

*A Daughter of Zur.*  
*A Tale of Claudia de Anar*

## A Daughter of Kur.

Gerd woke, again. She was heavy with child and most uncomfortable this night, and her mind wandered lazily between sleep and waking, dream and nightmare; she gazed from her Kerith, into the common space of the lodge where some of the men were sleeping nearer the fire pit, it was dark and despite the fire there was a deep chill in the lodge and she huddled into her furs; pressing close to Yvo's large and reassuring frame. Still blearily looking across the commons space of the lodge.

A shadow seemed to drop down from the Fyr Vindu and settled on one of the men, he pushed at it weakly then seemed to go limp; the shadow moved to a second again settling lightly on the man; and again he pushed and struggled, but only for a few moments and again he went limp; as it settled on a third the horror that this was really happening, that it was not some terrible dream burst through the fog of sleep and Gerd Screamed!

The man looked up into a mask of wicked feral hunger, The woman hunched over him slapped him with tremendous force dazing him; before plunging hungry fangs into his neck. Women were screaming, Men Shouting, Children Huddling close to their mothers in fear; A man seized the woman, for now she surely appeared to be a woman; but she threw him off her with such force that he lay broken against the wall. Other men were reaching for spears and short swords, she leapt about slapping them, pummeling them with odd blows of great power. She moved so oddly, like a drunkard, she seemed to have no idea how strong she was, how quickly she could move, and the affect was so ungainly, so graceless so comical that in any other moment Gerd Surely would have laughed; but not now, not in the face of the horror she was witnessing. A woman raced for the door, desperate to throw aside the bar but was seized and hurled bodily across the common space. Snarling, slapping, killing she herded them all towards Yvo's Kerith.

By now Yvo had gathered his wits and his sword, he swept two wide blows at her which she avoided almost despite in her ungainly movements; then as the 2nd went wide she seized his arm and twisted it so hard she nearly wrenched it off, before jerking him close for that fatal kiss.

She was close now, she slapped Gerd so wickedly hard, her vision swam, she felt hard teeth clamp down on her neck, felt her blood rushing out of her, as her vision faded she felt she was being swallowed whole by the Darkness, falling into the Dark. Forever Dark.



Rotgar breathlessly ran up to the seeking Durr there, but was told amid sidelong glances he was not in the Lodge. "You will find him in the woods with his Murian Pet." Sneered

Loka; barely concealing her displeasure with her new lords fascination for the Murian's company. The boy hardly noticed, great need pressed him.

He simply said, "Where will I Find them then? We have need of the Lord Urgently."

Hertha Pointed, "Follow that trail, you will find them practicing their Archery a short ways down in the Copse." He sped off into the snow-draped woods. "What presses you boy, is every thing all right?" she called after him.

"No Lady," he called back, "no everything is not all right at all." And he turned his focus to the trail and redoubled his pace.

Claudia was chatting with Dur as they Gathered Arrows, So "OthKar" leads the Clan of the Bear, and Ragimund the Clan of the Stag; I must admit I have not yet learned your clans patron, it seems a thing every one knows so well, that no one bothers to say?"

"The Otter, we are the Otter Clan." Claudia turned her head in Curiosity inviting him to continue, "Oh I know – the otter is not so Fierce as the Bear, nor as Proud as the Stag, but they are clever, and quick with a great love of life. No I am quite fond of our little brothers and I would ask for no better, Andhabok." In which Claudia recognized echo's of the Chattii word for Guide, she knew Durr was sharing with her a word of great power, and pressed the point no further.

Instead she replied, "No, no, you are brave and proud enough my friend, but I think this 'Andhabok' suits you well." Just then she caught a flash of movement on the trail, and a few moments later Rotgar came running up to them. He made a short bow in her direction and turned to Durr.

"May I speak to you privately MiLord, I have urgent word from your Brother Ragimund."

Durr smiled, "We were just speaking of him. Yes" Durr put an arm around the lad and walked a short ways down the trail. His face grew long, his aura dark as he listened to the lad. Durr then brought him back to Claudia saying, "Please tell Lady Claudia all you have just shared with me."

