my attention on him.’

‘You wouldn’t. He’s as brave as a lion,’ Lee put in, ‘but let’s ask on the vibrations: is he safely away from the troopers?’

‘It’s very cool,’ I said, ‘He’s OK.’

‘He’s – so selfless, so modest,’ said Lee philosophically.

‘He’s great company,’ Ahren was more down-to-earth. I was silent, but realised he had now saved our lives more than once. What a friend!

We fetched our bedrolls, lit a candle and went into the temple. In the centre of the hall was a dais and on it was a lifesize statue of a lady, made of silver and copper. The face, hair, hands and feet were of copper and the robes were silver, glinting in the candlelight. At her feet was a tiger, also made from silver and copper. Someone cared for this place; the flagstone floor was swept clean, the statue had been polished and some flowers had been offered.

‘Do you think we should sleep here?’ asked Ahren.

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘as long as we’re respectful.’

‘I agree,’ added Lee. ‘Let’s bed down behind that marble tracery, so if anyone does come we won’t be seen. Asha, you go that side of the statue and we’ll be here.’

‘Let’s say a short prayer, that we can somehow meet up with this Rajay Ghiry,’ I proposed.

‘You’re hopeful,’ Lee replied.

‘Yes, I am. That’s what my name means – hope – remember?’

We duly knelt in front of the statue and I made the request on behalf of all of us, after which we laid out our bedrolls. Lee and Ahren were soon sound asleep, but I just tossed and turned. The more I looked at the statue, the more invigorated I felt. After a while I noticed something in the doorway. At first it looked like a large dog or pony, but then I saw the silhouette clearly. It was a tiger. I clutched at the key around my neck and it turned to look directly at me, hidden behind the tracery. It walked towards me and stopped close by, on the other side of the marble screen. It had a gold collar and I realised it was a guardian tiger. Meeting it here did not surprise me; when I saw the statue of the tiger, I was reminded of them. I stood up quietly, put a shawl around my shoulders and went towards it. It took my shawl in its mouth and led me out of the temple, through the ruined gateway and into the rocks at the side of the valley. The moons were all nearly full, making it a very bright night.

Behind one of the rocks it began digging, and after pushing some stones aside, revealed a sword in a scabbard inlaid with gold and decorated with rubies and sapphires, with the twelve petalled flower of the fourth subtle centre embossed on the hilt. The tiger picked it up in its mouth and gave it to me. It was magnificent, and I drew the sword out of its scabbard. As I did so I felt a gust of cooling wind flow over me and it seemed to come from the sword. There was some writing on the blade in the classic language, which I could now understand, and just about read, in the bright moons’ light: ‘The sword of the rightful king of Daish Shaktay, by the grace of the goddess who protects his land. May all those faithful to him swear allegiance on this blade, symbol of his right and fitness to rule, as the instrument of truth and justice.’ There was more, but that was enough for me to realise the tiger had given me something incredibly important.



While I read this the tiger disappeared. 'So,' I thought, 'I've been given this beautiful sword, we know who we have to find, and he might even be in the district, but however are we to put it all together?' I decided to wait until morning, when I could talk to the others, and returned to my bedroll.

Later I heard voices and some young men came in. They were tough, unshaven and walked fearlessly. Not the sort you'd want to get on the wrong side of. They carried weapons, and their clothes, although worn and dirty, were of good quality. I was well hidden, but was scared. Were these the troopers? Were they bandits? Their vibrations were very cool, I knew we were safe and my fear was replaced by curiosity.

Lee and Ahren woke up immediately, but like me kept dead still behind the marble latticework so as not to be seen. The moons' light filtered through the doorway and we watched. The young men laid their weapons reverently at the feet of the statue and knelt in obeisance, then stood up and one, presumably their leader, turned to face them. He was medium to tall in height and his piercing eyes lit up his face when he smiled. My inner Tree of Life jumped as if in recognition when I put my attention on him, and I felt his subtle heart centre: brave, powerful, compassionate. I recognised that face – I'd seen it in my dream of the ambush. He was the person who had been kneeling over his fallen comrade.

'Those of us here tonight are party to a solemn oath,' he began. We looked at each other from behind our screen. 'We swear, before this image of the goddess who protects Daish Shaktay, that we will not rest until we have freed the whole of our country from its wrongful rulers, or died in the attempt.' The others solemnly repeated his words. 'It's been dangerous to come this far north, but only with divine help can we succeed. Let's get some sleep now. The old guesthouse by the gate is a good place. I'll take the first watch and stay in here.' Although his attitude was relaxed, he was evidently used to giving orders. Another young warrior stepped forward; I later learnt his name was Danard.

