The background of the entire page is a dark teal or navy blue color with a fine, irregular, marbled texture, resembling the surface of old leather or a high-quality paper with a specific grain.

*Blood of the Lady*  
*The Sacred Queens of Anar*

## Beginnings.

*I am Pandora de Anar, as I sit here at this desk penning these letters I am also looking out my window, at my children, and their children, and their children beyond them; and I know I have been well blessed, for though we Murian's are a long lived people, we have never been well blessed with children, and it is ever so rare for one of us to live to see three generations blossoming before her eyes.*

*I am filled with a simple joy, and deep pride watching my children gathering apples in the orchard; it is the harvest time, time for them to harvest the fruit of our labors, time for me to harvest the memories of a lifetime. Once I was one of those laughing little girls rushing about with a great stick striking the branches urging the heavy apples to fall. If you had told me then of the life I would live, I would have thought you mad; For I was The First Born Daughter of the Seventh Rebirth of the Ara, and my fate and my future then seemed as fixed as the course of the Esa which guards the eastern borders of my sacred home, Anar. I was born to be Fourth of the Nine, and later Regina, this was clearly in my stones, and was known to one and all from the day I was born.*

*Yet just as no one can know just how a single drop of water in the Esa will chart her course to the sea, nor if or when the Rains will return her to us; so too was my life a life to defy all our expectations. I see that in my children most clearly, some of them have the Raven hair and bone white skin of their Mother, of a Murian. While others call to my eyes with an unforeseen parade of Brown, and Red and Gold, and how this came to pass will be revealed later.*

*To understand my story, it might be best for me to explain just this; there is much of what you might Call Magick in these stories, what we would call Bianna. To the Chattii Magick appears to be something the goes beyond or is in someway contrary to nature; to a Murian Magick speaks to a deep understanding and acceptance of the ways of nature; I remember a time so very long ago now,*

*My Chattii Man-servant Bevel was playing with me, "Where is Pandora, where could she be?" he said, as he stepped from tree to tree looking for any little shimmer, any little difference in its appearance, but I was learning my lessons well, I was mastering the "song of the trees"; by listening carefully to the song of a given tree, then voicing the note myself, I could make myself all but invisible to mundane eyes; but just now I was still a little girl and the sight of Bevel looking right at me not seeing tickled me no end so I giggled. Playfully Bevel grabbed at the sound and caught his young princess, tickling me till my energy changed and I became visible to his mundane eyes once more. I was a lovely child with the Raven hair and bone white skin of my mother, and indeed all the Murian people. I was also precious to him, and he hugged me close before returning to our lessons. "*

*This great sorcery in the eyes of the Chattii is a Childs Game for us; but this game will greatly affect the tale that follows.*

*For now it seems to me time to return to our beginnings, to the story of my sister Claudia whose life has been so deeply woven into my own tale, and of her, and our first adventure beyond the Borders of Sacred Anar.*

## Life

Astara, cradled the infant suckling at her breast, wrapping the blankets round it more tightly; nuzzling it's tiny nose. "It would be better for this babe if we had a few cords of Murian Wood" she said aloud, "it would burn brighter and we would all be warmer."

Her husband shot her an angry glance, but dared not say anything to dispute her in the Lodger, in front of the other men; still he hoped another would say something dismiss Astara's foolish desire.

"Indeed Alur has been most harsh to us this season." Loka add her voice to Astara's.

"We have plenty of wood in the cellar." Wulf grumbled dismissively. Perhaps Wulf alone dared speak for the men, Three times had he crossed the Esa, three times he returned, once he even poached a stag from the Witches; none doubted his courage or his craft.

"And yet still this Lodge is freezing, While fire pit roars and we smother ourselves in furs, see I must clutch my child tight to keep the chill from overwhelming her."

"If Kethrid can't keep you warm perhaps you chose to wrong bed to share." Wulf laughed, but now Kethrid felt more deeply stung; though he kept his hurt to himself; he knew Wulf meant no great harm by it. "Do you hear my Hertha grumbling."

Hertha raised her chin up from her blankets, "Just a few cords of Murian Wood, would be a great blessing; hold back the worst of this terrible chill." She replied softly, Wulf nodded.

"It's too late to prepare tonight, best leave very early tomorrow a couple hours before the cock crows, we can slip across the Esa with the Dawn."

"But surely it would be best to approach the Esa by day, and slip across in the Twilight." Said, Njal

**"Best if we where slipping into the lands of Hatavii, but not the Murian's; The Murian's are witches, creatures of the night brothers; their eyes are surpassing sharp under the light of the moon. But living their long lives as they do under the shade of Anar's eves, they have no love of Uttu's bright light. If we cross the Esa with the Dawn, as Uttu's light shines right in their faces; we have our best chance to go unnoticed."**

**"But where?" inquired Njal.**

**"There is a small loop in the Esa not too very far from here, their watch is not so sharp there, there I have slipped into Anar before." Answered Wulf.**

**"You think we might do it then?" voiced Kethrid, a bit amazed at the turn events were taking.**

**"If we slip across with the Dawn, we might fell a couple of saplings before we are noticed, nothing too proud; we can float them down the Esa a short ways and lumber them on our side of the shore. With a little luck and hard work we should be back before nightfall." Said Wulf.**

**"Still it seems an awful chance for a few cords of wood." Kethrid finally said aloud.**

**"Life itself is a chance brother, but Alur's wrath will surely get worse before it fades; and few cords of wood blessed by the Witches Queen will help us weather the worst of it the better." Said Ufir**

**"The Length of my life and the Day of My Death were written before I was born, better to be fearless than of Faint heart for any man who would stick his nose out of doors." Said Njal quoting the Saga's.**

**"Tomorrow night then," Kethrid Nodded, "Njal perhaps you could tell us the full story of Skirnir and Gerd?" Njal who was their best story teller was happy for the suggestion, and regaled the Lodger with the Saga a tale of great daring in a hostile land - a story to warm the heart and feed the courage of all who lent an ear.**

**The next day passed quietly enough, the men packed a small river boat, a Draco; with Axe heads and handles, ropes to help haul the lumber down to the Esa, and a couple small sledges to help haul it home. The Draco was small and narrow with Dragon heads on each end, that could serve as handles on land. Designed to navigate the little rivers and streams that crisscrossed Chattii lands, and to be carried by two men with out much difficulty overland between them. Most Lodges of any size had at least one.**

**The Chatti's fire pit and shelter guarded their small camp fire from prying eyes, more than a few yards away no mortal eye should have noted them, Wulf placed a small wax pillar near the lip of the fire pit; when the line he had etched into it was**

gone he knew they had but two hours till dawn. The men roused themselves and began to manhandle the boats down close to the Esa. They welcomed the work for it helped them push out the chill in the night air.