"Yes Lord," he began then turned to Claudia, "MiLady, Lord Ragimund is most worried about his Lodge Brother, Yvo you see his Lodge Sister and Midwife Imma did go to Yvo's lodge to aid Gerd in the Birthing of her baby, but she has not returned, nor sent any word of the birth, and it has been some Days. So Lord Ragimund did send me and two lads to the Lodge to fetch word of his Lodge brother. We approached it yesterday near midday – Milady it was as quiet as a tomb, no men gathering wood, no children playing, no woman minding the children, not a sound, not a person. We grew fearful and decided it best to speed word to the Lords, my brothers have returned to Lord Ragimund, but as Lord Durr was nearer, and known for his Courage I thought it best to bring word to you here."

Durr looked up at Claudia, "The Wolves your sister summoned, might they have overwhelmed the Lodge."

Claudia paused for a long moment, "I doubt it, but I cannot say for certain no."

"I must gather up Har and a few others, I would like you to come with us." Claudia Nodded.

"But Lady Claudia is a woman? MiLord." The Boy Blurted out.

"Yes she is, and if there is Sorcery afoot she will be more valuable to us than 100 spears." The boy nodded, considering the thought.

It was late afternoon on that short winters day as they approached the Lodger. Yvo's lodge was every bit as quiet as the boy described it, Claudia and Durr watched with Ready Bows, as Har led two other warriors up to the Lodge house, they slipped in, and came out almost as quickly their faces stricken with horror. Har shouted to Durr, "Come, Come Quickly my lord." As Har led Durr into the Lodge he said, "Our Brothers and Sisters have been murdered."

Inside the Lodge was a scene of horror none present had ever before seen, nor would have dared to imagine. Men women children the whole of the house lay slain, and scattered on the floor. Smashed against walls and beams broken like rags dolls. What ever killed them showed not mercy for age or gender; the young lay crumpled beside the old, wives thrown down over their slain husbands, in the back of the Lodge was the greatest number where it seemed the men made a last desperate stand trying to protect the others – but all had fallen.

"This is the work of no Wolf Pack." Said Claudia, "Notice each has a great gash near the neck, but no other grave mark." Durr Nodded. "This is the work of a Daughter of Kur." The men blessed themselves without thinking. "She must have come upon them in the night" glancing up at the Fyr Vindu, in the roof the Lodge, she continued, "She slew these nearest the fire first before they knew what terror fell upon them out of the night then herded the others back here where she had them cut off from any escape." The Chattii looked about them, it was a typical lodge, with but one door, and the windows firmly shuttered against the winters cold. It had also proven a death trap.

"Why should a Daughter of Kur Come here?" Said Har.

"Why should she be anywhere," answered Claudia, "She lives and she must Hunt."

"Might Pandora's summons brought her here?" Asked Durr.

"It might, she would have ears to hear, and the prospect of War, of Killing and Mayhem enough to hid her presence might draw her." Claudia Paused, "but then again maybe not" Durr's eyes followed the sweep of her hands, "The Fury of all this, she must be newly turned, she has not begun to master her hunger yet." She knelt close by two of the fallen, "these marks, they come up on the Men, she was biting up into their necks, no this is a newly turned creature probably a Chattii woman."

"The Daughters of Kur are all Murian, Like the Wolf Mother!" Har snapped and glared at Claudia.

"Yes they are," she replied, "but the Wolf Mother can turn a Chattii as well." Durr nodded and she continued. "Once she tastes the blood of the Wolf Mother she is doomed,

the Fire in that blood will drive her mad, she will need to feed to ease the pain of that fire, but the more she feeds, the higher the fire will grow, driving her more fiercely to feed when the pain returns. Eventually the fire of the Wolf Mothers blood will consume her from with-in.”

“But why?” said Vinzenz, shuddering his voice cracking with grief.

“It is not for Fancy the Wolf Mother is called the Queen of Hunger, the fire of her hunger is a terrible thing, she turns one of these unfortunates lets them gather blood and souls for her, then after a time hunts them down and kills them claiming for herself the rich blood they have gathered. But she can do much harm before Tsulsala hunts her down, or the fires with-in her consume her, we must find her and kill her quickly.”

“You seem to know much of this.” Har said suspiciously a dark cast clouding his thick face, he has a short thick man who looked as much like a tall Bristling as a short Chattii.

“I was raised to be a Wise Woman, a Healer, and one of the Nine – I would be failing my people if I was ignorant of these things.” Claudia replied more shortly than Durr had seen before. Her eyes as cold and Har’s were suspicious.