'We must make another oath, that we'll accept Rajay as our leader until he releases us from his service, or we die in the attempt to make him crowned king of a free Daish Shaktay.' They all made this second promise and I remembered the writing on the sword.

I looked at Lee and Ahren, and assumed they would stand up and introduce themselves, but Lee indicated we should watch and wait a bit longer. The young men, meanwhile, took their weapons and left, apart from Rajay Ghiry, who sat down cross-legged in front of the statue. He had dark hair, a dignified, straight nose and a determined chin, at present covered with a ragged beard, and on his cheeks was a thick stubble. I also noticed his hands, with their long, strong fingers resting palm upwards on his legs. He radiated a feeling of absolute peace, joy and benevolence; his outer appearance was that of a hardened partisan and his inner self that of a saint. Some time passed and I wondered what to do, not wanting to disturb his serene meditation. Lee solved the problem. He dropped off to sleep again and turned noisily. Rajay Ghiry was instantly alert and grabbed his sword from in front of the statue. I was sure he wouldn't harm me so I stood up and walked out from behind the marble grill holding the sword I had been given, bowed to him and presented it. He looked at me in amazement.

'What a gift! My prayer has been answered. I was praying for guidance, for some sign,' and he took the sword.

'Please, unsheathe the sword and read the writing on the blade,' I asked shyly. He did so.

'It's too dark to read in here,' he pointed out sensibly. 'What does it say?'

'It's for the king of Daish Shaktay. That's you, isn't it?'

'Yes, if I'm worthy to be so,' he stared at the blade in wonder. 'Are you an angel, or something?' He looked at me with a hint of a smile. I wasn't looking very angelic – my hair was unbraided and fell untidily down my back, and my travel stained shawl covered the long cotton shift, frayed and worn, that I always wore at night.

'No way, that, she is most definitely not!' grinned Ahren, standing up. He and Lee came nearer, their hair tousled from sleep and not looking remotely threatening.

'We've come from Sasrar to help you. I'm Lee, this is my friend Ahren and my cousin Asha, Your Highness. She has a way of finding important things at the moment they're needed.'

'That's for sure! Call me Rajay. I'm hardly a king yet, only a freedom fighter. But this sword! An old rhyme says a maiden will give a sword like this to the one destined to make our country great again. There's even a tiger mentioned.' He looked at the statue of the goddess with the tiger at her feet

and reverently placed the sword at its base, then gave me the traditional blessing: 'Most auspicious lady, may you always bring such good fortune, in all places and at all times.' He put his right hand on his heart and bowed his head. I had just enough composure to give the expected reply.

'I bow to you too, my lord. May such blessings as you give return to you a hundredfold,' and also put my hand on my heart in the gesture of humility.

'You are my most honoured sister!' he smiled, broadly this time.

Rajay's friends heard our voices, came running to protect their leader and as they entered the temple he raised his hand, indicating we were not dangerous. 'The fact that we've found each other and this sword has come to me cannot be a coincidence,' he went on, and I felt a blast of coolness coming from the statue, or maybe from the sword lying in front of it.

'Where *on earth* did you get that sword from?' Lee took me aside and whispered.

'A tiger gave it to me.'

'I believe you, although not many would.'

The next morning I slept late and only woke up when Lee brought me a hot drink. Generally I was the cook and looked after the boys but today was an exception. I sat on the steps of the shrine and sipped the amber coloured tea, and noticed the young men had undergone quite a transformation. They were clean, had either shaved or their beards were neatly trimmed, and no longer looked like outlaws.

'We found a great bathroom near the monks' dormitory,' Ahren pointed to it. 'It's a cave with two little springs, one warm and one cold: hot and cold running water for a change! We're all finished there now, so you can go and clean up if you want.' I went off and as I passed the dormitory, now our stable, I overheard two of Rajay's friends talking together.

'Those lads are going to be a great help. They look like they can fight; no wonder Rajay was so pleased, but I don't know about the girl. She's a nice lass, but we'll have to leave her somewhere safe in the next few days,' commented the first, whose name was Varg-Nack. He was a strapping heavyweight and made even Lee look puny. He had light brown skin and his black hair was very short.

'Rajay was thrilled with the sword,' explained Valya, the other one, 'and it was the girl who gave it to him.' He was tall and slim, with dark brown hair and honey coloured skin, strong features and a sensitive expression that transformed into a shy smile.

At least someone is on my side, I thought gloomily, not relishing the idea of being offloaded on the first hospitable family we came across. I washed, was given some breakfast by one of Rajay's friends and decided to do a bit of exploring. I checked on the vibrations it was safe and set off through the gateway of the shrine and down the steep twisting track to a farmhouse some way below.