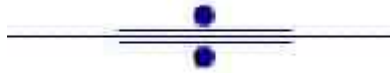
Again they paused just as the near bank of the Esa came into view. Wulf slipped forward; but he would let no one else come with him. Moving just a little closer to the Esa - peering at her dark opposite shore, at the Eves of Anar; the dreadful Forest of the Witches. They waited till the twilight of the coming dawn just tickled the sky and moved their boat down to the tree line, then just as the first rays of Uttu's light reached out to the Leaves of Anar, they made their dash, paddled across the river and pulled the boat up to the tree line on the other side. Kethrid's heart pounded in his chest. Never before had he dared come so close to the Esa, now here he was standing under the very Eve's of Anar.

Wulf wasted no time, he selected two trees with Narrow trunks, each just wide enough to make a decent cord of wood, the Diameter of the trunks, just wider than a mans hand could reach; and set the other men to work hewing them down. The tell tale stroke of the Axes rang in their ears, but there was nothing for it, they could not quietly bring the trees down; they had to work quickly and be gone now. Wulf whose wood craft was the best of any of them kept watch for any sign of approaching witches.

Kethrid paused for a moment between strokes, wiping his brow he said to Njal, "I think we just might get away with this and Astara will be so pleased." His friend and brother smiled a knowing smile; ....

Then his eyes opened wide with horror and a gout of blood shot from his throat, he fell forward the long shaft of a brightly feathered arrow in the back of his neck. Egil and Ufir turned to run, and were cut down 3 arrows each driven hard into their backs.

Kethrid threw down his axe and ran hard for the river and was cut down. Wulf looking around at the slaughter grabbed up an axe and charged blindly in the direction the arrows had come from and was met by an Arrow through his noble heart.



Pandora led a ring of nine archers out of the wood, she was now a grown Murian woman standing nearly seven feet tall as Chattii measure such things, a tall woman for her people but not unusually so, the Murian were much like the trees they tended, tall, long lived and strong. She came to Kethrid, pulled her Arrow from his back, pushed him over with her foot and drove it into his weakly beating heart. There it and he would remain as warning to any who would follow for the remainder of the winter.

"It seems too terrible to kill them so ... for what ... for a few cords of wood." Said Claudia, even as she dispatched Ufir.

**"Do you love our home sweet sister?" Asked Pandora.**

**"Of course I do, you know I do!" Said Claudia flustered.**

**"Then you must defend it, if we were to let each Chattii harvest just one tree; in a few short years Anar would be no more; it is our place to guard, our sacred trust."**

**"But must we kill them." Said Claudia.**

**"These men knew they risked death coming here, yet still they come; what words do you think could keep them away." Answered Pandora. Now she raised a hand quieting her sister and the others. She softly sang the Bianna, drawing the heat up from deep with-in the earth till the ground under her hands became a mud of earth and thawed ice. This she scooped up and slathered into the wounds of one of the two trees the men had been harvesting. The pitch of her voice changed, and by the alchemy of the Murian's, the mud was transmuted from the element of earth to the element of wood. She pet the trunk and whispered comfort to the wounded Dryad of the Tree. For several long moments singing deeply a song of healing.**

**She came to the other, the character of the song changed, carried a deep melancholia, she released the spirit of the dryad from the wounded tree, and motioned for one the shield bearers to approach. "This one is lost - you and your fellows are to harvest the wood."**

**"Yes Lady he replied."**

**Then she turned to Claudia, "They set on our sisters without a thought to their souls, they make no effort at all to release their spirits before gathering the wood, and you would spare them."**

**"I just feel there must be a way, a path that preserves life, theirs and ours."**

**"The world sweet Claudia, the world is red of tooth and claw; and so must we be, if we are to survive in it. We have no right to anything we are not willing to defend; no one does, the Gods will not preserve for us, that which we will not guard ourselves."**

**Claudia shook her head. "Sometimes I think I am losing you; you sound more and more like Mother each day. Soon I fear you will become someone I can never know."**

**"I am Regina, one day it will be my place to Guard Anar, keep her safe till Mother again returns."**

**"Yes you are Regina, and Mother is 'The Ara'" Claudia answered with a wicked wryness in her voice, "But who am I, why am I here."**

Pandora paused, suddenly thoughtful, "I think you are here to tell our story. The Burning is coming, we all know it is, and one day all this will be gone; but it will not have been in vain if we are remembered, if we leave behind us a song, A song that tells of a people who lived, and loved, and Danced with the Moon, here in Sacred Anar. A song can be a great thing; it can survive a people and ring down the ages. When at last the smoke clears, and Anar has been burned I think you will be our witness."

Claudia looked at her sister, but had no words for her. The Murian disappeared into the trees of the Palisade and returned to their Casade.

Later Pandora was speaking to Lady Ialu 2nd of the Nine of the Casade. "It was as you dreamed it, a band of five men come to do violence to Anar. Alas we did not see them cross, the sound of their axes led us to them, but by then one of our Dryad sisters was mortally wounded, I released her myself."

"And the other, I was told two sisters were injured?"

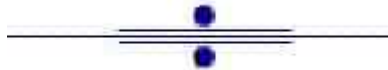
"Her wounds are Grievous, but I will remain here and see to her mending till she is fully healed."

And Lady Claudia?

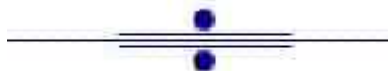
She will be returning to Casade Luna, she is much troubled by these events.

"I see." Said Lady Ialu, "I would comfort her myself, but she will have none of it just now."

"Claudia will find her own path; or so mother always says." Quoted Pandora. Still she could not help but wonder at the Ara's purpose; why had she sent her daughters here, had she foreseen these events as well; had she put them on this path on purpose; only Ara would know for sure, and surely she would keep her own council.



Across the Esa, as Twilight gave way to night, and the shadows gathered in her Lodger a woman clutched her child to her bosom; Lying to the child and to herself she said, "Don't worry little one, your daddy, your daddy is safe; he's just delayed, but he will be home come the morrow." Then she closed her eyes tightly and sobbed, and her sisters sobbed with her.