“You are so sure it is a woman?” asked Durr,

“Yes,” Claudia said, looking around at the slaughter. “A Lanshall, a Son of the Wolf Mother is more wolf than man, he would have gorged himself on the flesh, she was after blood, she cared not for their flesh”

“Let’s get out of here, there is nothing more we can do for these folk but avenge them.” Said Har.

“We must burn this place or one of them might turn and rise up themselves.” Said Claudia. Durr shuddered, but they set the Lodge ablaze and left.



The Quiet of that still winter’s evening seemed suddenly oppressive to the Chattii as they left the burning lodge behind them and struck out for their own home, the tramp of their feet, the snap of a twig, the crunch of the snow underfoot seemed enough to betray them all to a terrible fate, in that Erie silence.

The sunlight was streaming low through the trees, evening wore on, as they rounded one of a hundred bends in the winding trail home, there on a rock they saw a woman. Vinzenz hailed her, “Imma! Imma! A Joy to see you!” voicing his heartfelt relief; Claudia however saw her differently, saw her crouched low with her hands between her folded knees like a child playing at being a dog, noted the wide intense eyes as she stared at them, noticed the lean fierce cast of her face, and without a word un-slung her bow and notched an Arrow.

Har caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and seized her arm knocking her aim aside. “Are you mad! That’s my Lodge sister Imma!” but just as he said it the woman sprang, she soared into the air till she was eye to eye with the leafless tree tops, then came whipping down among them. Claudia Seized Har in turn and rolled them both to the

ground, rolling through the movement she coming up again holding Har's spear as one would a quarter staff. The woman landed hard just where they had been, and howled with feral rage that her strike had gone amiss; Claudia stepped into the Murian battle-dance, step whirl strike, step whirl strike, step whirl strike again, planting 3 blows on the woman's belly, back and finally with all her weight and strength Claudia brought the butt of the spear across her head.

The Chattii woman Shook off the third blow as one might shake off a hard slap, but by now the Chattii men were shaking off their surprise. The Creature now confronted with a ring of spear points closing around her sprang into the air again, landing well clear of their spears, once again; now lighting high up in a tree, she screamed with feral rage, and aching hunger, then she leapt down and sped into the forest, swallowed up by the gathering dark.

Har was up now, "I should thank you for my life" he began, "but why did you not kill her, you struck her 3 hard blows surely you could have run her through!"

"And what if I had," said Claudia, "What happens then, what happens when she realizes I have done her no real harm. Does she brake off the spear I have driven through her, and in her rage drive it through me, or you; what then?"

"That Blow to the head would have killed any one us and she shook it off for a slap." Said Durr his voice filled with worried awe.

"Milord you do not begin to comprehend what she has become, the blood of an Immortal courses in her veins, she has power you do not begin to guess, that she does not begin to guess. She still has the mind of a mortal woman, in an immortal frame, she does not yet grasp her own power, when she does, when she comes to truly understand the power that blood bequeaths her she will be twice as Dangerous."

"How do we kill her then! How to we kill something that can shake off our strongest blows, and is immune to our spears!" Said Durr.

Claudia un-slung her Quiver, "These arrows have silver points, they will do her real harm, but they will not be enough to kill her. We must get to your lodge Milord, then you and I must ride quickly to the Esa, there are weapons in the Casade Horus that will kill her."

"And what will we do in the Lodge? Asked Har, "wait for her to come and Slaughter us all?"

"No? You must ready torches and keep near the center of the lodge, near the fire pit, she fears fire as any animal does, you can drive her off with fire."

"We might burn down the lodge." Said Karl.

"Then let it burn!" Snapped Claudia, "A Lodge and be rebuilt and life can not so easily be remade!" Durr looked at her, an unasked question in his eyes.

"What if we turned aside, what if we strike out for they Esa now lady? Then at least our families should be safe." Karl replied, as the men all nodded.

“No, she might follow us, but we left a scent trail to the Lodge behind us on our way to Yvo’s Lodge, she could well follow that trail and she would come upon your families with no warning, no we must get to them and quickly. She bounded off, her heavy Murian frame was not well suited to running, but Claudia chugged along at a stiff pace and the Chattii kept pace with her. Durr sent the Young Rotgar ahead to warn the lodge, and fearlessly he speed off ahead of the others.

“A Brave lad, let hope death does not find him.” Commented Har.