Rajay, who was an excellent climber, led Ahren and Lee up to a rocky ledge, high on the cliff beside the temple. He kept watch and talked to them, because they needed to get to know one another.

'Those horses,' began Ahren, 'some of the finest I've ever seen.'

'Yes,' replied Rajay nonchalantly, 'they were from the baggage train we took, part of the tribute from the Chussan brothers to the ogre king of Mattanga. The Mattanga thieves have stolen goodness knows how much from us, along with whole slices of my country itself, and the Chussan government encourages their raiders to attack our trading caravans. Now I've taken a little back. The money and precious stones should be safely at my capital, Malak Citadel, in Central Daish Shaktay by now, and I'll use some of the spoils to compensate our hard-pressed merchants they've almost bankrupted. We needed some decent horses and there they were, waiting to be taken. I've chosen that mouse-brown one with the black mane and tail - she's the fastest, most sure-footed and most intelligent animal I've ever ridden,' he paused for a moment, scanned the horizon, and then went on, 'I'm at war. So far it's a guerrilla war, but still a war. We'll go home via a family friend, Count Zaminder, who rules the area south of here. We'll leave Asha there, because I don't allow any girls or women on my campaigns, it's one of my strictest rules.' Lee caught Ahren's eye, because the vibrations had definitely indicated that I should go with them to Daish Shaktay. They didn't say anything though, and Rajay went on speaking.

He told them his family had ruled Daish Shaktay for generations, but the ogre people had invaded Mattanga, to the east, many years before and had recently overrun his land too. As they grew older

they transformed from humans into a form that suited their nature, and many developed a scaly skin, little horns on the top of their heads, and so on by the time they were middle aged. These were the cruel, power loving individuals who played the same role as the Sorcerers in Teletsia. They made sure they stayed on top and everyone else suffered. Rajay's father had eventually given up opposing them and taken service under their king. In return he had been given back some of his depleted kingdom, provided he paid a heavy annual tribute. What remained of independent Daish Shaktay was ruled by Rajay's mother and the Council of Elders. This half-free land prospered but the northern part of the country, ruled by Mattanga, suffered under unjust laws and unbearable taxes.

'Two years ago,' Rajay continued, 'with the approval of the Elders and my mother, my friends and I started our guerrilla operations. Daish Shaktay has broad valleys intersected by lines of high hills. On many of these hilltops are forts, and whoever holds the forts controls the country. Even in the area administered by us, the Mattangans had put fort commanders sympathetic to them, but recently we've replaced them with men loyal to us. This soon came to the ears of the Mattanga king, far away on the shores of the Eastern Ocean. I meekly sent word to him saying I was improving the administration by placing more competent people in positions of power, but that excuse won't last long. Recently my father was murdered and I've come here not only to make the vow, but also to pray for guidance as to what to do next.'

'What *are* you going to do?' asked Ahren.

'I'm not sure.'

'When we came from Teletsia to Sasrar, we had advice from many wise people who are the spiritual guardians of the world.'

Rajay was silent for some moments, and scanned the ravine below. 'I'm also a guardian, but these ogres are powerful and it's going to be downright difficult to get rid of them. Plus I don't yet have a Key of Wisdom. I have to prove myself before I get one. My mother has the Daish Shaktay key at the moment.'

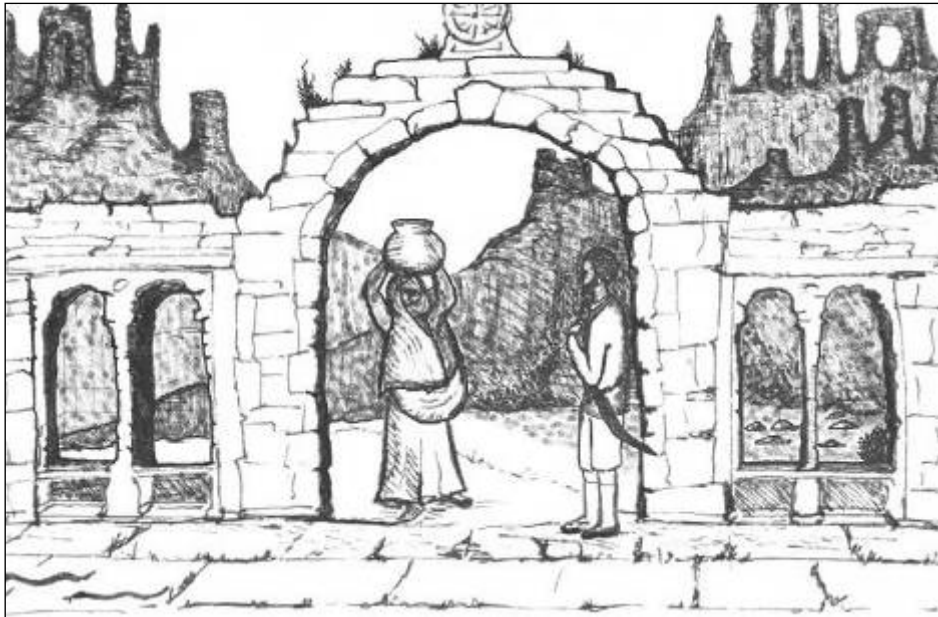
'The astrologers of northern Chussan asked us to come and help you. They wouldn't have sent us if it was impossible.'