Life chapter 2:

**Claudia slipped out of the Casade in the dim hours of the Twilight, she spent the long night along the Palisade Singing the Bianna, at first Vocalizing the Ancient Song of the Murian, but note by note, hour by hour slowly drawing the song into herself so long before morning she ceased to vocalize at all, still the energy she raised kept her warm, shielded her from the biting wind, and while the Wrath of Alur whipped round her, she sat chanting deep in her own thoughts, untouched by the chill.**

**There Deep in the Night she saw it – A wolf, and yet not a wolf; It was beautiful its lines Magnificent, each hair of it's coat glistened with life; but it was not alive, perhaps it was a spirit, the spirit of a great Wolf waiting to be reborn, for a long moment she watched him, and she watched her, and then as quietly as the vision came it faded.**

**As the first rays of Uttu's light touched the Eves of Anar, her eyes fluttered open, Claudia eyes opened to see a small form, a woman perhaps, wrapped in a hooded blanket and furs crouched over one of the dead men who had been slain two mornings past, now he was totally frozen by Alur's breath.**

**She felt a slight change in the energy around her, a focusing, and she raised her hand. The Archer not a pace away froze, she too raised her hand and repeated the sign, and the ring of nine archers charged with this part of the Palisade all froze.**

**"She is no threat to Anar," Claudia Said,**

**"She is still an Interloper on Sacred Ground." The Archer replied.**

**"I know, and I will see to her, you will watch over me, but be not too hasty with your bow." The archer acknowledged the Lady with a tiny bob of her chin.**

**Claudia approached the Chattii woman, she came with-in a pace of her, before lost in her grief, and blinded to Claudia's approach by her sobbing, Astara noticed the Murian woman.**

**"You, You Killed HIM!" Astara Wailed.**

**"No" Said Claudia, with an odd Melancholia in her voice that took Astara by surprise, "No I killed him," she glanced briefly in Ufir's direction, "and I have just saved your life."**

**"You, you think that makes it any better!" Astara wailed.**

**"No, of course not, I was simply honoring the truth. Hate me if you must, but at least hate me for what I have truly done."**

Astara blinked like an Owl surprised by the morning light and Claudia continued, "You must go now, you cannot stay here, unless it is your intention to cross the veil to be with your husband; for my archers will slay you"

"No, I have a child, his child, I must return to her." Astara replied.

"You have shown rare courage, I will honor that, you may return on the morrow with two men of your tribe, you may remove this one and take him home for a proper burial by your people."

"And the others?" Astara asked weakly.

"You came alone today, come alone again, the others will remain as a warning to any who would do harm to Sacred Anar till the end of Winter, then we will give them to the Esa, as we have done since your people burst from their cradle and found mine." Claudia Answered.

"It seems so cruel."

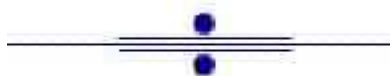
"It is, but it is a necessary Cruelty" Claudia replied, "Go now."

Astara got up slowly walked away in something of a daze, confused by events of the last few moments, a few paces from Claudia she suddenly rounded on her and shouted. "I hate you, I hate all of you, you Unseen Witches, I .. I will have my revenge!"

"That would be unwise." Claudia replied mildly, "Come tomorrow, bring two of your men and no more and I will honor my word to you."

"I will need another day to reach the Lodger of my Husbands Brother and return."

"It is given, but not a day more, cross the Esa as the Sun Rises two days from now and you will be under my protection." Astara had crossed the Esa on a small raft which she fashioned from what scraps she would find. Now one of the Archers Silently pulled Kethrid's Draco out from his hiding place along the Palisade and pushed it into the water for the woman. The Eight other archers also broke cover for a moment and Astara look around her in wonder, realizing how closely death had been watching over her while she conversed with the strange sad lady of the wood.



The Sun was already low in the sky when Astara finally reached Durr's Lodger; Wulfs brother was a brave and generous lord and he had already agreed to take herself and Hertha in, Loka, Ermin, and Traud; would likely be inherited along with Wulf's Lodge by the son of one of Durr's vassals.

Hertha was nursing Astara's child as her lodge sister crossed the threshold, but rushed immediately to her as Astara stepped through the door, "Thank the Gods you live, I thought sure I was going to lose you too."

"Yes, it was a fey thing to do and I must speak to Durr of it soon, the Babe, the babe is well?" she asked.

"Of Course, would you like to nurse her?" Hertha asked,

Astara smiled; leaning in close she whispered, "I am so cold, I fear even my milk is chilled, best I warm a bit before feeding her myself."

"Your bosom must feel fit to burst." Hertha replied.

"It did, I had to leave a little milk on the snow, and that was a trial it froze as quickly as it left my nipples."

"There is good stew, and warm cider go warm yourself she will be fine another few minutes with me." And Hertha nuzzled little Cacilla,

Word of the disastrous raid had spread quickly through neighboring lodges, most of which owed allegiance to Durr, and so the men of those lodges had gathered here, to work out what response if any they dared to take. Now and again Astara would pick out a sentence in the bellowing din of male voices.

"We cannot just let our fellows lay un-avenged in the snow."

"They Courted the Wrath of the Witches, and they found it, shall we risk more deaths for fools!" and so on back and forth.

Durr moved through the crowded room, from man to man, brother, commoner, and lord; unseen and unspoken of the way always just seemed to open for him as he moved, but Astara noted the silent statement of his power. His Dark hair marked him as not being a true son of Freyja, but otherwise his appearance was noble He was a handsome man perhaps 6 foot and three fingers, with chiseled features, and a strong but less stocky frame than most Chattii.,

He drifted over to the table where Astara had taken her seat, and quietly waited for her to speak. "They will bellow till they have made enough noise to satisfy themselves of their manhood, then they will all go home." Astara said dryly to her new lord.

"It is a terrible thing to face the witches, an adventure all too likely to end badly, one cannot blame them for not rushing into the jaws of death still wet with the blood of our kin Sweet Astara; and you; how is it the evening finds you alive, Hertha told me you were going to the Esa, going to find dear Kethrid there?"

**"Yes milord, it is true; and I have been with my Sweet Kethrid. I have held him in my arms, and grieved his loss, then a strange woman approached me, One of the Witches, she spoke to me as a noble might, she sent me back across the Esa lest her Archers slay me was well."**

**"Her Archer's, she used these words?" Queried Durr.**

**"Yes milord, and so saying she sent me back across the Esa with a promise that if I returned with two men, no more, day after the Morrow; I might carry sweet Kethrid home, and give him "a proper burial". Then Nine Archer's appeared from out of the trees, so close they were, and yet I had not seen them; it was sorcery lord. One of them led me to Kethrid's Draco and I returned with it across the Esa; there it waits now, and with your blessing Lord we can return to it, bring Sweet Kethrid home, and light a Pyre in his honor."**

**"And the others?" Durr asked,**

**"She said I came alone, and I must come along again, she would not release the others, they will be given to the Esa come the spring."**

**Durr nodded Quietly, "You must tell me the whole of this tale again from the beginning,"**

**"Then you will help me MiLord."**

**"Kethrid was my Lodge Brother as well Sweet Astara, but tell me all you know I do not trust this Witch, and I may learn more than you think by your story." And so Astara told Durr her story, till he had heard it three times in full, and she was so very tired and he was sure he could learn no more from her.**

**Then he pulled out his knife and began rapping it's butt on the Table, till the din slowly quieted and the eyes of every man in the room was on their lord. Then he began speaking,**