They arrived at the lodge as the last rays of the fading daylight painted the sky a pale blue, already the trees were in deepest shadow, the lodge had but two horses, animals better fit for the plow than the lance, but they had been saddled and Claudia mounting one and Durr they other they set out for Anar.

“Keep the Fires High and torches to hand remember she fears fire!” Claudia shouted a parting warning, then spurred away on her mount as fast as she dared to go ... but in the deep of winter there were places where the pair could best manage a careful walk, lest they tumble and lame one of the horses, or themselves. It was while the horses carefully picked their path through a swath of ice that Durr took a moment to speak his troubled mind.

“When Karl said that torches might burn the lodge, you where most harsh him.”

“What of it?” Answered Claudia,

“You once told me you do not fear your rebirth, you said it while I held a knife to your throat, so what is it you fear so Claudia.”

“They will not be reborn.” Said Claudia, “they have been consumed by the Fires of Kur and they will not be reborn, as will any who follow them into the belly of that beast, and we dawdle here!” she spurred her bay out of the ice and down the trail. And Durr thought Death was all around him, that creature might spring on them at any moment, it might slay him as well, but her death was coming too – Death as Fierce as Winter was coming – Riding a Bay Plow Horse, for just a moment he felt a drop of pity for she who had been Imma.



The Chattii kept an uneasy watch, and by midnight more than one of the men was sure he had seen a hungry face leering at them through the Fyr Vindu, but before he could speak to warn the others the face was gone, and none could be sure if he had seen more than the shadow of his own fear. The women and children were gathered together a little further from the fire, a little nearer the door so if she should drop through the Vindu and attack the men the women might not be trapped as Yvo’s kin had been slaughtered.

The candles burned low, the wee hours of the morn drew near, when suddenly with a tremendous noise one of the windows burst, the creature just launched herself bodily through the storm shutters which exploded in a mass of splinters, she seized a boy, bowled Karl over knocking him into the fire pit, and sprang through the Fyr Vindu to the

roof with her prize. The space of breath, maybe two then the boys screams went silent, and his mother screamed, “No!”

Karl leapt out of the pit scorched and howling two women covered him with blankets to smother any embers; For a moment it was bedlam in the lodge. Har focused his fierce gaze on the Vindu, notching one of the Arrows Claudia had left them, desperately searching for a mark, but Imma and the Boy were gone.



Claudia and Durr Arrived at the Esa near midnight, Claudia Singing the Bianna as they approached and Engaria’s Shield Bearer’s quickly floated the pontoon bridge with practiced skill; as soon as it touched her bank Claudia sped across.

“MiLady I had thought I should not see you for a year, what brings you home singing an Alarm!” Said Engaria, Captain of Archers to Casade Horus.

“A Daughter of Kur is loose in these woods, I need 4 Rowan Spears, 2 Fresh Quivers, and my own bow.” She said, Dismounting from the Bay.

Engaria turned to her Shield bearer, “Lest you have been struck suddenly deaf you heard our lady now go!” The man made quickly off taking one of his fellows with him.

“MiLady, that will leave us but 4 more Rowan spears to defend the Casade?”

“I know, but she is east of the Esa, and she will fear the Witches. We will hunt her there.”

“Let us come with you then, let us hunt her together!” Engaria replied ready for the fight.

“Dear Lord Durr’s home might be besieged even now, I do not have time to wait for you to ready mounts and archers, I ride into battle and do not mean to arrive on the field to find the battle is done!” Said Claudia.

“Then you will need this!” Said Eduardo, Engaria’s Shield Bearer rode up on Claudia’s beloved Evita. She smiled broadly. “The Dream seer saw you coming, and sensed you would need our friend.” He said patting the horse he dismounted handing Claudia the Reigns.

“See to this noble animal,” she answered handing him the reigns of the Bay. “she has served me well, and ridden harder than she was ever meant too” She then mounted Evita handing Durr two of the spears that had been brought, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murian bow.

“I will follow quickly as I may!” Said Engaria.

“Scour the banks of the River then, she may be drawn West.” Claudia Answered, West Towards Kurr as Engaria knew full well. Then she was off, riding with Grim Purpose, Durr feared his own mounts heart might give out, but followed just the same.