'That's encouraging! One thing I'm certain, it's important to have a spiritual guide - for me, and especially for my friends. The knowledge of the Tree of Life and the vibrations are so much part of me that to know right from wrong is automatic, but they don't have this awareness yet. I'm waiting for some sign before I tell them. I operate from a deep level, the universal unconscious, in that I may not consciously know why I do something but it usually turns out for the best.'

Just then they saw a peasant girl staggering up the track in the ravine bottom. She had a brass pot on her head and was not walking with the usual rolling fluency of the country women. She entered the temple complex and put the pot clumsily on the ground, and they realised that it was me.

'Now what's she up to?' Lee sighed.

'Let's go and see,' Rajay didn't sound pleased.



I had bought milk, coffee and sugar, and gave my shopping to Witten, the cook. He was of medium height, had a plump, smiling face, narrow slanting eyes, a dark skin, shoulder length dark hair and a comfortably rounded body.

‘Where have you been?’ demanded Rajay. They had climbed down the cliff and I went to greet them.

‘I’ve had a very productive morning,’ I replied apprehensively, sensing something was not right. ‘Let’s go into the shade and I’ll tell you.’ We sat under a tree, which had grown up at the side of an old pool, its sides and bottom made of decaying masonry, meant for pilgrims to wash in before entering the temple. These days the pool was green and stagnant, but the tree enjoyed the moisture and we sat on the steps at the side, under its spreading branches.

‘So?’ continued Rajay sharply. I couldn’t figure out what I’d done wrong.

‘First I went to that farmhouse down the gully. After some bartering, and help from the farmer’s wife, I came away dressed as a local woman. She gave me a skirt and a veil, and I bought that pot from her too. It’s not so easy to carry them on one’s head.’

‘We noticed,’ Lee smiled.

‘And then?’ Rajay glared at me.

‘I went down to the village. The local costume was in case there were troopers around. It was a run down place, with a dozen or so single storey stone houses built round a square, and some more behind on the hillside. There were a few small terraced fields, hardly more than gardens, at the back of the houses, and a stone water trough in the square, presumably fed by a spring, and the excess water flowed down the side of the track to the valley. I went into the one shop and the shopkeeper asked who I was, so I said my family were visiting the temple and I’d come to buy food. As I was leaving, with a few things I had bought, I noticed some merchants arrive with cooking pots for sale, loaded in large baskets on the backs of mules. They laid their merchandise on the ground in the square and soon a number of people gathered round. The merchants told everyone the latest news before getting down to business. I walked over to where I could hear them.

‘There are some Chussan troopers around,’ the boss began. ‘Not that they were interested in us. It’s Rajay Ghiry they’re after. Hopping mad they are, that he pinched all that stuff they were sending to Mattanga. I’d rather he had that loot than the ogre people. They call him the Mountain Mouse because he knows the country like the back of his hand and disappears into the hills when they try to catch him. They’ve offered a large reward for him, dead or alive.’

‘I wouldn’t give him away for all the gold in the world,’ said a villager, ‘I hope they never get him.’

‘Have you heard of the great hermit who lives in the mountains south of here?’ asked another merchant.

‘Naturally,’ replied a woman, ‘what do you take us for? Dull-witted city folk who don’t know what’s important? It’s because we have the holy temple up the hill, and that saintly hermit fairly nearby that we have any peace around here at all.’

‘One of his disciples is in Belar. He’s well worth going to hear. What words of comfort he speaks, and how beautifully he sings the praises of our Creator!’

‘How long is he there for?’ asked another villager - prosperous, judging from his clothes and the fact he wore shoes.

‘A week or two.....’ At this moment a man came running into the square.

‘Tigers! Lots, at least twelve!’ he shouted, and everyone stood up and prepared to make for cover.

‘Calm down,’ the prosperous villager urged, ‘no one has seen any tigers around here for years.’

‘I saw them with my own eyes. I was on the hill and looked into the ravine, where the road goes through it. A band of Chussan troopers came galloping up.....’

