

# Crowning Fantasy Book 1

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CROWNING FANTASY BOOK 1

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Written by Coral Russell.

To Suzie, thanks for being my bestest friend.

To David, thanks again for letting me read *A World Apart*.

To my family, thanks for being so supportive.

If you're interested in the book cover art please check out, Ellerslie on Deposit Photos.



## Areas of Varlid:

Nation of Dohla, capital Rasima on the Bred Hav:

Shimel sahaerat

Mining operations on the edge of the great desert, El Kebida.

Minor strongholds of Padda.

Zeroob sahaerat

Dil Hill

Northwest Slat Galen

West Waha

Slat Galen:

Southeast Zeroob sahaerat

Northwest Sanddyner

Northeast Trask Galen

Sanddyner, city Free Port Sanddyner on the Bred Hav:

Northeast Hojder Galen

Southeast Slat Galen

South Portal to Refuge

Hojder Galen

North Rike

South Sanddyner

Nation Rike, capital Fond on the Bred Hav:

South Hojder Galen

Numerous caves that lead to Grampus strongholds and other areas of Varlid.

Trask Galen

Southeast Hojder

Northeast Enade

Enade, Jointly held capital of Varlid on the Bred Hav

East Falt Galen

Falt Galen

West Enade  
 East Aririnkatata  
 Aririnkatata  
 Faglar stronghold  
 Port Nomoshichi (Port Plaj) on the Bred Hav  
 East Nokashikatekiariku (Patri Peyi)  
 Nokashikatekiariku (Patri Peyi), capital Mikanokichikata (Vil  
 Peyi) on the Bred Hav  
 West Aririnkatata  
 East El Kebida

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in *Crowning Fantasy Book 1*, so far. . .** a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

#### THE MIKACHIARI

Mikachiari lived in the lush, tropical paradise of Nokashikatekiariku in the capital Mikanokichikata. They migrated to Dohla and asked the Elyun for asylum. They prefer and still speak their language, Takatojidokajiku. This language consists of two letter syllables that transmit the shared history of all the Mikachiari. New pieces are added to words when new collective history has been accepted and needs to be passed on. Special scholars called, Arimiromotakashiari, record the language and are also in charge of updating the language. Since the scattering of Mikachiari across Varlid some of this collective history has been lost. The Mikachiari still use their own language and only learn enough of the language wherever they are to perform their duties. Their Goddess is Jimotekuari. They do not recognize any others.

Mikachiari in Dohla:

Mina - after she joins Teke her name is changed to Mina Rinkishikamitaku

Kazi - best friend to Mina

Tado - priestess for Dohla

Batu

Phrases in Takatojidokajiku:

Curse you - Teku

Curse you there and back - Teku Torin

Bless you – Zutakuari

There are four powerful races native to Varlid that live in the Galen besides numerous animals - Vartalf, Grampus, Padda and Faglar.

Faglar were allies of the Mikachiari.

## Country: Varlid, Nation: Dohla, City: Rasima

*Some see the turning point in the history of Varlid through the lens of intercourse or lack of. - Mikachiari scholar*

Mina lay in a puddle of bodies and twitching tails. It was almost morning and time for work. The warm, living mass moved, stretched, yawned. Mina felt blunt claws no longer good for hunting raking her back, arms, legs. Someone leaned over her head and began combing through her hair, tickling her ears.

"Mina," her best friend purred. "You're always the last one to get up." Kazi must have been the one attending to her head because sharp teeth nipped her ear.

"I'm up," Mina grumbled. She propped herself on one elbow and leaned over the closest Mikachiari to rake her claws along a body part. Her sleep blurry eyes couldn't tell exactly which area until a hand slapped her.

"Not there," a voice spat.

"Sorry," Mina said. Kazi giggled and pulled Mina up and away from the dissolving puddle of Mikachiari. All females, their bodies were barely covered with bits of cloth more for the sake of their Sayids and Ashihas, than any sense of propriety on the Mikachiari's part.

Mina let herself be half-pulled, half-dragged to the common washing room where stalls fit two at a time. The younger ones splashed water, snapped towels, their voices rose in volume until an elder hissed for quiet. Mina and Kazi hushed. When Mina drew a washcloth away from her, Kazi gasped. Red dots stood out on the light-colored cloth. Blood.

Mina froze, her eyes widening in terror. She fell to her knees before Kazi and pleaded, "Don't tell. Please, don't tell anyone."

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in Crowning Fantasy Book 1, so far.** . . a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

#### THE KERTENKELE

Kertenkele lived in vast underground caverns and tunnels in the great desert, El Kebida, called Buyuk Col. Their dead language is Dil since they no longer speak it except for ceremonial purposes. They migrated to Dohla and asked the Elyun for asylum.

Kertenkele in Dohla:

Onyx Ay - leader of Kertenkele in Dohla

Gumus Ay

Buclu Okuz

Golo was the first Kertenkele to suffer the Cinsel Iliski which led to the rampage in Rasima called Ofkelenmek.

Phrases in Dil:

Curse you - Lanet

Curse you there and back - Lanet tanri

Bless you - Sok yasa

There are four powerful races native to Varlid that live in the Galen besides numerous animals - Vartalf, Grampus, Padda and Faglar.

Padda are cave dwellers that inhabit the mines the Elyun are plundering. They are gorilla fighters and consider Kertenkele their mortal enemies.

Vartalf - wandering fishers, hunters, tradesmen. Their main homeland is an area off of Dohla called Musten Ka but they are travelers and can be found anywhere in Varlid.

## **Country: Varlid, Nation: Dohla, City: Rasima**

Gumus Ay waded into the mine as he had for the past one hundred years. Stoic, solid, a wall of Kertenkele flesh surrounded by his brother Kertenkele, they broke rock, removed precious minerals and stones, the wealth of Dohla, and deposited it at the feet of their Elyun masters. The Kertenkele also broke up Padda nests. Any Padda unlucky enough to cross their path within the mines were exterminated. His elders did it with relish. Gumus Ay thought they were reliving the invasion of their homeland. The one they couldn't prevent. The one that destroyed their race. He was young then and didn't remember any of the mothers, wives, sisters lost forever.

The stone shattered, exposing the minerals he picked out of the debris. Gumus Ay felt... off. For a month now it felt as if a small fire burned underneath his skin, sending heat radiating through his large body. Working in the mines sixteen hours a day, almost non-stop, had not smothered the feeling. When he collapsed into his small stone cell the smoldering sensation barely let him gain one hour of sleep.

Hours into his repetitive job and the heat from the inside notched up. Kertenkele didn't sweat. Not that Gumus Ay had ever seen, but beads of moisture now formed on his upper lip. His thick purple tongue removed them. Toward the end of his shift Gumus Ay's large hammer froze in mid-stroke. He remembered what this inner fire meant, death.

Mina's body trembled as Kazi ran and hid the bloody washcloth, the sign Mina would be subject to the Nodoshiku. All Mikachiari who reached this age entered the ritual with Tado, the high priestess. Tado stated the Nodoshiku ritual was necessary since the exile from their homeland in order to protect the Mikachiari. Hushed speculation circled among the younger Mikachiari as to the details of this 'protection'. The Mikachiari who returned from the ritual were silent, their eyes dark with a secret never shared.

Until recently or maybe the resistance had always been there and Mina and Kazi only noticed when they grew old enough for it to be relevant, Mikachiari questioned, in whispers, never out loud, of Tado's insistence on this ceremony. Mina and Kazi stayed up at night discussing as their time grew near. Their discussions resulted in a pact, they would stall the inevitable for as long as they could.