**"My Brothers, this brave woman has returned this very night from the field of our Fallen Kin; she has won by her courage the honor of returning Brave Kethrid to us from the Hands of the Witches. Who among you will accompany me and this fine woman to the Esa to bring our Brother home."**

**"I!" replied the men with one voice.**

**"I am honored to lead a band of such brave souls!" said Durr, "But we cannot all go, So as you all have Volunteered how shall I choose among you"**

**"Then Let the Runes Choose." Called out one Man.**

**"Yes, put the choice in the Hands of the Gods."**

**Durr Nodded, "Let it be so then, I will need 8 men and two strong lads to accompany me; let the Gods Choose who."**

**"But the Witch said, two and no more!" Whispered Astara.**

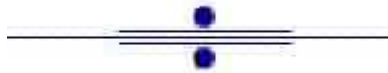
**"I know, dear sister, and it will seem to her that is all who have come."**

**She looked at him with Questing eyes.**

**"You swore to the Witch you would take your vengeance, do you still want it?"**

**"Yes Milord," she answered firmly.**

**"Then Trust me and you shall have it."**



**Life Chapter 3 : The party had spent the night in Wulf's old Lodge, Loka, Ermin, and Traud did their best to be gracious hosts, the party had left near the morning. They approached the Esa near dawn.**

**Lady Engaria, was peering into the darkness, "I count the shadows of 8 Men at least, I do not trust them MiLady, you should not have promised them this."**

**Claudia too was watching the Chattii, to Murian Eyes they where as Shadows against the flaming Aura of the Trees around them, "So long as only two cross the river they have kept their word, and we will keep ours." She replied.**

**As the sun rose and the twilight of dawn revealed the far bank of the Esa to Chattii eyes two men Entered the Draco along with the woman. They rowed steadily across and Claudia came down near the banks to greet them. Stopping respectful distance from the Draco as it beached she said, "You have kept your word, and may retrieve your dead."**

**Without a word the Chattii nodded and went to Kethrid, with short flat knives they broke his remains away from the clutches of the Frozen Earth which already was loathe to surrender it's prize. When they had bundled Kethrid into the Draco, one of the Chattii Men took a pace closer to Claudia. He held out something, a small hand carved wolf.**

**"Dear Lady you too have honored your word, please accept this as a gesture of our thanks." He said.**

Claudia came down nearer the water till she was just a step or two from the man, suddenly and without warning two youths leaped out from under blankets on the bottom of the Draco and raced around her putting the point of Knives to her belly and her back. The Man stepped up too and drew his sword. Claudia raised her arm over her head and made a small gesture with her hand.

The man eyed her suspiciously, "What are you doing witch?"

"I was instructing my Archers not to shoot you, shall I tell them otherwise." She looked down at one of the boys, gently moving the tip of his blade away from her belly, "Please put that way before my Archers lose patience and kill you."

The Lad looked to Durr who shook his head slightly. "I see no Archers." He said. Claudia made another small Gesture, and Lady Engaria stepped into view, the Chattii Gaspd as she just seemed to Magickally appear from the line of tree's.

"MiLady."

"Lady Engaria what would you do if I told you to shoot this young lad." Claudia said nodding slightly at the lad holding his knife to her belly.

"See your will done of course." She said flatly, with just a hint of menace in her voice.

"You're coming with us Witch" Durr said trying to take command of the moment again.

"I do not fear my rebirth, do you fear yours Chattii?" Claudia replied, "Now please tell these lads to put their knives away." Durr Nodded, the Lads put away their blades, but he kept his own unsheathed.

"This noble lord has invited me to witness the funerary rites of his brother?" she said to Lady Engaria, "I will accompany them, not a prisoner but as a guest."

"My eyes say otherwise" The Archer replied.

Durr Sheathed his blade, "Lady if you would be so kind as to get in the boat."

"You will inform Pandora I am this Noble Lords guest, and beg for me her forbearance that she not worry about me for 3 nights, then I will return to you I promise." Said Claudia.

"If that is your will Lady." Engaria replied.

"It is." Claudia smiled.

Engaria turned to Durr, "You have threatened 'The Blood of the Lady', I look forward to Killing you."

"Engaria!" Claudia gasped.

"MiLady, I was merely Honoring the Truth." She Said, then she turned and walked away, voicing a single clear note as she went, as Miraculously as she appeared, she vanished, and the Chattii looked to one another in amazement.

Claudia offered Durr her hand, "If you would be so kind" Durr helped Claudia into the boat, and the lads began paddled across the Esa. Sitting at the back of the boat Claudia said, "You forgot to give me my wolf."

"Your Wolf?" said Durr.

"I would not think such a noble lord as yourself would offer my such a gift merely as a deception? You did truly intend for me to receive your gift no?"

He reached out with the little wolf in his hand. "Of course, I can see you are an honorable woman, and you will be treated with honor accordingly."

Claudia took the little wolf in hand, it was beautifully carved, so full of life and vigor that if it had leapt from her hand into the Esa it would not have surprised her at all; "This is Magnificently done. By your hand?" she asked.

"Yes Lady." Durr replied, "I have some talent with a knife, and the work takes ones mind from the winters chill.

Claudia smiled. "And what was your true intention today?"

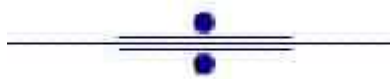
"To take you to our Lodge, to Ransom you for the Blood Tort of our Fallen."

"And more" said Claudia.

"The Ransom of a Witch Noble must be a mighty purse." Durr replied.

Claudia shook her head slightly, but remained silent. She gazed at the little wolf thinking to herself, Alive and yet not alive, so it was you who came to me in my dream little wolf, and now pray tell where will you be leading me. Of course the wolf did not answer, nor did she expect him to he had done his part in fulfilling the Wisdom of the Dragon, and now she Claudia, must do hers.

The archers found the Chattii's ransom note in the bottom of the Draco, and sped word to Pandora and the Ara of the Sudden Turn of Events.