‘When?’

‘Just now, and suddenly these tigers appeared and attacked them. One man was wounded by them, and another two were hurt when they fell off their horses.’

‘Where did the troopers go?’

‘They turned around and galloped back down the road. The strangest part was that the tigers had golden collars around their necks.’

‘You must have been seeing things,’ joked a merchant. ‘Wild tigers never have gold collars!’

‘Don’t be too sure,’ said an older villager. ‘I’ve heard there are magical ones guarding the temple.’

I finished my story, and continued speaking. ‘Then I came back here, after I’d bought some nice fresh milk for all of you from the farmer’s wife’ Rajay was still glaring at me.

‘Asha, I have to talk to you. Come over here,’ he demanded, and I followed him to the other side of the tree.

‘Have I done something wrong?’

‘Don’t you realise how dangerous it was, going off by yourself like that?’

‘No I....’

‘If you’d been caught, we’d have had to rescue you. Didn’t you understand the vows we made, or the writing on the sword? I’m fighting a war to get my country back, and it’s not some childish game. Another of my vows is to protect women – and even foolish and irresponsible girls like you. Why do you make it even harder for me?’

‘Asha, you’d better apologise,’ Lee came up behind Rajay.

‘You’re going back to Sasrar as soon as I can arrange it. I *cannot* risk having you around at this time.’

‘But I have a job to do in your country,’ I persevered.

‘The only job *you’ll* do is to lose me the lives of some of my most trusted followers.’ Rajay clearly saw me as immature, irresponsible and an added burden.

‘I’m sorry,’ I murmured, without conviction.

‘You’re not. You’re in your ego, thinking you’re right.’

‘But -’

‘But what?’

‘I have to try to awaken the Tree of Life of your people in Daish Shaktay, and show them how to use its powers and blessings. Don’t you want my help?’

‘Not if you get us all killed.’

‘Don’t you understand how much it can change everything, if people’s level of consciousness changes?’

‘You’ve forgotten who you’re talking to, Asha,’ said Lee brusquely. ‘Try to have some respect, at least.’ At this moment, luckily, Witten arrived with a pan of hot, milky coffee and some horn cups.

‘Thanks Witten. Leave it there,’ said Rajay calmly. ‘Ask Danard to come here immediately.’

‘I’m sure Asha checked with her subtle power that it was safe to go to the village, right?’ Lee tried to smooth things over.

‘Yes, obviously,’ I replied.

‘So maybe Rajay will forgive you, if you promise not to go off alone again.’

‘Indeed. What’s done is done,’ Rajay conceded. ‘For all your rash behaviour, you’ve brought me the great news that we’ve been saved by the guardian tigers, and my prayer for a spiritual guide may also be answered.’

‘You were right to be angry. I didn’t realise the danger I was in, and the danger I’ve now put you all in. Please, have some coffee,’ and I poured it out for him.

‘Asha, you’re too much!’ Rajay laughed, accepting the coffee, and to the boys, with good natured resignation asked, ‘How *do* you put up with her?’

‘We’re used to it,’ sighed Ahren. ‘We’ve learnt to accept each other’s shortcomings by now.’

‘What’s going on?’ Danard arrived at the run.

‘Make sure everything is packed and hidden in the big cave,’ Rajay ordered. ‘Saddle the horses. We must have our weapons ready because there may be troopers around. We should be able to fight them off if they attack, because we can easily hold the ravine. I take it you two can use a bow and arrow, and a gun?’

‘Well enough,’ said Ahren modestly, considering he was the Sasrar archery champion.

‘Actually, guns are too noisy, and take too long to reload. In case of attack, Asha, hide, and if it goes badly for us, escape when they’ve gone. The local partisans under that village headman will protect you.’

All was peaceful until early evening, by which time I had climbed up to the high vantage point with Lee, and was watching the track, which twisted down the valley. As it became cooler a wind got up and did make strange shrieking noises in the rocks, but it didn’t bother us. Then I saw them – a dozen or so mounted troopers approaching fast, quite far away. I called to Danard, down below in the temple courtyard, and warned him.

‘Lee, come and help us. We’ll give you weapons,’ he shouted back. ‘Asha, stay up there, out of sight, and let us know when they’re getting close.’

Within almost no time, all the young men were concealed behind rocks at the sides of the ravine in its narrowest place. Lee joined them. I did my bit and signalled when the troopers were nearby, but couldn’t resist watching. As they came round the corner of the track, the tiger I had seen the night before jumped out from some rocks and swished its tail angrily, standing in the path of anyone approaching. It was dusk, and the troopers’ horses skidded to a stop, panicked and shied, and maybe the troopers did not know there was only one tiger, not a whole group. The wind was making strange noises, also scaring both the troopers and their horses. One trooper saw me, jumped off his horse and began climbing the cliff up to where I was now attempting to hide.