It was easy enough the first few months, Mina's period was light and the ache only annoying. The hardest part was hiding the rags until they'd found a system of washing and hiding the evidence themselves. Six months later the pain radiated down Mina's legs and her stomach clenched in cramps. When they were able to sneak a moment alone after serving lunch, Kazi rubbed circles on Mina's lower back.

"I don't know how much longer we can keep this up," Mina whispered to Kazi.

"I'll find something for the pain, surely the Ashiha has something."

"I'm sure she does but with what excuse? Ashiha's not going to just give it to us. Asking will raise suspicion."

Kazi bared her teeth in agitation. "I've been thinking, I'm bound to start soon and what will we do then?"

"You're a true friend for going along with this but maybe it's time to ask an elder sister for help. Whatever is done during the ceremony, it can't be that bad."

"I'm not willing to give up yet. I'll keep alert for something or someone to help us."

Ashiha Esarotarahis entered the large courtyard of the Mikachiari servants and the usual constant purr of conversation grew silent. "I need a Mikachiari to run an errand for me." Many ears pricked up at the chance of leaving the servant's quarters until the Ashiha explained. "It's in the Kertenkele market." At her announcement ears flattened and eyes wandered elsewhere.

Mina and Kazi exchanged a glance and both shot forward. With a bow before the Ashiha Mina replied, "We'll go."

The Ashiha's eyebrows raised for a moment before handing over a medium-sized package with the name of the merchant to look for in the market. She spoke the words Mina needed to hear, "Take your time."

Kazi jumped forward to follow Mina but Ashiha Esarotarahis motioned her back. "I just need one to go."

Mina hung back hugging the package.

"Go," Kazi mouthed.

Mina tilted her head in apology to Kazi and slipped through the door and out into the streets of Rasima.

Since the day in the mine when Gumus Ay realized his condition, he had redoubled his efforts to control the fire flowing through his body. They were trained from early childhood by Onyx Ay himself to prevent this very thing, the Cinsel Iliski. Warned repeatedly of the dire consequences facing all his brothers if the Ofkelenmek were unleashed upon Rasima again. With a heavy face, he slowly lowered his hammer. He was losing the battle over the control of his own body.

Should he turn himself over to Onyx Ay? Maybe he hadn't studied hard enough, concentrated on Onyx Ay's lessons long enough, wasn't strong enough. Gumus knew a death sentence

hung over his head at this display of weakness. Shame made him sag forward. Gumus was from the same clan as Onyx.

"Gumus?" Buclu Okuz asked. The question was hesitant since Kertenkele never sickened or weakened or tired. They marched on for hundreds of years.

Gumus looked up.

"Are you... sweating?"

Gumus's tongue darted out to remove the sweat. He shook his head 'no' and opened his mouth to speak when the klaxon bell for break rang out through the mines.

"Drink," Gumus muttered and stalked out of the mine. He continued past the others where they stopped to eat. He ignored Buclu's calls. Soon every Kertenkele was watching as he left the mines and headed toward the Kertenkele market.

Gumus was the only Kertenkele walking around the market at this time of day. He felt the eyes of the Sudawa on him as he passed. Gumus was as conspicuous as a hill with wildflowers sprouting from the top taking a stroll down the street. He would have to weave through the back alleys to his small, single room. He ducked through a stone archway when a hot, rolling wave surged through him. He stumbled against the stone wall, sweat rolling down his face and *plunking* on the pavement under his feet.

*Not here, not now.*

Gumus Ay had to barricade himself in his room until he could bring himself under control. Each step sent another wave crashing through him. No exact explanation of the Cinsel Iliski was given except that at the last stage it resulted in a rampage of such destruction, death was the only way to stop it. This was supposed to be a phase only possible in those Kertenkele who did not mate. The females were the key but the Kertenkele were a

dead race, their females eaten up from the inside out by the Bocek. His giant chest heaved and he stumbled into a pile of stacked crates.

A high-pitch yelp shot out from behind one of the crates that had tumbled down. Gumus recoiled at the thought of being caught during this fatal weakness. He flicked the crate away and revealed a Mikachiari crouching in the darkness.

*Female.*

His mind registered this much right before an opaque veil dropped in front of his eyes. He reached a massive arm down and clamped his hand across her entire face. Her terrified eyes peeped through the cracks between his fingers.

A rumble rose from his chest as he picked her up and hugged her to his chest.

*Female.*

Squeezed against him, she resembled a furry package with a dangling, ribbon of a tail. Tension eased out of his body just enough for him to move his legs forward, weaving around the deserted back alley ways until he reached his room.

A kick sent the wooden door clanging against the stone wall. Kertenkele were too massive for beds. Woven mats were on one side of the room and a small kitchen on the other. He dumped the Mikachiari on the mats and closed the door. There was no way she could escape with one tiny window at the back and Gumus filling the rest of the living space.

Gumus was safe here. There were no other Kertenkele around at this time and no reason any Elyun would wander into the living spaces of their willing slaves. The Kertenkele had no vices and could offer no entertainment to the Elyun. Kertenkele lived as monks, the perfect working machines, the perfect guests in a foreign land.

The Mikachiari stared at him with wide eyes. Kertenkele and Mikachiari did not mix. This could be the first time she'd ever seen one up close. Mikachiari barely spoke the language of their

masters, Loha. She had backed into the corner and made herself as small as possible. The veil that had fallen across Gumus's eyes lightened and his mind reeled in horror at what he'd done. The Kertenkele were to harm no one. Ever. Such was the penance for the slaughter of their females. His knees buckled and he fell on them with a thud.

Gumus flattened one palm against the wall. The burning so strong he thought he would burst into flames. His thick fingers pulled out his coarse shirt from leather shorts. A glow like embers from a fire fanned down from his belly to just above his knees.

"Help me," Gumus said, bewildered at the pleading in his voice.

The Mikachiari's mouth dropped open revealing tiny, pointed teeth. She hiccuped but did not speak.

There were no other creatures in Varlid save Bocek and Padda as massive as Kertenkele. But the female Kertenkele were gone. Only males survived the invasion of the Bocek. Gumus was too young to remember when his brothers made the march of mourning, Sabah Yuruyusu, and placed themselves upon the mercy of the Elyun.

Curiosity skittered across the Mikachiari's face. "Wha—What wrong?" she stammered.

Gumus's shoulders powered up and down. The sensation of flames pouring out through his skin made him double over and moan. He rocked back on his heels as his eyes glazed over and the opaque veil dropped again.

Gumus had no idea how much time had passed. The stones beneath him were slick with sweat. His body twitched and heat waves as hot as the Buyuk Col desert, passed over him. Just like that desert there was no rain, no relief. He pounded the wall in

frustration. A scuttling sound reminded him the Mikachiari was still in the room. Why had he brought her here?

Breath, it always starts with the breath, Onyx Ay had instructed. *Do no harm. Do no harm. Do no harm.* Gumus vowed he would take his own life before he harmed this creature. Still taking in great lungfuls of air, he sat up, grabbed the Mikachiari and hugged her to his chest.

There was a pinpoint of sensation that sparked between warm and scalding hot like a current. *Do no harm. Do no harm. Do no harm.* Gumus slumped back and drifted away into unconsciousness.

Mina gathered herself and pushed. The dead weight of the Kertenkele's arms held her firm.

*Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!* She'd taken too much time to clean up. It felt so good to be out from the watchful eyes of Tado and Ashiha that she'd relaxed. The Kertenkele were all supposed to be in the mines this time of day.