**Life Chapter 4: A great cheer greeted Durr on the opposite shore as the men who had accompanied him realized he truly had captured one of the dreaded witches, and they might truly ransom her for the Tort which was owed for their kin.**

**The Chattii struck out for Wulf's old Lodge, they would treat with the Witches from there, as they made their way along half hidden tracks, they could not help but marvel at Claudia's great height, nearly seven foot as the Chattii measure such things, a fair height for a Murian woman, something of a Giant to them; and her beauty, as blood of the Ara she was well blessed even among a people noted for their beauty.**

**Har voiced the mind of more then one of the men when he suggested, forfeiting the Ransom and keeping her for themselves but met by a stern rebuke from Durr. "The Lady is a Noblewoman, she will be treated as such by you Curs" Durr scolded them smiling, and they all laughed with him.**

**"I think the Big Cur wants our prize for himself." Said Har; who was handsome enough for a Chattii, perhaps 5 and half feet in height as they measure such things, stocky strong, with a thick beard and hairy limbs. He looked As much like a Very Large Dwarve, or Bristling; as a short man. It was hard to know just where his furs ended and Har's own deep brown mane began.**

**"It would be the Big Dogs right." Replied Durr, and they laughed again.**

**Astara was not at all amused, but she dare not correct the men, instead she contented herself with Claudia's capture. She cared not for any ransom when the moment presented itself she would kill the witch and avenge her kin.**

**The march took most of the day and Durr found a few moments to speak to Claudia here and there, "My people think you should be bound and gagged lest you bewitch us."**

**"And you, what to do you think." Asked Claudia.**

**"My people believe your Magick lay in your songs." Durr continued.**

**Claudia nodded slightly, "I had heard Chattii believe this."**

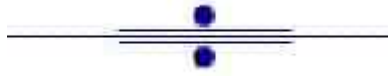
**"but is it true?" asked Durr.**

**"There is much Magick in our Song." Claudia Answered.**

**"Then I would ask you to promise not to Sing, I believe you are noble and you word will bind you as strongly as any rope."**

**"Perhaps more so." Said Claudia smiling slightly.**

**"Then I will leave you unbound so long as you honor your promise."  
Claudia nodded her ascent.**



**Wulf's Lodge was quite a bustling whirl, a second party of men had remained behind to prepared Kethrid's Pyre; as Uttu stained the Sky blood red with twilight Astara put the torch to the Pyre and led them in the songs for the dead. The other wives stood with her, each with her own torch but having no remains of their own to honor, the joined Astara in setting fire to Kethrid's remains; as they did so they glared at the Witch woman with baleful eyes.**

**Men folk from several lodges had gathered to see the Witch Prisoner, Durr sent runners, young men no more than 16 summers to other lodges, both to announce his great prize and to ask for warriors be sent to come help guard their new treasure. Durr was a clan Chieftain and as such he might call as many as 300 warriors to him if hard pressed, but 300 might not be enough if matters came to a fight, he knew he was taking a great chance here, and he would stand better if the Clans of Stag and Clan of the Bear Stood with him; still life itself was a chance and if he wrested a ransom from the witches, the gold and glory both might propel him to the circle of Elders of the Gross Chattii.**

**Durr had seen enough battles to know that a battle might easily be lost by a faint heart, by pulling back when one he should push forward, and he felt this was such a moment, this was a moment to push forward and seize the day. He let no doubt in his mind line his face or cloud his eyes, let his men see in him the great chieftain he felt in his heart he truly was, a man in charge of his moment and his destiny.**

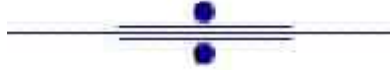
**Claudia had blessed herself Oddly as Kethrid's Pyre burned, touching her brow, her lips, her heart. She still seemed oddly calm; unafraid in this moment. There were many children in the Lodge this night, brought by the wives of some of the gathered warriors while they helped the women folk, the children gathered around Claudia. For them she was something out of a story come to life, and the tug of the forbidden pulled them to her, and she seemed to genuinely welcome their company. Letting them shyly touch her, bone pale arms, or her Raven hair.**

**Watching her Durr thought, surely some Witch Lord must be raging this night, raging as he would had she been stolen from his own Lodge. What ever else she was she was a fine woman, and Durr could not help but notice that quality in her.**

**The men folk sang loudly for many long choruses and drank too much ale, Loka whispered in Durr's ear. "My Lord, such a gathering of men overwhelms my larder, we have not fodder enough for more than 3 days; and we will go hungry ourselves afterward."**

Durr kissed his Lodge sister, "These men are my guests, not your burden, in the morning I will send a lad with a message to Senta; his first wife as she well knew; and she will arrange to have your larder restocked."

"Thank you my Lord." She bowed slightly.



**Life Chapter 5:** Shortly after midnight one of the Runners Burst into the Lodge, he was breathless sweaty and his clothes rent in several places. "My Lord My Lord we are cut off; we are besieged by wolves."

Durr looked at him, "What say you boy!"

"MiLord, Rotger and I set off for the Lodge of the Stag as you instructed but were soon set upon by wolves, we avoided them and found more, we avoided them and found more still. Rotger was lamed I left him in a tree not far from here the Wolves circling at his feet; I barely managed to return myself. My Lord I doubt a single runner has reached his lodge, the land is flooded with wolves as if every wolf in all Mura is harkening to a call."

"So it begins." Claudia said softly, but all heard, and all eyes turned to her.

"You, You are calling these wolves!" Said Durr.

"No Good Lord, I gave you my word I would use no sorcery and I have used none, but the wolves answer a call none the less. Pandora's call, my sister is coming, and the Ara will follow, you have awakened 'The Power that Sleeps in the Woods' and courted her wrath, for the sake of these good folk, Dear Lord, I suggest it is time you gave me back."

Durr shook his head, "No lady you will remain with us."

"Then may I at least save this child?" Durr looked confused for a moment, and Claudia turned to the Runner, "Your companion Rotger he is not far from here."

"No Lady, not far, but the wolves are everywhere, we cannot reach him."

"We can" Claudia said, "but It will require that I sing my lord, if you will allow this small sorcery, we might save this lads life."

"Don't trust her Milord" hissed Astara, "She will summon the pack right to our door."

"Lady Claudia has been an Honorable guest so far, I will trust her; but you must promise not to abuse this trust, do no magick you need not do to save the lads life."

Claudia made a tiny bow, "Of course good lord, I would not dishonor the house of Anar by twisting your words. I am a Witch, not a Shyster."

"Lead us to Rotger then boy," Durr said, and the three of them left the Lodge. It was not so very long at all before Claudia put out her hand and stopped them, she glanced at Durr. "I must sing now." He nodded, she began a soft low song, and several wolves stepped out the shadows approached them, they licked her hand and retreated into the darkness. All along their path they encountered wolves, many bowed low in submission to Claudia. Others Howled, a few the "Alpha's" would approach as the others had and "kissed" her hand.

Durr looked to her with Questioning eyes.

"It is well known even among your people that we are Kin to the Wolf Mother, Good Lord, their Fealty to her extends to us."

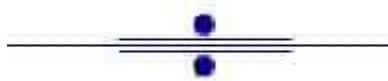
"And your sister summoned them, can you dismiss them as well?" Durr asked.

"You would have me help you in the fashioning of my own prison?" she allowed herself a small laugh, "but no Dear Lord, My sister is Forth of the Nine, I am Third of the Nine, a healer; we have been taught different songs."

They found the lad clinging weakly to consciousness, having lost too much blood from a gash in his leg. Claudia reached up and pulled him down, the character of her song changed, Settling him on the ground he ran her hands over the leg Seven times, each time softly singing. With each pass of her hands the wound closed little by little by they seventh pass it was sealed.