The troopers in the front were momentarily distracted by the tiger. Rajay and his friends, concealed behind rocks in the poor light, shot them with arrows, silent and deadly. Ahren, lightning fast and unerringly accurate, brought down two. I screamed for help because I was about to be caught. Ahren looked up and aimed an arrow - that trooper probably never knew what had hit him – Ahren caught him in the heart, from behind, and another in the neck. Unfortunately as Ahren’s attention was on saving me, one of the troopers charged him with a sword. I could not see what happened, only that it didn’t look too good, but then Witten pulled the one attacking Ahren off his horse, and killed him, also with a sword. It was all very confusing but soon the leading troopers were done for, and those behind turned round and fled. The tiger also disappeared.

Rajay’s friends looked at their fallen enemies, and I noticed the heavyweight, Varg-Nack, casually finish off one who was still alive. I didn’t feel right about this, but it could easily have been us, and from what Robin had told me of these types, our fate would have been the same if they had been the victors.

‘Are you all right?’ Lee called up to me.

‘Yes, thanks to Ahren,’ I stuttered as I climbed down to join them, shaken and scared. Ahren was nursing a slight wound and Rajay looked at it, and asked Valya to fetch the medicine and bandages bag.

‘You’ve got good bodyguards,’ Danard said to me with a smile, by way of complimenting Lee and Ahren. ‘And we’ll also do our best to keep you safe.’

‘Those troopers were quite pathetic, the way they ran off,’ added Witten, cleaning his sword. ‘You three didn’t see us at our best. It was hardly a fight, even.’



‘Easy, Witten, we could all have been done for. It’s lucky they were such cowards,’ cautioned Rajay, while tending Ahren’s arm. ‘That tiger made all the difference! He appeared at exactly the right moment,’

‘You’re good at this – how come?’ asked Ahren, as Rajay worked at his wound with confident efficiency.

‘I’ve had to learn how to kill people, so decided to also learn a bit about healing them too. Keep still, or I might hurt you. We’ll leave for Count Zaminder’s right now, in case the troopers come back with reinforcements. I wanted to wait until tomorrow, and give the horses a full day’s rest, but it’s not safe. We’ve got some extra ones and we’ll travel fast, so you’d better let your ponies loose. Asha, can you ride a warhorse?’

‘I’ll try. We stole some Sorcerers’ horses and escaped from Teletsia on them.’

‘Really? You have the makings of a partisan.’

### **Chapter 3** **Visiting the Zaminders**

We left soon after, taking a narrow, winding pass through the mountains in the moons’ light so as to avoid the main road through the plain. Riding a powerful horse throughout the night was no joke, and we must have covered a good three or four days’ walking distance. The country was dry and deserted and the track was often steep and rough, so my horse stumbled occasionally, nearly throwing me off. Our new friends took turns to lead the way as they had come by that route the day before, and I had never been so tired as I was the next morning, but I wasn’t going to admit it to anyone, least of all Rajay.

At dawn we reached the pleasant valley where Count Zaminder lived, in the hills north of Belar, the town where the hermit was staying. As we approached the Zaminder’s estate we stopped in a wood some way before the gatehouse, and could see their home in the distance, at the end of a driveway through fields. Danard went to see if everything was alright and we watched him ride on ahead, cautiously. He was taller than Rajay, and they both had dark hair and dark eyes, but Rajay’s skin was lighter. Danard’s face was angular and his features were sharper, but nevertheless sometimes people mistook them for relations.

‘Danard is like a brother to you,’ Lee observed while we waited.

‘Yes, we spent time together as children,’ replied Rajay, ‘when I was about six years old, the Mattanga forces were, as usual, giving my mother and me a hard time. This was before my father gave up fighting them, so my mother and I were always moving from one fort to another for safety. Danard’s father hid me on his farm in the hills for some time and people thought I was his cousin. He’s a bit older than me, and Namoh is his brother, three years younger.’ I looked at Namoh, standing by his horse and talking to Ekan. Namoh had the same sharp features as Danard, but was wirier, as if he hadn’t finished growing and would fill out in a year or two. ‘Here’s Danard; it’s safe to go on,’ continued Rajay, who as always was keeping a sharp eye on the road ahead.