The Kertenkele's skin was cool and smooth to the touch. She'd never seen a Kertenkele up close. They lived in separate areas of Rasima and other than their similar sad history, they had no use for one another. One had never glowed before and no one had mentioned they did. Mina closed her mouth around the area of his skin closest to her and bit down as hard as she could. Nothing. Not even puncture marks.

Mina let the heaving of the Kertenkele's chest lull her to sleep like the rocking motion of a boat. Ships had carried the Mikachiari across the Bred Hav sea to the nation of Dohla and the Elyun. They were servants, some even said slaves, but Mina had never wanted for anything in the Sayid's house.

Her lips curled into a snarl at the reason she and her sisters were here - Chikitofu Meikizikashiteari. Those two words

encased the entire event when the magic users raided her homeland, slaughtered their males and reduced their allies, the Faglar, to paupers clinging to the corners of their homeland.

The Elyun and everyone else in Varlid called them Asistan Ti, the tiny wizards, and had open diplomatic relations. It did not extend to returning the female Mikachiari who had escaped and asked for sanctuary within Dohla and other parts of Varlid. The Kertenkele fluently spoke, Loha, the language of the Elyun, but the Mikachiari stood fast to their language and a few remaining traditions they could practice in their adopted home. They learned just enough to get by in their duties and no more.

A pounding at the door woke both of them. Mina hissed from the top of the Kertenkele's chest. With a gentle touch, she was lifted and set down across from the door.

"What's your name?" the Kertenkele asked. His deep voice vibrated in her ears.

"Mina." After a pause she asked, "You?"

"Gumus Ay." The pounding on the door became insistent. "I'm sorry. I'll do my best to see that no harm comes to you."

Mina wondered what he was sorry for.

Three Kertenkele in the shape of a triangle filled the doorway, Onyx Ay at the head. Kertenkele faces weren't as expressive as the Elyun or Mikachiari, but Onyx Ay's face was etched with sorrow. He looked down at the dull glow on Gumus Ay's chest and legs. He reached his arms out and rested them on Gumus's shoulders. "I have failed you."

Shame fell on Gumus like a shroud. "It is I who have failed you." He reached forward and ripped his shirt in two.

A ruckus outside the room made Gumus look over Onyx's shoulder. Tado, the high priestess, climbed the backs of the two Kertenkele behind Onyx screaming in Takatojidokajiku the

language of the Mikachiari. Few understood more than a couple of words of their language, since one word often encompassed an entire subject. Whatever Tado was saying made Mina flex her claws in Gumus's leg and whimper.

"Onyx, do with me what you will, may my sacrifices be remembered, but don't let anything happen to this Mikachiari. This is entirely my fault. I... I don't know why I brought her with me."

Tado still screaming atop the shoulders of the Kertenkele, switched to Loha, the language of the Elyun. "What happened? Why my daughter? Do no harm, Kertenkele!" When she saw Gumus's glowing body she froze for a moment and then shrieked in earnest, incomprehensible in any language.

Onyx motioned with his head to start backing out of the room. When they moved into the hall outside, Tado was able to squirm between the legs of the Kertenkele and grab Mina. Gumus moved to interfere but Onyx encircled his neck while the other two grabbed his arms.

"Onyx, you promised!"

"The Kertenkele and Mikachiari handle their own. If we don't take care of this the Elyun will seek revenge on your brothers. You must help me end this quickly."

Now that Tado had a hold of the cowering Mina, she signaled several other Mikachiari who had been waiting farther down the alley to take her.

"No!" A spark of madness touched Gumus and the glow running along his chest and legs flamed brighter. In the small alley more massive hands encased his arms and legs to hold him back. Gumus kept his eyes glued to Mina until she disappeared from view.

The landscape changed. He was no longer near his dwelling in the Kertenkele Market. Dirt and dust formed a cloud blurring the features of the others straining to contain him.

Gumus relaxed and let himself be led outside of Rasima and up a winding path on Del Hill, marked as sacred and exclusively used by the Kertenkele for rituals. An alcove had been hewn out of solid rock on the back side of the hill facing away from the more common grounds used by the Kertenkele. Gumus didn't resist being stuffed into the cramped space and drew his feet up as Onyx latched the iron gate shut.

"Rest as best you can. Use the concentrations I gave you to calm yourself. We'll find respite for you soon."

Mina was enveloped in a swirling mix of tails, claws, and flashing teeth. All the Mikachiari who surrounded her were elders, having been through the Nodoshiku, their faces were engorged with rage. Mina's wide eyes shifted around, trying to escape the blows and kicks that rained down on her.

*Why? It wasn't her fault. She'd done nothing wrong.*

Tado's hoarse voice rose above the clamor, "How sisters? How are we going to placate Jimotekuari? The goddess who has asked nothing less of us than our purity!"

No response was uttered, nor one expected. The beating went on. Mina felt clumps of hair pulled from parts of her body. She collapsed, her mind numb, receding in incomprehension. Her brain registered a change of place and a metal door clanged shut. Grateful, to be denied feeling, she slipped into unconsciousness.

A small group of Mikachiari stood across from Tado and a larger group of elders. Everyone else had backed away to the furthest reaches of the courtyard.

"Why Tado?" asked Batu.

"It is not your place to ask why," Tado said. "If the a decision has been reached by the high priestess, Rikijiri Noshikikuarichiari, and it is passed down through our scholars, Armirimotakashari, then there is nothing to explain."

"That has been so long ago Tado. Can we at least ask if there has been a change? We are far flung across Varlid, many of our scholars are dead, the high priestess is in hiding, there could have been a change in our situation by now."

"I assure you I will hear if it does and the goddess, Jimotekuari, still watches over us."

"No one watches over us! There is no one to rule us from above anymore. We should know why." Batu paused then she bared her teeth. "Why are we being mutilated? Why are we being made barren?"

A hissing passed through the courtyard.

"Silence!" Tado shouted. "The Tiny Wizards are the reason and your anger and questioning should be at them and not at me."

"The Elyun and Manskliga have taken us in, vowing not to turn us over to them and they have kept their vow. The Tiny Wizard's are here in Rasima but they never come near us. So again Tado, why? If we must be protected in this brutal way, then why?"

Tado's face drew weary. "If you are interested in politics Batu travel to Enade, if you can gain permission to leave Rasima. If the Elyun and Manskliga are protecting us it is for their benefit and theirs alone. Be fearful of what will come when it is not profitable for them to offer us sanctuary." Tado slowly turned to face those standing at the edges of the courtyard. "The Nodoshiku is a sacred ritual passed down from our high priestess and recorded in our history by our scholars. It is my duty to carry out this deed until I hear differently from the high priestess herself." Tado faced Batu. "Now bring me Mina."

"No."

"Batu, there is a price to pay for disobeying do not force my hand."

"I will not bring her. There are others speaking in the place of the high priestess and they tell a different story Tado."

The courtyard erupted in noise and motion. Mikachiari moved to choose sides between Batu and Tado. Claws rose in anger and mouths curled back revealing fangs.

Ashiha Esarotarahis strode into the courtyard blowing a shrill whistle. "Enough! You." She pointed to one of the Mikachiari. "Translate."

At first several Mikachiari started to relate what had just transpired. Ashiha Esarotarahis huffed in exasperation. "I don't care what you are doing amongst yourselves. I want you to translate what I'm saying."