They rode hard Evita was Gran Caballo, a Murian warhorse in size and appearance she was much like a Clydesdale of today, but she fit her powerful mistress well. Evita picked her path with speed and skill carrying her mistress faster and more surely than the plow horse had done; as they neared Durr’s lodge there was suddenly a tremendous clamor and



Claudia spurred Evita to a last effort, as they cleared the tree line and the lodge came into view, Claudia reigned Evita in and unslung her bow; breathless Durr came up beside.

“She is on the roof and she is not alone!” Claudia said, peering intensely into the black of the night.

“Shoot her then” Said Durr.

“Quiet, Quiet please my lord I dare not waste this shot.” She said, but her eyes never flickered in his direction.



The little rat struggled and screamed and wriggled furiously, and “Imma” or she who had been Imma in a moment of frustration slapped him hard. He fell limp – she paused for a moment breathing deeply, she feared she had slain him, ruined her prize but no, he lived, and in a moment his fresh lovely blood would flood her burning belly; rid her of the terrible pain for a short but blessed time. She hissed as her mouth opened in anticipation revealing her fangs, she began to lean forward and ...

She was struck in the side of the face, a terrible blow, and something like hot embers had buried itself in her flesh; oh how it burned. She recoiled, leaning back and staring into the darkness where the first blow had come from another blow to her chest, and something burning buried itself deep in her bosom. She leaped from the roof in fear, anger and frustration, as she did so a third glancing blow tore her arm. She raced into the woods, only moments later realizing she had abandoned her prize; yet she dare not return, not now, she fled that place of burning pain.



Claudia returned her 4<sup>th</sup> arrow to the quiver, “She has fled, and her victim lives I still see the fire of his Aura” Durr needed no other word, he raced to the east end of the lodge, and flew up the ladder built into that wall for tending the thatch of the roof.

He found the boy laying near the Vindu in the deep dark amid the thatch; he was still dazed but clutched Durr fiercely when he was picked up. Only then did Durr see that the lad was Durin, his own nephew, named for him as a token of his brother’s loyalty to his lord. Durr carried young “Durin” down from the roof, and once in the lodge placed him in Hertha’s arms.

“He Lives, He Lives, My boy Lives! Oh thank you, thank you my Lord.” Karl too silently nodded his thanks.

“It is Lady Claudia who you owe thanks, she put 3 darts in the beast and drove her off.” Hertha bowed, “Then I thank you Lady, with all my heart.”

Claudia smiled, “You are most welcome, please see to the child.”

“I see you brought Murian Spears,” said Har, “why should they kill her when ours will not.” His tone was challenging and short.

Claudia tossed Har a Spear. "The Last foot of the Shaft is Rowan, the wood of the flame tree will feed the fires in the Wolf Mother's blood. Bury this in her bosom and she will Burn." Har knew the limbs of the flame tree were too gnarled to make a good spear. He examined the Murian spear with expert eyes, the Small silver tip, the long Ashen shaft had been cut to a long triangular point, there a Rowen haft had been fixed to a strong join with some animal glue. Har shook his head, "As I said you know much of these things."

And Claudia rounded on him hard, "You have no love for me, my people or our ways Lord Har, I know this; but this night I am all that stands between you and a Death beyond rebirth, so keep Silent and learn to appreciate our ways!"

"I will not be spoken to thus by a woman! Witch or no Witch!" Shouted Har.

"Enough!" Snapped Durr, "You will show respect to Lady Claudia, or you will leave my Lodge and my Service! We have great need of the Ladies Wisdom, if you doubt it leave, go face death alone."

Har glared at his lord but kept silent, but Loka was working through Claudia's words.

"beyond rebirth?" Said Loka, "Then our sisters, our lodge brothers?"

"Have been consumed by the fires of Kur; they are forever gone." Claudia answered softly. Loka Wailed and the other women joined her. "Silence" snapped Claudia, there will be time for your grief, but in this moment your cries will call her back to us."

She settled her great frame against the wall and prepared to sleep. Durr looked at her Questioningly. "We are all exhausted Milord, and she will flee this place of pain for some little while, as any animal might; we have a few hours at best to steal a little rest before her hunger drags her back to us."

"I will see to the Horses then." He said and grabbing one of the lads left the lodge. Har settled back against the opposite wall facing Claudia spear in hand. Two of the younger men took up the Murian Spears and kept the first watch.