The Zaminder family lived in a low stone house behind their fort, that was kept ready in case it was needed. Their staff, including a small army, lived in cottages up and down the valley. Count Zaminder ruled this area, but the ogres of Mattanga and the Chussan brothers both claimed to be his overlords. A crowd of people greeted us in the yard at the front of the fort, because Rajay was a celebrity round here. We were introduced to the count, a paunchy man in late middle age with an enormous moustache, a beard, straggly greying hair, mid brown skin and a somewhat fearsome expression. We also met Countess Zaminder, a jolly, roly-poly lady with lots of chins who looked as if she could keep her husband in order, if anyone could; their tall, well-built son Bukku and their daughter Melissa, a pretty girl of about my age with a pale skin, a warm smile and a mop of curly reddish-brown hair. In colouring she took after her mother.

I was dead tired, and was only too happy when she showed me to a comfortable bedroom in the house, which was built round a courtyard, with delicate wooden balconies on the inner side, flowers and fruit trees in large pots and a chuckling fountain in the middle. Rajay and the others stayed in the fort; he expected them to be able to live anywhere. I collapsed on a bed just as I was, and the next thing I knew was Melissa, knocking on the door and asking to come in.

'I've brought you some herbal tea. It's afternoon,' she said, standing over me with a mug in her hand. 'Would you like to borrow some clothes?'

'That's very kind.'

'I've got masses you can choose from, and some I've never worn.'

We were instant friends, and I was soon wearing a pale yellow dress with a long skirt and colourfully embroidered sleeves: a gift, Melissa insisted. Around my neck I had my golden key of Sasrar with its many jewels winking from the petals, and she gaped at its beauty. I knew its potent vibrations would have a good effect on her, so took it off for her to look at. After this, she suggested we go outside, as it was pleasantly cool, and she took me to her large herb garden behind the house.

'Lee told me you know a great deal about herbs,' she began, as we sat on a stone bench under a tree.

'Yes, but you grow different ones here from either Teletsia, where I used to live, or Sasrar, where I've been recently.'

We talked on. She had a good feeling when I put my attention on her inner side, and I wanted to show her how to give her awakening, as the astrologers had asked me to. I prayed to the great Mother of the primordial Tree of Life to inspire me.

'Can you feel the joy of the plants and flowers, as they bask in the sunlight?' I asked.

'Yes, and I wish I had that joy within me. It's not easy living here, never knowing when the next gang of soldiers is going to attack us and maybe wipe us out completely. My two older brothers were killed last year, leading our little army against one from Jewelton.'

'I'm sorry, it must have been a great shock,' I paused, but she did not reply, so I went on, 'In Teletsia my life was also full of insecurity and fears, and then I discovered I did have that peace, hidden away inside. I can show you how to find it within you, if you like.'

'Really and truly?'

'That's what I've learnt in the secret kingdom of Sasrar. We all have an inner Tree of Life, with seven subtle centres, like jewels of power or spiritual flowers at different points up our back, and in our head, and they each have a special beautiful quality that you can start to live once it's awakened. Put your right hand on your heart, and your left hand outwards, palm upwards. Ask, "Am I pure, eternal spirit, full of joy and peace?"'

'All right, I'll go along with that.' Melissa was surprised, but eager to try and did so.

'Keep your eyes closed, put your right hand on top of your head and ask, "All loving Mother of Creation, You who are reflected in me, please awaken my Tree of Life, and let me be a conscious part of the whole, and feel that thoughtless peace and joy."' As she did this, I raised my hands up behind her back, rotated my right hand in a clockwise direction above her head, and the air just above her felt cool, even in this warm garden.

'Put your hand above your head. Do you feel a cool breeze?'

'Yes, and I feel peaceful and still.'

'That coolness means you are now consciously connected to the power that created us, and you can find that inner peace any time you want, by putting your attention on the top of your head and letting the thoughts float away.'

'It's so easy! Is there more to it?'

'Lots, but later, we have company.' Danard and Valya came towards us.

'I hear you're a great herb gardener, Melissa,' Danard began.

'I'm learning.'

'Back home on our herb farm, we do a great deal of research,' said Valya. 'Will you show us round? Danard is a farmer, and he also understands plants.'

Valya had been the heir to vast estates in Daish Shaktay, but his father, who collaborated with King Karlvid of Mattanga, had disowned him for joining Rajay. I left them with Melissa and went to find Lee and Ahren. They were in the main hall of the house, practising music on some instruments. Since living in Sasrar, a land where music flowed constantly, like the ever-present waterfalls, we had learnt to sing, play and dance quite well.

'You're looking nice,' Lee complimented me.

'The dress was a present from Melissa. And guess what, I just showed her how to awaken her Tree of Life.'

'That's brilliant!' Ahren congratulated me.

‘The first to be awakened by someone who’s not a guardian, and not in Sasrar,’ added Lee. ‘Good for you.’