The Mikachiari's shoulders drew down in embarrassment. Tado stepped forward. The Ashiha held up her hand. "Tell them, I don't care what this is about. The Elyun were gracious enough to take you all in and all we ask in return is that you live peacefully. We let you keep to your ways as long as you live in peace within our walls." The Ashiha fixed her stare on Batu. "You will do as your priestess commands. It is in your best interest." The Ashiha addressed Tado next. "You may preform your rituals, but the Mikachiari also serve a function as servants of Elyun households. You will not maim my servants outside of this ritual. Are we clear?"

Tado answered with a reluctant nod.

Ashiha Esarotarahis turned on her heel and stalked out of the courtyard calling over her shoulder, "I don't want any more upsets! Between you and the Kertenkele we've had enough trouble for one day."

"Mina?" A soft, *clinking* accompanied the voice. "Mina, it's Kazi. Ohhhh, what have they done to you?" the voice moaned.

Mina didn't want to believe she had any friends left. Some of those elders who had beat her she considered friends. She chose not to move.

"Mina, there isn't much time. Tomorrow night is your Nodoshiku, but there are rumors you will die during the ceremony. Not all are happy with Tado's ways. Some sisters want to help."

A touch across her leg meant as a caress made Mina wince in pain. "Be ready to go in the afternoon."

Sunlight pierced the swollen slits of Mina's eyes. She cautiously stretched her body, trying to assess if anything was broken. Her foot brushed a metal cup and liquid splashed her toes. With movements abbreviated by pain, she maneuvered to the cup and licked water up across her hot, swollen tongue.

Rest alluded her on the hard, wooden floor. Mina had every intention of begging Tado for death before, during, and after the Nodoshiku. She was convinced Kazi visiting in the night was a dream until scuffling noises drew near. Scraping followed with hushed hisses issuing instructions. "Turn it this way."

"No, this way!"

A metal squeal gave way to sighs of relief. Coarse fabric scraped her body and she moaned aloud when she was half-lifted, half-drag along the floor.

"Quiet, Mina. We're almost out," Kazi's voice reassured her.

A voice she didn't recognize whispered, "Kazi, you'll be missed, go back, now." Muffled voices argued back and forth.

She felt a squeeze on her ankle. "I'll see you soon, sister."

Heat and light filtered in through the fabric as she rattled along on a cart with other parcels half smothering her. Mina bit her lip to keep from crying aloud as every bump sent tendrils of pain coursing through her body. Quiet streets gave way to market noises and then to quiet once more. Parcels shifted as she was

lifted out and dumped on the ground. She covered her mouth to cut off a scream. "Sorry," someone muttered before the cart rattled off. Eventually she came to rest and a door closed. The fabric was removed and a hooded figure crouched beside her.

"Stay here, don't make a sound. There's enough food and water to last a week. After that, get out of Rasima."

"Who are you?"

"Batu and we've risked much to do this. Ashiha Esarotarahis and Tado will make us pay for freeing you. Get to the farthest outpost you can. I hear there is one in the far west called Dong Tochi. Do not let The Tiny Wizards catch you. I don't know what they're doing but find out the truth about the Nodoshiku ritual. Come back and save us if you can."

Mina's face was slack with bewilderment. "But I can't. I'll go through with the ritual if it'll bring peace back."

"No." Batu gripped the back of Mina's neck. "You must do this. Do it for your younger sisters. Do it for Kazi."

Mina shook her head. She couldn't begin to imagine a life outside Rasima, outside of the sisters at her Sayid and Ashiha's house.

"We were not always like this," Batu said. "We had a great nation once." Batu touched her forehead to Mina's and blessed her, "Zutakuari." The word held the history of all the blessings passed down for generations through the Mikachiari. It was used in time of great need.

"Zutakuari," Mina whispered.

The next day Mina opened her eyes enough to recognize the room was the one she shared briefly with the Kertenkele. She drank water and wondered what had become of him.

Gumus lay in the grip of agony. He had tried all of Onyx Ay's concentrations and even invented a few of his own. Every time he

felt on the verge of control, it slipped away like Buyuk Col sand in the wind. He even tried to let the growing rage become a concentration, but it only intensified until colors in hues he'd never imagined, danced before his eyes.

Onyx Ay appeared before the locked gate. Gumus cringed, unable to face the fact he had failed at following Onyx's tutelage.

"I am sorry. The concentrations to curb the Cinsel Iliski, the mating time, have worked for so many. We never knew they wouldn't work until Golo, may his sacrifices be remembered, went on his rampage."

Gumus knew the story by heart, but kept quiet as Onyx continued.

"He killed so many. The streets of Rasima ran red with the blood of anyone who tried to stop him. Kertenkele, Mikachiari and the Elyun, who showed us mercy, all fell. He ripped limbs from bodies, he tore apart anyone who crossed his path and tossed the pieces aside. I saw this with my own eyes. We finally killed Golo, may his sacrifices be remembered, and that tragedy is forever known as the Ofkelenmek. Elyun law dictates that any Kertenkele who comes into Cinsel Iliski be... ." Onyx Ay's voice broke as he leaned against the bars of the cage. "Gumus, your sacrifices will be remembered."

Silence echoed through the tiny enclosure. "I understand, Onyx. Please make it swift." Gumus fixed his eyes on Onyx's through the bars of the cage. "Before I welcome what is building inside of me."

Mina ate and drank and nearly peed herself in fear when she heard sounds approach the door of the Kertenkele's room. She remembered his name, Gumus. Nerves wouldn't let her wait a week. She packed the remaining food in a folded rag and planned to venture out the next night. She had gone back and forth

between throwing herself on Tado's mercy and trying to survive outside Rasima.

A world she had never seen lay beyond Rasima's gates. She tried to imagine a life away from her sisters. What kind of life it turned out to be meant she'd have to make decisions for the first time. That scared her as much as being caught, as much as being returned to Tado.

Night drifted down to cover the city. Elyun enforced a curfew for everyone but themselves. Not that the Kertenkele or Mikachiari ever ventured out past their protected areas. The Sudawa would be patrolling the lower class Elyun and keeping them away from the higher classes as they drifted from house party to house party. Mina knew if she still held any favor with their Goddess, Jimotekuari, she would make it out into the night. If she only survived for a day before being killed by the beasts that roamed between the nations, at least she would die free and of her own choice. To her knowledge it had been ages since any Mikachiari had done so.

As she had anticipated, the Kertenkele market was quiet. She crept among the shadows until she saw a single torch by a lone Sudawa, slumped, his head to one side, asleep in a chair. Next to him was an entry way only large enough for someone to stoop through one at a time. Kertenkele couldn't pass through at all, they only used the three large main gates. Mina crept forward afraid the hammering of her heart would wake the Sudawa. She worried her lips to keep herself from panting in fear.

The Sudawa moved and Mina flattened herself against the far wall. She let out a whimper of relief when she realized he had only slumped further in his chair. His chest rose and fell with deep snores. Mina stayed against the wall and scooted down until she was flush with the gate. She reached one hand out and touched the gate handle. Locked.

She looked around until she saw a lever with four handles on the wall above the Sudawa's head. *Teka!* Mina cursed silently.

The code to unlock the door changed daily and she could hardly stand over the guard and try combinations until one worked.

Back through the silent alleys Mina crept until she came to the Kertenkele market. Four very alert Sudawa stood at the main gate. A festival, the Elyun used any excuse for a festival, was being held in the main Elyun market up the stone slope. A huge glow lit up the sky outside the gate at the top of Del Hill. The Kertenkele must be celebrating as well.