As Durr returned he Saw Claudia was already sleeping, her face gentled, her breath soft and low. Not for the last time he marveled at the simple beauty of this strange woman, but in this moment he did not wish she was a Chattii, he felt the danger to them all crowding in all around, and he knew they needed her lore, and her wisdom to survive.



In the deep dark of a frozen copse, hidden among the shadow of a hundred trees,

"Imma" searched the wound to her face with fumbling fingers, found the shaft of the arrow and wrenched it from her flesh and threw it fiercely aside with a howl. She found another shaft and wrenched the 2<sup>nd</sup> from her bosom, but she did not throw it aside, something caught her notice, she sniffed the feathers on the Arrow; she knew the smell.

"Her!" the word burst from her lips.

And then the oddest thing happened, she realized she had just thought; and with that came the realization she had not heard her own inner voice in days; her mind had been

filled with the rage, and famine of a wicked, feral thing, nearly every waking moment filled with that terrible burning pain. Only when she had found the lodge, and fed that terrible hunger had she been blessed with a moments ease, indeed she it was a bliss beyond anything she had ever known – she remembered the confusion, the fight, feeding amid their useless struggles and pointless pleading. She had seized them one by one, draining them of rich red blood; lost to the breathless bliss as the fire consumed them.

Part of her wanted to cry, knowing they had been lodge brothers and sisters, precious kin she had loved all her life, but that small part was as a match onto a bonfire; pushed aside by the fierce and terrible thing that had come upon her; and in that confused moment she remembered them both: the Witches; those great and terrible women who had suddenly stepped out of legend into her life; taller, paler, prouder than any woman she had ever known. The 2<sup>nd</sup> whose scent was on the feathers, who had driven her from her prey, denied her the blood of that squat and hairy man; and now the child.

Then there was the other.

The First Witch, the terrible woman with a wicked smile and evil laugh; she had come upon Imma in the woods, she had drank of her blood – then moved to wicked laughter she said, “So you were a mid-wife, now you shall be my mid-wife, A Mid-Wife of Death.” Then she bit herself and forced Imma’s mouth open, The Witch poured dark blood, burning with poisonous fire pour down Imma’s throat, a terrible hunger awoke in her and soon she was grasping at the wound desperately nursing; hungry for blood; unable to resist its pull even as each drop fed the roaring fire, increased the breathless pain.

From that moment to this, she had not had a thought such as a woman might think, but had only known the Hunger, the Rage, the instinct, of a famished animal; and try though she might to hold on, this moment was fading, she felt as if she was drowning, as the Animal once more flooded her mind.

She howled in feral rage.



They made ready to leave with the dawn, Claudia on Evita, and Durr mounted beside her, Har and Karl on foot as they set off Vinzenz came rushing out. “Lady I beg of you lend me your lance.”

“And how shall I hunt for her?” Asked Claudia.

“Lady we have all seen your skill with the bow, and we have need your knowledge, but I, I cannot sit with my hands in my lap like a woman, waiting for word while my lodge brothers hunt the slayer of my kin. If I must use my bare hands, I will not stay.”

Claudia smiled, “Such courage should not be denied, she threw him the lance, pulling her great Murian mace from its scabbard she weaved it through the air a few strokes, “This will not kill her, but it might driver her back long enough for you to put a lance on her; I give you my lance, now you will be my Shield Bearer.”

“Thank you Lady.” He said, he knew enough to understand the bond between a Murian Archer, and her Shield Bearer, to appreciate the deep honor she was extending him.

So they set for Lord Ragimund’s lodge there they warned Durr’s Vassal of the beast loose in the woods, and borrowed three horses for the hunt. Turning west the small hunting party searched for her trail. Claudia observed that the sun would feel like the lash of a whip to their quarry, and Har suggested then they seek her in a copse a few miles to the West, about half the distance to the Esa, “it is up on small hillock, it is very dense, Imma would know it, she might seek shelter there.”

The day ground on with no sight of her, the sun was dazzling bright, and the cold was deep, but its bite found little purchase with this grim little party. Now and again they found tracks that spoke to Har, confirmed in his mind that she was only a little ways ahead.

Now and again Karl did shudder and throw a worried look to his left the third time, Har said to him; “What do you see brother?”

“A Shadow, a great black shadow in the woods always to our left, but when I turn to look straight at it; it is just gone.” Karl replied a worried note in his voice.