She looked up to Durr, "He's lost a lot of blood, he may still die, She rose, lifting the boy and handing him to Durr, "be careful with him, that wound can still be opened again." Durr then carried him back to the Lodge.

On their return Durr Quietly returned the Lad to his father and mother, telling them to be most careful with him, but Tielo, Tielo was a cup filled to over flowing pouring out to one and all the story of the wonders he had just seen; when the Chattii looked to Claudia for some confirmation of these wonders, she mildly replied. "The Child Flatters me, it really was not quite as wondrous as it seemed to his young eyes."



Life chapter 6 :

It was not a Murian Lord, but Lady Pandora who was raging. "Why Why did you not shoot them!"

"Lady Claudia gave the sign to hold, Lady!" Replied Engaria, a bit confused.

**"And why did you obey her!" Stormed Pandora.**

**"She is 'Blood of the Lady' am I to Question her!" Engaria replied caught between Ara's daughters.**

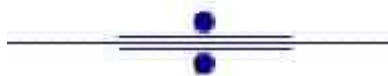
**"Blood of the Lady, Blood of the Lady, have we become Chattii who mindlessly obey their lords despite all sense!" Pandora Stormed, then as if turning a page she paused a moment, turning again to Engaria more calmly, "We cannot undo what is, tell me quickly what else have you done!"**

**"We crossed the Esa as soon as the Chattii had disappeared beyond the nearest trees, we found the note I have brought to you; as soon as I understood their intention, I dispatched 3 archers, Young Ones swift of foot with good wood craft to follow the Chattii, we should know where they are holding Lady Claudia by morning. I have sent runners and riders to the 3 nearest Lodges, we can cross the Esa with 150 Archers, and 100 Shield Bearers by nightfall; but lady it worries me, if the Chattii realize the true value of their prize they might rally to this brigand in their thousands."**

**"Indeed they might, I want you to send 3 more archers across the Esa, they are to follow the Chattii path till Uttu Touches the roof to the Sky then return to us, and ask Lady Olalla; who was 4th of the Nine of the Casade; to go with them and mark their path, I will not wait for word of my sister on the banks of the Esa."**

**"Yes Lady," She paused a moment, obviously shy to speak her mind, but finally brought herself to say, "Milady, Lady Claudia is Blood of the Ara, perhaps she knows what she is doing, perhaps we should wait three mornings time as she begged of you."**

**"Lady Claudia is FOOL!" Pandora snapped, "Oh but the Seer named her all to well, always her head nearer the clouds, than her feet to the ground. No we dare not wait! I leave matters concerning the Archers and Shield Bearers to you, make sure the Shield Bearers carry pavilions and provisions for a few days, we will have to camp in Chattii Lands; meanwhile there is something I alone must do I will be beside the Esa."**

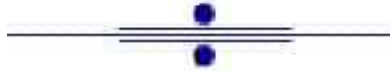


**Pandora raised her arms and began the ancient summons of the Wolf Brothers, and wherever they were, sheltering from the cold or on the hunt, they turned their heads towards the song, paused, and then began loping towards that ancient summons. Crossing Ice Bridges, and fallen trees they poured into the lands of the Gross Chattii, the Largest of all the Chattii Nations, the First the Murian's had met, and the people for whom they had named the Iron Age Race of Man.**

**Alone in a high Cabanavore of Casade Luna, Ara too heard her Daughters song, and called for her Sleigh, Far Far away in Kur Tsulsala, her sister, heard Pandora's**

call, she too wondered why her niece was calling to her children, she wondered if it would provide her some wicked amusement to see for herself, the wolf Mother Tsulsala turned her gaze to that tiny spot on the Esa where Pandora stood arms flung above her head, her body like a 5 pointed star, singing.

Pandora's song echoed through out Anar; for those with the power to hear; The Nine: the Anilla De Anar heard the call, they too knew this Ancient Song and knew it's significance; they dare not disturb Lady Pandora, but discreetly they reached for her, touched her presence, understood where she was then dispatched Archers and Shield Bearers to Casade Horus. The Power that Sleeps in the Woods was Waking, The Murian were preparing for war.



It was another hour before the Chattii finally settled into their beds, two young lads were given the duty of watching Claudia through the night, she sat quite tall in a chair settled deeply into herself, and seemed to go to sleep ...

As she sank into herself she felt the tug of a dream, and soon, she was beside the Esa, beside Pandora, beside the Ara, and others were there too,

"Are you well?" Asked Ara

"Quite well, they treat me with no little honor." Claudia replied.

"Can you return to us?" Ara Continued.

"Not with honor." Came Claudia's reply. Ara Nodded.

"I am coming." Said Pandora, "I should reach you by midmorning."

"I know." Replied Claudia, "I had to save a young man from your wolves."

Pandora shook her head, "Why did you save him, your captor."

"They are cut off, they are as much your prisoners, as I am theirs even if they do not know it yet."

"Why did you go with them." Asked Pandora.

"I sensed it was my intent." Claudia replied.

"And what is that Intent?" Ara Queried.

"That has yet to reveal itself, but I am just where I should be, and I would ask you to call Pandora back across the Esa, allow me to finish what I have begun."

**"I am to meet her captor in the morning, it will not go well for her if I am not there." Pandora cut in, the other women of the Nine nodded their ascent.**

**"Then you will be there." Said Ara, "I will arrive as the sun sets on the Morrow, and I do not wish to ride into open war, free your sister, but find another path." Pandora nodded her Ascent.**

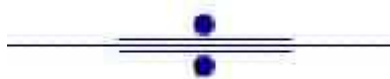
**"You as well Claudia, it is my will this business be settled before I cross the Esa."**

**"I understand mother." Claudia replied.**

**"MiLady." Lady Oia The Ara's fiercest Warrior and best captain spoke up, the Ara's attention turned to her, "I have dispatched a strong force of Archers and their mates, and I would be loathe to recall them whatever Lady Claudia's intent till we know she is safely returned across the Esa." The other Ladies of the Nine, murmured their agreement.**

**"It would be most unwise." Said Ara, "Let your Archers rally to me at Casade Horus then my Sisters."**

**The dream ended, and Claudia fell into a deep sleep, the trees in Chattii lands did not shine so brightly as the Trees of Anar, and it was much more difficult, much more taxing for Claudia to reach even a short distance across these muted trees to speak to her kin. She would be glad when this was over, glad to walk under the Eves of Anar.**



**Morning came all too early for all of them, for the Men feeling the effects of the Ale, for the women seeing to the milking of the Cows, and the making of a breakfast, and for Claudia who missed the comfort of her kin. Astara would not wake however, her sisters found her in the grip of a terrible fever and shot fierce glances at Claudia.**

**Claudia rose and approached her bed, but Loka stood between them, "You will not touch her Witch, this is your doing like as not anyway."**