It was as she thought, there was no way out. Rasima was an impenetrable stone fortress. There were tunnels in the mines but she would be killed in minutes by Padda. Mina slumped down and landed on a grate. *It was useless. I'm useless.*

Mina was thirsty but there had been no container to carry water. The sound of trickling water registered in her addled brain. There were public drinking fountains scattered throughout the city. She would need water to cross Dohla. She almost laughed out loud. If she could get out of Rasima. Mina put her palms on the metal grate beneath her to stand. It was damp. She felt its edges in the darkness. It was too small and sealed into the stone with no way to open it even if she could crawl through the opening.

But... .

She stood and aimed her hearing over the stone wall. A stronger sound of running water met her ears. She'd never been in the Kertenkele market long enough to notice it before but this wall was blocking off an aqueduct. In the dim light she thought she had maybe three feet of space between the large fortress wall and this one. She flexed her fingers testing the mortar with her claws. *Teka Torin!* Mina cursed her pampered lifestyle. Mikachiari were agile creatures but years of household service had left them weak. Still, it was her only option.

Mina moved down the wall toward the mines and took back her curses when she found scaffolding half dismantled by the aqueduct wall. The entrance to the mine was a dark, gaping black

hole. No one except in the company of Kertenkele entered and exited safely. Looking around just to be sure, she climbed up and standing on tip toe was able to grip the edge. Her face wrinkled in pain and effort as she managed to drag herself up and rest her elbows on the edge. The sound of water could be heard clearly now. A couple deep breaths and Mina plunged over the side.

Mikachiari hated water, Mina remembered, as the cold liquid closed over her head.

Mina was carried out by the aqueducts to a river outside Rasima. Luckily the bars of the grate were set wide enough apart she slipped right through. She climbed out at the nearest bank. Her food was water logged. All that was salvageable were a few pieces of fruit and a bag of nuts.

The rugged land of Dohla opened up before her. The small spark of hope and excitement she'd allowed herself to feel at first vanished at the enormity of her task. Mina had no idea which direction would lead her out of Dohla. A glow from the top of Del Hill beckoned her. The Kertenkele hadn't cared what happened to her but Gumus had. He said he'd try to protect her. Well Gumus had failed once so he owed her.

A scuttling noise from some animal sent Mina hurrying away from the river and towards Del Hill. She couldn't think of another option but to find Gumus and get him to help. If Gumus didn't, this adventure was over before it had begun.

In the night, the deep, rumbling chants from hundreds of throats drifted down to Gumus's cage. The chants were in his native tongue, Dil. His brothers were chanting to the Goddess Gudina that his good name be remembered. That all his good acts, all his sacrifices, be

remembered. That any stains upon his name not follow him to her realm. Instead, they chanted, let them be passed on to his

surviving brothers. Kertenkele lived hundreds of years and those years couldn't be born under the heavy weight of unsullied life. Gumus's brothers were already mourning his death.

The sound provided him more comfort than he'd felt in the past few days. He must have drifted off because he was awakened by a surge of heat causing his back to arch unnaturally. Gumus with deliberate force banged his head against the rock wall. He would rather spill his own brains than be left with nothing but the coming rage. It was worse than hunger, even thirst. Neither food, nor water had passed to him since he'd been incarcerated, but those pangs hadn't registered.

Gumus leaned as far forward as he could and then flung his head backwards.

"Stop!"

The Mikachiari crouched in front of him, one hand touching his shin. He banged his head a couple more times, for good measure, then leaned forward to examine Mina.

"What did they do to you?" he asked. Even in the darkness he saw swollen features and a large split in the bottom lip.

Mina turned sideways and drew her cloak up to her eyes to cover the damage done from the beating. "I free."

Gumus resumed banging his head.

"Stop, now. What do to you?"

He paused, the corners of his mouth wanting to lift in a smile at her broken use of the Loha language. The Cinsel Iliski must be driving him mad. Kertenkele were never... amused. "I'm going to die to prevent the Ofkelenmek from happening again." Gumus closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm to come to you."

Metal creaked and he opened his eyes out of curiosity. Great Goddess Gudina the Kertenkele were never... curious. The door to his cage swung open. Mina had worked the simple latch open. She pointed to him and then to her chest. "No die."

"No! I'm a danger, to you, to everyone." Gumus reached forward and closed the gate. He motioned for her to lock it again.

Mina spread her hand to encompass the scenery before her. "You help. We no die."

"I can't help you. You have no idea what I'm capable of doing. Lock the gate. Please, lock the gate." There was no way she could understand the danger of Ofkelenmek.

Mina repeated her gesture and sat back on her haunches. "We no die."

The opaque veil seeped into the corners of his vision. With a growl, Gumus kicked open the gate. His cramped muscles ached in protest as he stretched his legs. Mina scampered up to his glowing chest and patted her hand just under his neck. "Remember? Better now." Gumus's breathing slowed. He did feel better.

Although they walked upright, Kertenkele could travel on all fours when they wanted to. Gumus trekked across the rocky expanse with Mina curled up on his back. He was outside of Rasima for the first time since he was young. There were three main areas to Dohla: Shimel sahaerat, Zeroob sahaerat, and Waha. The outside entrance to the mines was located in Shimel sahaerat, the inner entrance was found in the Kertenkele section of the city Rasima. Gumus was traveling through Zeroob Shahaerat. At the far end was the Waha. It was dangerous, but it was also the only source of accessible water in this part of Dohla.

Beasts appeared and disappeared as specks on the horizon. Several times he moved away from abandoned campfires, not wanting to fight with Padda or Vartalf. The sun was setting when he passed a large valley on his right, the road to Shimel sahaerat, a mountain enclosed area that lead to the mines and deeper still Padda's underground tunnels. The Elyun were decimating their

population using their tunnels and underground caverns to mine the precious stones and minerals of Varlid. He couldn't afford to seek high ground in case the Sudawa were searching for them so he kept going until he came to a small gathering of rocks. Gumus circled the area several times until he was sure no other beast was using the spot.

Gumus scooped Mina to his chest and curled up around her. He resigned himself to seeing the Mikachiari to the safest town. Gumus had promised to try and protect her. He could always return to his brothers to let them carry out his death sentence. The sentence he deserved, but they wouldn't care about Mina or the fact he was the cause of her being banished from Rasima. He still didn't know why or understand how this had happened. Gumus understood she would die and her presence did calm him more than any concentrations.

Mina stirred underneath his arms. He checked to make sure he wasn't squishing her in some way. Mewling sounds drifted up from the center of his chest. Her tail and paws twitched. She must be dreaming. The fur between her eyebrows puckered.

A long forgotten hum vibrated in his chest and a vague image of a Kertenkele face, rounder, smoother than a male's, with bright eyes flashed for a second, then disappeared. Gumus knew why he was given a death sentence. If there had been any female Kertenkele left, his Cinsel Iliski would have been a period of celebration. Since there wasn't, all it brought was the painful remembrance of all the lives lost.

Gumus stopped humming. Mina lay loose limbed against him, her breathing deep and regular. The Asistan Ti had decimated the male Mikachiari and the females were left at the mercy of others. They had no protectors. Gumus felt tears form at the corner of his eyes and Kertenkele never cried.

Another new sensation coursed along his side... pain. Gumus heard and felt a *thwack!* He opened one eye to see a Padda, mouth drawn back in a grimace, glittering, pitiless eyes fixed on Gumus. The Padda brought down his solid wooden weapon with one hand and in the other open palm held a green vaporous ball.