Har smiled, “A Bear I think, some bear has shaken off his winters slumber to see what troubles his woods; concern yourself not with great shadows brother. Our Quarry for all her fearsome power is not so very big.”

“You do not trust Lady Claudia?” Karl said very quietly to Har.

“Death has been too frequent a visitor since her path crossed ours brother, if it should come to close combat, if both she and the beast might be run through at once, I for one will shed no tears for the loss.” He replied just as quietly, and neither Claudia nor Durr riding a few paces behind seemed to notice.

The sun was getting low, and Har was for turning back, returning to the Lodge to protect their kin through the night; Claudia pushed on past him, “She is too near, the stench of Chaos is too strong, do what you will but I will not give up the hunt.”

Vinzenz rode up, “I promised to stay by your side, I will not turn back one step before you.” Durr took up his place beside them without a word. Har shook his head slowly.

“Let us hope you are right then, that she does not slip round behind us to fall on the lodge unprotected.” They pushed on ... the sun sank lower you could see the rays of light shinning through the branches, and the Trail round up along the lip of a steep ledge on the hillock. There was barely room for the horses to pass single file, there was barely room for Evita to find purchase at all.

It was to perfect a place for an Ambush and when Karl started a 4rth time at shadows, Har Snapped at him, “Grab hold of your nerve man! Your worse than a child by a campfire!” Then she sprang...

She came silently down out of the trees, dropping out of the shadow of the high branches and landed behind Durr on his mount, she grabbed firm hold of him, dragging his neck back towards hungry fangs. With a great shout Claudia snatched her mace from its scabbard and swatted her from Durr's back just before the fatal bite fell. She Spurred Evita forward then leaped from Evita's back landing in the space she had made between her own Horse and Har's.

Imma was scrambling to her feet in frenzied fury, Claudia called to her, "Come to me, Come to your Death you Horror." She Lunged and Claudia swung, but Imma was ready for the mace now, she seized it and they wrestled; Claudia was powerful too and the force of her blow carried them both over the lip and tumbling down the steep slope still battling.

Imma landed impaled on 3 broken saplings, and in doing so ironically saved Claudia's life, she landed a few paces away bruised and stunned but whole, Imma worked her self furiously off the impaling stumps, but this gave Claudia just enough time to shake off the stupor of her landing and take up her Mace.

Durr seeing she was hot with Battle Madness threw his spear down a pace or so before her Shouting, "The Spear, Claudia the Spear, you can't kill her with a Mace!" Claudia nodded dropped the Mace and sprang for the spear, but Imma was just a moment ahead of her, she found herself wrestling the demon; one hand to her throat desperately pushing her fangs back the other grasping her near the shoulder.

She could not see Har grabbing a rope, and securing it to a tree, or Karl and Vinzenz, holding it for Durr as he desperately scrambled down, if she had it would have been cold comfort, the men dare not descend too quickly less they impale themselves, and she had precious few moments left.

Imma struggled and Hurlled her about but she would not let go of her neck, let her bring that fatal kiss any closer, then thinking this woman had no training to fight she fell back, kicking out and tried to put Imma over her head, but her grasp was too strong, and she was not thrown clear, Claudia found herself on her back with the demon now scrambling atop her.

Imma howled, then spoke, "You! You! I know your stench, you denied me the Man, and that rat of a boy, now you will feed me, now you will make good for all; your blood will ease the fires Witch!" She wrenched a hand free and slapped Claudia a stunning blow."

She Paused a moment, looked around, the nearest man on the rope was still too far away to deny her this time. Har's had taken up a bow, the Murian arrows were longer and thinner than those he was accustomed too, he loosed 3 shots but all flew wide of their mark in the fading light. The Last rays of light tickled the dark clouds and died.

Imma Smiled, at last she could Feed. She opened her Mouth, began to lean in ... As a sound like Thunder burst with a Terrible Clamor on the slope; Even Imma could not help but snatch her gaze in the direction of that earsplitting noise, A great black shape the size of a bear raced down the slope with impossible speed, it trampled saplings, and snapped

off small trees in its wake and it was headed straight for her! She Howled began to rise to meet this new threat and was carried off ...

Claudia again roused herself ... she was amazed to be alive, she looked to her left and there was Imma in the jaws of an Immense wolf, every inch as large as a bear, It shook Imma so hard they could hear the breaking bones, then swallowed her whole in three great gulps. The wolf howled!