‘There’s a big do for Rajay this evening,’ said Ahren. ‘We’ve been asked to play some music. That’s why we’re practising.’

‘Could you try to awaken the people’s Trees of Life? You know how we learnt to do it through music in Sasrar?’ I suggested.

‘Since you’ve already awakened Melissa’s, you should do it,’ Lee replied.

‘All right, but you do the talking,’ I was desperately nervous of speaking in front of a crowd. It was bad enough to be asked to play and sing.

‘No problem.’

‘Lee and I had better go and spruce ourselves up,’ Ahren grinned.

‘What about your arm wound?’

‘It’s fine. I had a narrow escape.’

‘I know, I was watching.’

‘Rajay warned me that one must always be very careful of an unexpected counter attack like that. He’s going to teach us a lot.’

‘I sincerely hope he is. I don’t want to lose either of you. By the way, is he still angry with me?’

‘He wasn’t angry with you, just concerned for your safety, but you were an idiot, going off like that,’ added Lee.

‘Mmn, I can see that now.’

‘He felt responsible for you, like, if anything had happened, he’d have blamed himself. He’s a caring soul underneath that tough exterior.’

‘How’s the fort?’ I changed the subject.

‘Noisy and smelly,’ Ahren put in, ‘because they keep masses of animals in the yard there - cows, horses, hounds and so on. We’re upstairs, but we’re partisans now, so who’s to complain about a little discomfort?’

In the evening Rajay wore rich brocade clothes and a jewelled turban. Dinner was in the Great Hall, and he had the seat of honour, covered with a silken rug of many colours. He, his friends, we three and the men of the Zaminder family sat at a high table on a raised dais at the top end of the hall. The tall ceiling was vaulted stonework and the walls were decorated with frescoed battle scenes. There were lines of lighted candles on high ledges around the walls, and behind each of them was a simple mirror, which reflected the candlelight out into the room. A large number of men, women and children sat at long trestle tables, waiting for the feast to begin and eager to catch a glimpse of the young king.

‘We are grateful that you visit us again, Your Majesty,’ began Count Zaminder.

The Countess and Melissa served Rajay first, with an assortment of exotically spiced and flavoured dishes: venison, mountain goat, roasted birds, and all the usual vegetable accompaniments, and when he complimented them on the delicious food, the reply was, ‘It’s our pleasure, if only we could do more.’ Although the hospitality was spontaneous, Rajay was also their lifeline. If he could re-establish a strong Daish Shaktay they could become protected allies.

‘I’d like to visit a holy man who’s in Belar at the moment,’ he mentioned to Count Zaminder.

‘He’s called Baktar – we all respect him enormously. Might it not be safer to invite him up here?’

‘Let’s try.’

When the tasty desserts had been served and eaten, and the meal was finished, the trestle tables were taken down and everyone sat on the floor. There was a call for music and we listened to Melissa, who played a stringed instrument, sitting on the dais where the high table had previously been. The rhythm and melody combined perfectly and we experienced an inner dancing joy; she later said that since I had awakened her Tree of Life, her playing was transformed.

Next we were called up onto the dais. Lee played his flute, Ahren was on the two-toned drum and I played Melissa’s instrument. We sang songs from Sasrar about the awakening of the Tree of Life; they had catchy tunes, and soon everyone joined in the rousing, easy choruses - including the Zaminder’s staff, Rajay’s friends and the families of the locals.

‘Let’s see how many of them have got it,’ said Lee. We stopped singing and he stood up. ‘Can we do an experiment? In Sasrar we use music to awaken the eternal spirit within us. That’s what those

songs were about. Stretch your hands above your heads and ask, “Is this the power of divine love?” If we feel coolness flowing on our hands – that’s how the power says ‘yes’ to us. Do any of you feel it?’

There was an ominous silence.

‘I feel it, like a fresh mountain wind on my hands, and such peace and joy!’ Rajay came to our rescue, and then it started.

‘Yes, I feel it too!’ or ‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ and the hall was full of excited voices and shining faces and sparkling eyes.

When the evening drew to a close, Rajay came over to me. ‘Lee told me you began this by giving awakening to Melissa. They got it well, didn’t they? I could feel the coolness from them, but none of them dared speak up, so I helped you along a bit.’

‘Thank you. I hope we did the right thing.’

‘Obviously! That’s your role. It was a surprise for me, that your music could touch their souls. Will you do this in Daish Shaktay?’

‘Yes, that’s why I came, but I apologise for being so disrespectful yesterday.’

‘Forget it! If there’s one thing I admire, it’s people with depth and courage, like you three have,’ he bowed slightly, gave me a kindly smile and said goodnight.

I breathed a sigh of relief.