*Loana!* Gumus cursed. *Magi Padda.* Although he should be grateful, they weren't as powerful as some of the others. The Padda drew his arm back to fling the poison at him. *Still, this is going to sting.*

Gumus flipped so his back faced the Magi Padda and took the brunt of the attack to spare Mina. A sharp burning crawled up his spine as the poison dug in. It was a weak poison, meant to drain life force. It wasn't fatal unless a creature was sufficiently weakened first.

Gumus was weak from lack of food and water, but not that weak.

Mina's eyes flew open at being dumped on the ground. Gumus grumbled, "Stay!" He looked over his shoulder to see the Padda, his weapon on a downward arc aimed at Gumus's head. His forearm smacked the Padda's wrist and Gumus twisted his body around smashing the Padda's face with his fist.

The Padda rocked backwards his head striking the boulder behind him and sank to his knees. Gumus drew back to strike again and paused, realizing the Padda was young, not full-grown. He hesitated. A rumble deep in Gumus's throat burst out and the glow along the front of his body pulsed. *Kill, he struck first.* Gumus followed through with all his power. The Padda's face ricocheted off his fist into the boulder again. When the dust settled, dark purple liquid flowed from the nose and mouth of the Padda and a healthy smear covered the boulder above the slumped form.

Gumus's victory was short-lived considering the poison now had a firm hold and was burning its way along his spine just below his skin. He flung himself against a rock and rubbed.

"No!" Mina shouted. "Bad. More bad." She tugged at his arm. Gumus knew she was right. He paced a few steps back and forth flexing and rolling his shoulders. The burning and poison would subside, but he had no idea how long it would take and he would be weakened. He couldn't carry Mina on his back like he had yesterday and he couldn't afford any more encounters with Padda.

"Can you walk?"

Mina nodded.

After a few feet Gumus knew it was not going to work. His gait was too wide and Mina still limped from her beating. He signaled her to wait and removed her cloak, turning it into a sling. "Come, sit inside."

By nightfall Gumus could see the campfires from a caravan of Vartalf on the left in the area before the entrance to the Waha. The Zeroob sahaerat curved to the right. After another day's walk they would reach the first Galen, or wild area, Slat. None of the nations owned the various Galen scattered throughout Varlid or even tried to maintain order in those areas. It was overrun by beasts and, if rumors were true, Aventyrare. They had to cross that wilderness to get to Sanddyner, still a half-wild Galen with beasts, but the three nations jointly maintained an outpost there. Gumus had decided their final destination lay in the relative safety of the Free Port of Sanddyner.

If the Vartalf didn't kill them on the spot, the Vartalf would wait until they were asleep and kill them then. Gumus could smell water and Mina stirred and whimpered. It was so near. The poison had worn off a while ago but Gumus felt tired for the first time in his long life. He circled closer to the camps looking for any unoccupied pond where they might grab a quick drink.

A puddle of thick, brackish water guarded by a lone Waha crab was the only option Gumus found. With an agility that surprised him, Mina sprang from the sling in front of his chest and pounced on the back of the crab. She grabbed both arms of

the crab right below the dangerous claws and pulled backwards until the joints cracked. She flung both to the side and flipped the crab over, ripping tiny legs away until she reached the tender underbelly and made short work of dissecting it.

Mina handed a thick chunk of pink meat to Gumus with a grin. "Eat."

Gumus grunted, impressed.

They both choked down two gulps of water before the nasal language of the Vartalf and the skittering noises of more Waha crabs made them shrink back. Gumus was in no position to take on more than one at a time and probably not even that many.

Mina settled back into the sling as Gumus thought about a plan to cross the first Elyun outpost of Zeroob sahaerat. There would be a second one to sneak past at the entrance to Slat Galen. "We're going to pass the outpost by the Great Nahara. We'll rest there until night so we can pass the second outpost before the Galen."

Mina's voice was muffled. "Galen, bad."

"Goddess Gudina willing we'll make it to Free Port Sanddyner in a few days."

Mina snorted, "Goddess Jimotekuari."

Gumus wasn't going to argue which Goddess to supplicate to and would pay honor to them all if it meant they reached their destination safely. The outpost was dark, but he stayed to the right and didn't double back until he was sure they'd made a large half-circle around it.

Even from this far off the rushing water of the Great Nahara and Great Nahara Falls sang in his ears. Water and plenty of it. The Great Nahara and its underground tributaries were the only reason Dohla was inhabitable. The Waha and Rasima were fed by these large rivers that ran through the mines and all the way to Buyuk Col, Gumus's homeland. During the Sabah Yuruyusu, the surviving male Kertenkele had simply followed the river until

they reached Rasima and prostrated themselves before the Elyun Emperor Rehis Abja.

The air cooled as they neared the falls. The Elyun maintained a large, sturdy bridge, but Gumus hadn't been here since he was young and didn't remember the river was far below them, too far to drink from. He edged along the bank closer to the falls, the water roaring in his ears. Spray covered the rocks along the bank making them slick. He picked his way carefully until he found a flat rock—half dry, half wet.

Mina and Gumus licked water from small indents in the rock until they were full. In the cool air they bathed in the spray and then settled back on the dry half of the rock. Gumus hadn't seen any creatures stirring, but with morning only a few hours away they'd have to find a better hiding spot to spend the day.

Gumus lay on his back. A half moon hung low and the night twinkled with the light from a million stars. *Why had this happened to him?* He squirmed feeling the flames at the fringes, threatening to engulf him. Killing the Magi Padda and fighting the poison had returned him almost to normal. Now it was back, reminding him of what his future had become.

He searched his mind for Onyx Ay's concentrations and the mantra - *Do no harm*. It sounded distant and softer than before. Gumus watched Mina, curled up on his chest no doubt believing she was in the arms of a protector. Gumus knew she was in the arms of a monster.

Mina slept in the heat of the day as Gumus Ay tramped through the rest of the wasteland of sunburned rocks to the final checkpoint before the Slat Galen. Gumus knew they were close since faded tufts of grass dotted the horizon in front of him.

That morning Mina had gasped after looking at his face.

"What's wrong?" Gumus asked.

"Eyes change," Mina said.

Gumus rubbed his eyes.

"Yellow, orange, red."

The color of fire. Gumus felt a dark swirl of doubt and anger seep into the marrow of his bones replacing the *Do No Harm* teachings so carefully instilled over the years.

A solitary Sudawa sat in front of the guard shack with a sword draped across his lap. The entrance to the Slat Galen had been narrowed to a large single lane. A bright shine of green blossomed on the other side.

There was nothing to do but pass directly in front of the Sudawa. Gumus eyed him while keeping his steady pace. The Sudawa righted his head first and then tilted his armor faceplate back to get a better look at who was approaching. A slight clang of armor announced the Sudawa was moving. Gumus watched as the Sudawa raised his hand for him to stop.

Past this narrow road a different existence awaited. Gumus decided there was no reason to stop. The Sudawa must have sensed something amiss or realized he was seeing a Kertenkele on four feet instead of two. Gumus whispered, "Get ready to jump." He felt Mina tense in response.

This was probably the most excitement the Sudawa had seen in a long while because he seemed to Gumus to be amused. "Halt!" When there was no response he shouted louder, "I said halt!" The rest of his muttering was lost as he picked up the pace to cut Gumus off before he reached the gate. "You dumb, rock breaking—"

The rest of the sentence was lost as Gumus came up swinging. Mina leaped to one side as the Sudawa went sailing in the opposite direction. He landed with a loud metallic crash and didn't stir.