**Claudia glanced at Durr, then fixed her gaze on Astara, "Her Aura blazes, she is burning up, loosing her man, then trekking back and forth over the snows to the Esa and back and back again, it has been too much for her, her strength is fading and her will to live slipping away from her."**

**"Can you help her?" asked Durr.**

**"I cannot be certain, but I have power in these matters, let me use that power."**

**"Step aside Loka, Let Lady Claudia see to Astara."**

**"My Lord, she has bewitched you, she has clouded your mind, please do not let this witch touch my sister."**

**"Do as your Told Woman!" Durr roared.**

**All eyes in the lodge now turned to Durr and Loka, and Loka shamed bowed to her lord and stepped back. Hissing to Claudia under her breath, "I am not bewitched, what ever spell you have woven around our lord." Her lips shielded from view as she gazed at the floor.**

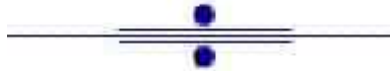
**Claudia looked to Durr, "I must sing, I must touch her inner fire." Durr nodded and Claudia began, she sang in the deep resonate tones of the Bianna, as she passed her hands over Astara slowly the woman seemed to grow more quiet, Claudia wiped her brow, and fresh sweat did not spring forth, for several long moments Claudia sang, then she pulled back.**

**"I will need the bark of certain trees, if you will accompany me Good Lord, we shall have need of your knife." Durr nodded, looking to Loka Claudia continued, "Please gather some snow, and melt it gently, we want the water to remain cold."**

**"I know a little of healing myself!" Said Loka Stiffly.**

**"Good then I will need to see your herbs when I return."**

**"You WILL...." A sharp glance from Durr cut Loka off before she could complete her thought, instead with an effort she swallowed and said, "Of Course Lady."**



**Once out in the woods, Claudia stepped with strange assurance, she seemed to know where each tree she needed should be found, and move through the forest like she was born there, as she was gathering bark from one of the Trees Durr spoke to her.**

**"May I ask you an Odd Question Lady Claudia." Durr Began,**

**"Yes Good Lord."**

**"Why are you with us." Durr Continued.**

**"I don't understand you MiLord?" She Replied.**

**"It seems clear to me now that last night as we carried that lad back, you could have just walked away from us, disappeared among the wolves and come to no harm, yet you did not. The morning we 'captured' you could have with a sign from your hand had us all killed. You have never been my prisoner despite appearances, so why then are you here?"**

**Claudia smiled, "Do you fear Death MiLord?"**

**"Less than most, no more than a very few I would say."**

**"But still you do fear it?"**

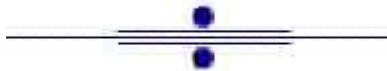
**"Yes Lady, I give the Wolf Mother her respect."**

**"As do I MiLord, but I also believe this, and perhaps this belief is mine alone ... I believe that many perhaps most folk say they love life, but in truth they just fear death; they think they love life, but that love is more about clinging to the familiar, than embracing the unknown, but if one can let loose that fear, let it go completely - and see life for what it is - beyond that fear of death - then one sees that life is Glorious, and it is worthy of so much more honor than it is given."**

**"I am with you because I looked into your Aura and saw you were a good and honorable man, and it was worth risking my life to spare yours, it was worth risking my life to spare those young men who looked at you with such awe, and it is worth risking my life to save Astara, even if she would bury a dagger in my belly given half a chance. I am a healer my lord and It is my souls purpose not to Battle Death, for that battle is pointless and the Wolf Mother always Wins, but to see to it that life, life is not wasted. Life is precious for it's own sake, and should never be lightly cast aside, nor taken."**

**"You know she would kill you, yet you struggle to save her life, you are a very stubborn woman." Durr observed.**

**"Yes MiLord, where life is concerned I am a very stubborn woman."**



**Durr spoke to Claudia privately as they made there way back to the Lodge, "I cannot simply send you on your way, I must treat with your sister and collect the ransom, otherwise all my people will believe as Loka you have bewitched me, and it may not go so well for you.**

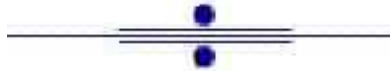
**Claudia smiled, "I do understand MiLord, neither of us has completed their role in this drama, I hope things go well for you. Truly I do, but I would not put much hope in Pandora bringing a ransom, that is your custom, not ours."**

**When they reached the Lodge, they found the men were nearly ready to set out to meet Lady Pandora, They had a large supply of torches to keep the wolves at bay should they return, and no-one doubted they were near to hand. Durr left half a dozen young lads to watch over Lady Claudia, openly to see she did not escape but privately to see to it the wives did her no harm, each was warned the Murian would not ransom a corpse and they must be most careful with their prize.**

But young men slip into carelessness easily, Ermin and Traud distracted the young men calling upon them to help bring firewood up from the cellar, then Loka came up on Claudia from behind. A flash of rage filled her mind just before her arm lunged forward to stab Claudia bent over Astara's bed, but it was enough warning for Claudia to whirl out of the way of the knife. Loka Lunged again and again but the Murian woman remained just beyond the tip of her blade. The forth time she Lunged Claudia caught her arm, she turned it out hard and forced the knife from her hand. Loka pummeled her futilely but her blows were spent and untrained. While the Murian woman was trained as a warrior, and fully as powerful as any Chattii man, Claudia pushed Loka down into a chair.

"Your sister lives, and her babe needs nursing concern yourself with that and stop this petty madness!" her voice firm with the strength of one who is born to rule, By now the men were emerging from the wood cellar and realizing they had been duped grinned sheepishly, Claudia looked to them, "Well don't just stand there grinning the fire needs stoking, get to work."; which they were glad to do.

A short while later Claudia went to a window to cleanse herself with a few deep breaths of cold air. Out in the woods she saw them, the merest flickers of shadows in the trees. The Chattii would not see them, but they were clear enough to Murian eyes. Claudia stared at one till she sensed she was being watched and returned the Ladies gaze, then Claudia made a few discreet motions in the sign language of Murian Archers, she waited for a moment till she saw the archer reveal herself, she would still be well hidden to Chattii eyes, but to a Murian she was now plain as day, the Archer repeated the signs before again disappearing into the aura of the trees. Claudia returned to Astara's bedside and began softly singing.



Durr was at the head of his party, there was a bend in their trail just as it passed over a small rise, and Pandora waited for them there. She was seated on a large stone that looked almost like a natural throne which was now covered in furs, two great wolves sat next to her, her hand carelessly scratching ones head. Beside her stood Engaria and behind her waited 100 Murian Shield Bearers, their shield wall in plain view. Durr's men spread out to either side of him and for a long moment both parties watched each other.

"I do not see my Sister." Pandora began.

"Show us the ransom and she can be brought quickly here." Countered Durr.