Then Amid a cloud of Fairy lights she was gone and a woman stood there. A Murian woman dressed in a palette of the deepest Twilight. Claudia rose unsteady to her feet, "I should thank you, you saved my life."

"Did I?" the Woman mused, "how fortunate for you then."

"It was not intended?" Claudia said.

The woman tilted her head, "Why ever should I intend that? You might have lent a touch of spice to that bland little creature."

"Sorry to have disappointed you." Claudia replied.

"You needn't be." The woman playfully tapped her belly. "Still plenty of room"

"Another time perhaps?" Claudia said, parrying words with the Dark woman.

She laughed Gently, "I would have been pleasantly very surprised, had you accepted my offer." By now the men had descended the rope, and were gathering around Claudia, and the dark woman; looking from one to the other the likeness was stunning, and for Durr who alone among them had seen the Ara, it was most unnerving.

"You are..." Karl Stammered.

She laughed a gentle but evil laugh, Then spoke in a lilting voice as if reciting a favorite poem, "I am all things in Nature, Red of Tooth and Claw, I know no Modesty, no Restraint, Hunger is my Law." She stepped back into a whirling bow, and disappeared in a cloud of Fairy lights, like an actress leaving the stage.

Karl looked at them, from one to another, as if seeking confirmation of what he had seen with his own eyes. Har would have none of it, "Our work here is done, or done for us, and there are other dangers in the woods, time we returned to our home and kin."

Claudia and Durr followed the others on the long ride home, deep in the night riding side by side he spoke his mind, "She looks so like your mother, and your speech with her it was so very familiar it troubles me."

"You know her as Tsulsala, Wolf-Mother, Queen of Hunger, a terror as great as any in the Nine Worlds, and she is" She replied, "but she is also my mothers sister. My wayward Aunt you might say, and while mother has gone to great lengths to shield my sister from her, even mother cannot be in two places at once and she has often visited me, when I was very young I thought she was a strange sort of Faye, only later did I learn her true nature."

"Yet you still speak to her so intimately."

“Of course, is anything more intimate than Death, and I am a Healer, as any Healer I must be most intimate with Death.” Then she turned to him, “If you would have me return to Anar I will go, I would not blame you for wishing this.”

“I know, and I know Har wishes this; perhaps your presence here has brought us to the wolf mothers attention? Perhaps our confrontation to your sister, I cannot pretend to know what moves such great powers; but I do know Yvo’s was not the first lodge ever to know her wrath, and we have seen the Wolf Mother and lived, and that is a very rare thing indeed.” He smiled, “Please stay, we still have much to learn from one another my friend.”

She smiled, and nodded, they rode home.



Claudia stepped out of the close dark air of the Lodge into the bright clean air outside, and for a long moment with her eyes closed just let the cold winters sun dance on her skin. It felt good. She missed her own Murian Lodge which would never be shuttered except in the face of the Alur’s Wrath; Teresia was doing well, a fat lovely baby at her breast; not an hour ago now she had been pushed him out of her womb into Claudia’s hands. It was a joy to welcome him into the world, a joy bathe and swaddle him, and place him on his mother bosom. It seemed odd to her that no wise woman would name the child, that honor fell to the father, and that they would wait one full moon before naming him; but these were the Chattii’s customs.

After Imma’s passing need had compelled her to assume some of the Midwifery duties for the clan, now with 5 mothers safely delivering their children in as many weeks word of her skill was beginning to spread; and women where seeking her out.

“Good Morning” shouted a familiar voice, Claudia opened her eyes to see Durr approaching. She tilted her head, her eyes filled with concern, and he spoke to her unasked question, “No, no all is well my friend. I just had not seen you for a while and as Raban’s Lodge was near I though I would visit you and pay my respects to the father.”

“Five babes in Five weeks, I should never see such a wonder in Anar.” Claudia mused.

“And another soon – Loka tells me word of another request for your aid has come to her.”

“I can return with you in the Morrow if you mean to spend the night, my work her is nearly done, and your women know much of caring for little ones; but please come in let me show you the babe, let us welcome this little one into the world.”

Durr Laughed, “Best I let the father show me the babe, it is a formality, but one we best observe.” She nodded and they entered the lodge. It might have been dark and smoky but it shone as brightly as any place in the world as Raban and his wife marveled at their latest little gift from the Ki.

Ama tu ANKI, BB.