Mina's jaw was slack with surprise at the sudden violence. Gumus held out his hand and noticed her hesitation before she returned to her seat on his back. Breaking into a trot they passed

into Slat Galen. After the Kertenkele invaded the Padda's territory to mine for the Elyun, the Padda had retreated to this Galen through tunnels deep in the surrounding mountains. Vartalf also used this area to hunt and fish. Once they reached the wide open area Gumus stood up and swung Mina to his shoulders.

"What do you see?"

"Animals."

"Padda or Vartalf?"

"No."

"What animals?"

"Many wild. Flying, running, hopping."

"How far can you see?"

"Maybe ten miles."

"Good."

Every five or ten miles Gumus would stand up and let Mina scout the area. The Padda in Slat Galen were not like the weak Magi Padda he'd fought in Dohla. These were a head taller than Gumus. The Vartalf in this area would hunt alone or in pairs. In pairs they would be easy to contend with if they decided to attack but if one were able to get back to their caravan with news of unarmed travelers, Gumus knew it would mean more trouble than he could handle.

By the third scouting, dusk had fallen. Mina's movements were slow and unsteady as she lowered herself.

"Are you okay?"

"Hunger, Gumus."

The way had been clear so far and Gumus hated to stop now. He estimated they were thirty or forty more miles. Then there were another forty or more miles to the Free Port of Sanddyner. Water was plentiful at small ponds scattered throughout the Galen, but Gumus was no hunter. "Can you catch another crab?"

"I try."

Gumus took his time circling around the next pond checking for danger before allowing Mina to spring into action. Much smaller Slat Galen crabs clicked their claws in the darkness. Mina came back with a handful and offered first to Gumus. "No, I'm fine." A look of doubt crossed Mina's face so he insisted. "I need water, food can wait."

Mina chewed her food and slurped some of the crab juice from it's shell, then she curled up in his lap.

"We can't stay here," Gumus said.

Before the sun set there was a large hill on the right and mountains on the left. On the right side of the Galen were two more Galen, Trask and Falt, which needed to be crossed before reaching the jointly held capital of Enade. The Elyun, Manskliga, and Asistan Ti held and maintained this city as a neutral zone for the three nations.

On the left side of Slat Galen was the way to Sanddyner. Gumus searched along the small outcroppings until he came to a small hole that smelled like some creature had used it in the past. "Here." He enlarged the opening enough for Mina and then laid down in front. The grass wasn't tall enough to conceal him but since they'd traveled in darkness and heard nothing out of the ordinary he hoped to pass for a rock in the darkness.

The next day passed much the same way only they made more stops for food. As they neared the entrance to Sanddyner Mina spotted an upright figure walking in the distance. Gumus squinted. "Too small to be Padda and too big to be Vartalf. Must be Aventyrare. Is he armed?"

"Not know."

They gave the figure a wide berth and continued through the green grass of the Slat Galen until it gave way to the blinding white sands of Sanddyner. The guard shack was on the far left so Gumus stayed to the far right. At this distance he couldn't tell which nation was on duty. There were no Padda in Sanddyner and the Vartalf were numerous here but a bit more civilized since

they relied on trading with the outpost and Free Port. There were several more aggressive beasts they needed to avoid until Gumus could properly arm himself. With food in her system Mina was alert and even trotted by his side for sort periods of time or scouted ahead over a dune.

Mina pointed. "Small tree patch three miles."

"Small tree patch is an oasis." Gumus replied. He had tried improving her Loha during the journey. Since entering Sanddyner and having fasted for almost a week, the flames and burning were at bay. He couldn't carry on much longer this way though and he didn't know what would happen when he was fully rested and fed. "We'll stop there."

On the ledge above the oasis they hunkered down as figures appeared. Gumus could make out small groups of what appeared to be Aventyrare scattered around campfires. They looked Manskliga and Elyun in stature. No Kertenkele and no Mikachiari. To the left the pound of the surf could be heard although dunes obscured it from sight and to the right were more sand dunes which eventually led to the Galens before reaching the Manskliga capital of Fond.

Gumus turned to Mina and saw her for the first time in days. Her hair was matted and either lying flat or puffed out at odd angles. Her bruises and cuts were gone and only faint scars remained. He reached out as Mina prepared to spring to his back and instead he drew her up. He straightened her filthy cloak and pulled up her hood to cover most of her face. What could be seen of her features he tried to clean by licking his palm then rubbing at her face. Mina closed her eyes and shivered until she slapped at his hand.

"Stop. No more!" She drew the backs of her hands over her face. "What doing?"

"Now is as good a time as any to see if we'll pass for Aventyrare. How do I look?"

Her eyes wandered up and down. Tentatively she brushed at dirt and scratched at larger patches of dried mud. After trying the same licked palm technique on his hair, Mina threw up her hands. "Okay, I guess."

"If they try to attack us head that way." Gumus pointed away from the water.

Mina's eyes twitched with nervousness. "Alone?"

"I'll meet you past the guard shack."

Her hands ran up and down his forearm and she pulled tight to his side.

"No," Gumus said as he pushed her away. "I work for you. Stand tall, shoulders back. You tell me what to do."

Mina's head drew back in surprise and one corner of her mouth jerked up in amusement.

They pulled back from the ledge and circled to the left so they could walk on the sand covered path edged with white brick and small thorny bushes. Gumus pushed Mina in front of him when she hesitated. With every stride she straightened until even under the cloak he could see her bouncing gait, hips swinging, shoulders drawn back, head held hauntingly high. At the last second before they came into view, Gumus dropped down to all fours.

For all their preparations, nothing happened at first. Gumus had been right, Manskliga and Elyun in a mix of dull used armor and regular dress sat around campfires drinking and eating or resting. A few Elyun glanced over at Mina. A slight figure the size of an Elyun child sat up at the campfire closest. Before Gumus could warn Mina she crouched and hissed. A blond-haired Asistan Ti stroked a thin mustache and grinned. He called out to them in a high-pitched voice, "I haven't seen a Mikachiari in ages. Ho, there!"

Gumus gave a tug at Mina's cloak as a lengthy string of what he was sure were curses in her own language flowed past her lips.

The Asistan Ti leaned back kicking his feet in the air as he laughed. It was a small tinkling sound in accordance with his size.

"If the males only fought as well as the females cursed we'd have lost the battle for Patri Peyi," he said as he wiped tears from his eyes.

Mina tightened, ready to spring and Gumus had no choice but to stand, catch Mina around her middle and draw her back to his chest. She hung there cursing and scratching at his arms.

The Asistan Ti's laughter died as Gumus revealed his true size.

"Is she serious?" the Asistan Ti asked.

Gumus scooted Mina behind his back and moved away.

"We're all Aventyrare here Kertenkele and our allegiances are for the highest bidder. You two seem new to this trade," the Asistan Ti said as a single purple flame grew from his fingertip. "So just this once I'll let her outburst slide."

On the other side at the edge of the oasis they sat as Mina huffed and mumbled, her face twisted in rage.

"Mina, you have to calm down. You are Aventyrare now. You'll see Asistan Ti and you can't fight them every time. We will go to the port of Sanddyner. From there you can catch the boat to Dong Tochi or if things are right, settle in Sanddyner." When she refused to meet his eyes, Gumus continued. "Mina, I've done what you asked. I helped you reach a new place. It will never be as safe as the house of your Sayid. You must change."

"Where you go?"

"I'm not safe around anyone. I have to go far away."

"You fine."

"No," Gumus didn't want to explain he was starving himself to keep the Cinsel Iliski at bay.

A hunk of crab plunked down between them. "Eat this. You look hungry."