"Ah yes, the ransom, your people have expression do they not, 'A Kings Ransom' because you make a sport of war, and ransom each other as part of that game."

"It is no game." Countered Durr, "Your people owe us a blood tort for our kin, and for all the others who have fallen beside the Esa and never was their claim honored."

**"That too is your custom not ours." Said Pandora.**

**"Then why have you come." Demanded Durr.**

**"I think that should be clear I have come to take my sister home." Pandora replied.**

**"Have you?" Countered Durr, "You have no ransom, and if you meant to fight you would have ambushed us, not staged this bit of theater, what do you really hope to gain Lady Pandora."**

**"You are cut off and alone." Pandora said pointedly petting her wolf, "You are outnumbered, and you and you alone stand against 'The Witches' perhaps I thought you would see the sense of this and avoid useless bloodshed."**

**"That is not the whole of it," Said Durr, "Your Queen has not given you her blessing in this has she, You do not want this fight, promise you will return with her ransom and I will bring Lady Claudia to you here on the Morrow."**

**"It is true The Ara would rather we did not come to blows, but so many armed men all gathered together, terrible things sometimes do happen when such a cauldron is stirred."**

**"Yes they do and I have archers too more than one shaft might find you before your men could come forward to protect you." Engaria stiffened at the threat but Pandora waved her down.**

**"We are all under the Gaze of the Wolf Mother, we all take our chances." Pandora observed, "You will deliver my sister to me, and you will do it now!"**

**"Not before we see her ransom." Durr Countered, and the two just stared at each other for a long moment. There was a tension in the Air, archers fingered their arrows, and swordsmen licked their lips in the cold. With each passing moment it seemed more certain they would all soon come to blows.**

**"Perhaps there is a third way beyond this impasse." A voice said, and all eyes turned south, to Claudia emerging from the tree's. Durr looked at her confused, and perhaps more than a little disappointed.**

**"My sister sent archers around behind your men to rescue me. I did not leave your Lodge till after they arrived. I have not betrayed my word to you."**

**"And the men I left to guard you?" Durr Asked.**

**"Sleeping Peacefully." Claudia replied, and Durr tilted his head slightly puzzled, "I must confess I sang them a lullaby but only after the archers arrived and it was certain I would soon be leaving."**

**"You are a stubborn woman." Durr Observed.**

**"Where life is concerned" Claudia replied, "Yes I am." Then turning to the Captain of the Archers, "Lady Engaria, your Quiver Your Bow." Engaria un-slung her Quiver and handed it and her bow to Claudia. "I can offer you no price in gold, but take this, a Murian Bow and Quiver, as a sign of my friendship and the friendship of the Lady of the Wood; they will be a powerful token and raise the status of you and your clan in the eyes of your elders." And many among the Chattii nodded acknowledging the value of such a rare prize.**

**"You have no right to offer them The Ara's Friendship" said Pandora, in an archaic form of the Murian tongue the Chattii would not understand.**

**"It is the Ara's will we find another path, as this is the only other Path before me, this is the Path I will walk and count on her to blessing it." Claudia replied in the same.**

**"Now I must ask one last small favor from you my Good Lord." Claudia turned to Durr, who nodded, "If you would send these men home, with these tokens of my friendship and accompany me to the Esa."**

**Durr thought about this for a moment then handed the bow and Quiver to Har. The Chattii moved off and returned to their lodges, while the Murian's retreated to the Esa. It was nearly dark as they crossed the Pontoon Bridge Engaria had temporarily thrown across the river. The Ara was waiting for them there.**

**Ara kissed her Daughter, and Claudia Kissed her.**

**"It is good to have you home." Ara Said.**

**"It is good to be home." Claudia replied, "but I must be going now;" she paused a moment as all eyes fixed on her, "We should be more to our neighbors than a terror that lays hidden in the tree's and they should be more to us than interlopers. So I will be returning with Durr. There is much I can teach his people about healing and how to better tend to their trees, I am sure there is much I can learn from them in return."**

**"And when will you be returning to us?" Ara asked.**

**"In a Year and a Day, if this Good Lord will keep me so long?" Claudia said, turning to Durr.**

**Durr nodded, "You would be most welcome."**

**Now The Ara spoke to Durr, "Understand this you have won the Friendship of my Daughter, and you may call yourself my friend as well for that, but while she is with you Claudia speaks for herself alone. I and I alone speak for Anar."**

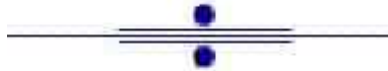
**"As is only right Lady." Durr answered, then he and Claudia crossed the Esa together. Claudia knowing so very well one adventure was behind her, and another was beginning.**

**Pandora stood beside her mother watching her sister climb the far banks of the Esa and said aloud. "She is Daft, well and truly Daft, just as mad as a march hare."**

**"No" Said Ara, "She is just destined to walk a different path than you or I. Do not underestimate your Sister Pandora, she has her place in the Wisdom of the Dragon, even if for neither you or I have yet too see it."**

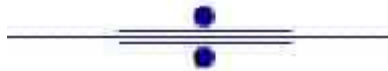
**The Ara and Pandora had retired to the Casade, Engaria stood still as stone her gaze fixed on the spot where Claudia and Durr had disappeared into the woods on the far bank; her fingertips upon the beads of her braids; the braids of an Orensa; then she said softly aloud, but surely only she herself could hear; "You have twice threatened The Blood of the Lady in my Presence, and I will kill you; I only regret I can kill you but once." Then she turned to her mate and shield bearer and said, "It is done."**

**Lady Engaria's shield bearers withdrew the Bridge.**



**Later that night while Claudia attended to Astara's fever Har and a few of the other men approached her, they held out a small feathered braid such as Claudia had observed the women sometimes wore woven into their hair.**

**"Lady Claudia, when a man of our people is recognized as a true peace chief, he may wear the feathers of the Dove in his headdress. It is not our way for a woman to be honored as a Peace Chief, but we have all seen you have the heart of one, and would be honored if you would wear this braid in your hair while you are with us." Claudia smiled and looped the small ties around a lock of hair, and thanked the men sincerely before returning to Astara.**



**Some day's later Claudia was in the woods gathering things for her Medicine bag. A voice came to her from out of the Trees very like mothers, but then again not, filled as it was with a wry and wicked humor, "It was such a terrible shame you nearly brought about such a delicious bit of mischief, and then you had to go and ruin it all." The Wolf Mother Said.**

**"I am happy to have disappointed you." Claudia replied.**

**"Your new friends would think twice about the value of your friendship if they saw me talking with you." Tsulsala said.**

**"Best they don't see you then." Claudia replied.**

**"The world is Red of Tooth and Claw Claudia, you will come to know this one day."**

**"Of course it is, but when it is in my power, I will make it a little less so."**

**Ama tu ANKI.**