Gumus looked up to see an Elyun with a full, dark beard looking down at them.

"We're not a completely heartless lot," the Aventyrare said, not introducing himself. "If we could have made it in our own homeland we wouldn't be out here wandering the Galen." He

eyed Mina. "There is plenty of work if you don't have passage to Dong Tochi."

"Passage?" Gumus asked as Mina picked at the crab. They were large here like the ones in Waha.

"Money to pay for the passage by ship. You are new to this. It's a long trip and there are pirates to pay off." The Aventyrare nodded over his shoulder. "She's right not to trust Asistan Ti, sometimes they'll buy or sell information to their kin and then next thing you know." The bearded Elyun drew his finger across his throat. "The only Asistan Ti you can halfway trust are the Black hats. Good thing they have to announce what kind of magic user they are by color. They're great in a fight. Never trust the Grey and especially the White hats. They are loyalists to the core. That Asistan Ti is a black hat." The Aventyrare pointed his thumb at Mina. "If they're trying to trick you, and they will, you can also tell them by the color of their magic. Purple is used by Black hats, blue and green by White hats. The Grey hats use a little of both magics but weaker colors, including yellow and orange." The Elyun Aventyrare squatted down in front of them. "How did you escape Dohla?"

Gumus tensed. "We're not from Dohla."

"Right. I can tell by your dress. I'm Elyun, I know what your kind wear in the mines."

Gumus ignored him. "The guard to Sanddyner didn't stop us. Why's that?"

"The only guards you have to worry about are the ones bordering nations. There isn't a large garrison stationed at any of the outposts outside of the nations so they tend to ignore everything that doesn't walk up and slap them." The Elyun Aventyrare stood up. "If you assaulted a guard in Dohla, my advice would be to never find yourself back there."

"Thank you for the food," Gumus said as the Aventyrare walked off.

"No money," Mina sighed. Gumus though her face was drawn down in mock sadness. Her eyes twinkled. The Aventyrare had given her an excuse for Gumus to stay on and help her.

"I know. Let's go to the Free Port and see about work then."

"Stay with me more?"

"Only until you have passage." Gumus took a bite of food since his starvation tactic wouldn't work if he needed to perform hard labor. He'd have to find some kind of balance to exist in control until he got Mina on a ship.

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in Crowning Fantasy Book 1, so far. . .** a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

#### THE ASISTAN TI

Asistan Ti are magic users. They have diminutive forms because of their reliance on magic for all their needs and purposes. Their experimentation with magic caused them to destroy their homeland of Peyi across the Bred Hav. During the Varlid War they joined with the Elyun to invade Varlid and defeated the Mikachiari. They renamed the nation Patri Peyi and the main city Vil Peyi. Port Plaj is the renamed Mikachiari port in Aririnkatata. They speak the language Lang.

There are three types of Asistan Ti:

Nwa Chapo (black hat - attack magic)

Blan Chapo (white hat - defensive/curative magic)

Gri Chapo (grey hat - weak defensive/weak attack magic)

They worship the Goddess of Magic, Deyes nan Magic, and have Priests, Pret nan Magic, that establish the rules for their society.

Prezidan Jules is the ruler over the Asistan Ti.

Asistan Ti names reflect their magic types. There are only three supreme masters of magic at any one time. When one falls another rises in rank and strength to take its place. Once they attain their position their name changes to one of the following:

Nwa Chapo Yon Sel

Blan Chapo Yon Sel

Gri Chapo Yon Sel

Strength of magic user:

Fo - strong

Feb - weak

Mulayen - average

Black Magic:

Dife - fire magic

Glas - ice magic

Dlo - water magic

Le - air magic

Elcleraj - lightening

White Magic:

Gerizon - restores health

Pwoteje - protect magic

En Dife - protects against fire

En Glas - protects against ice

En Dlo - protects against water

En Le - protects against air

En Elcleraj - protects against lightening

Phrases in Lang:

Curse you - Modi

Bless you - Beni ou

Goodbye - Orevwa

Mikachiari in Sanddyner:

Mina

Cita

Kertenkele in Sanddyner:

Gumus Ay

Mavi Ay

Aventyrare is any Elyun or Manskliga that have left their nation and wander the world by any means. They are sometimes joined by Mikachiari and Kertenkele. They usually settle outside

of port towns and have established two colonies in the Far West:  
Dong Tochi and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li.

**Country: Varlid, Nation: The Galen Wilderness  
Sanddyner, City: Free Port Sanddyner**

The Free Port of Sanddyner was surrounded by a large rock wall with it's back to the waters of Bred Hav, the great sea. Several miles directly across from the Free Port was the outpost. The brown buildings and water tower looked deserted except for wisps of smoke curling into the air from a chimney on one of the buildings.

The path to Free Port after the oasis was crowded with more people than Gumus had seen since leaving Rasima. A few more Asistan Ti appeared and several slender figures about Mina's size. If they had not been obscured by cloaks, Gumus could have sworn they were Mikachiari. If they were they didn't react to Mina's presence. There was a complete absence of any of his brothers which at first relieved Gumus then made him melancholy. All those years of working shoulder to shoulder with his brothers, gone.

Free Port guards stopped random people to check their bags or carts, otherwise they seemed uninterested in the milieu passing back and forth through the gates. Free Port itself was black and white. The sand and surrounding wall shone brilliantly in the sun. The buildings were made of a black porous material and in the background the Bred Hav glittered in varying shades of blue and green. The air reeked of fish. Nets were pulled tight over frames and fish or sea animals in every size and shape hung from wires strung between anything that would support the weight. Occasional drops of water or slimy liquid from half-dry fish fell on Gumus's shoulders and added to the stink of Mina's cloak.

The actual port was sealed off by a series of gates and fences and armed guards. Boats of varying sizes were either moored at the docks or drifted in lazy circles in the bay. They made their way up to the fence and guards immediately closed in and told them to back off. Gumus tried to ask questions but the guards banged sword to shield. "Move off!" one shouted.

Several people stood in front of the gates calling out deals on tickets to different locations. Gumus stopped and asked one about the price to Dong Tochi. "One thousand moneys," was the curt reply.

Mina slumped against him at the news. It was a fortune by any standard. Gumus wandered around asking about work. The cooking smells from familiar and foreign dishes made his mouth water so much he was afraid he'd start drooling. Without one money between them and no work in the port, they headed back through the main gate. At night the gates were shut and you were either locked in or locked out.

The area directly outside of Free Port, the outpost and the closest oasis, glowed with campfires in the growing darkness. Gumus wandered by several to ask about work. The only answer he could find was to hunt and fish and turn in the raw materials to different shops at Free Port. The remittance was small. Gumus did the calculations in his head and it amounted to months of hard labor.

Mina carried back crab to the small indent in the rock wall that surrounded Free Port. They ate in silence. After they finished, Mina curled up against his chest. He murmured, "We must begin tomorrow."

"Sorry, Gumus. No idea trip so long."

"All trips are long."

Over the weeks they became a hunting machine. They found another beach and even a secluded area a little ways up from the shore. It was an abandoned campground once used by others. As they explored the length and breadth of Sanddyner they found more of these abandoned niches that were claimed and then reclaimed by various Vartalf and Aventyrare.

Gumus was wary of the guards so he avoided any prolonged contact. They made few trips into Free Port and never camped outside the gates. He had no idea if authorities had posted rewards for their capture. This forced him to keep Mina away from others even though the Aventyrare and subsistence hunters like themselves seemed generally helpful.

Their stock of money, small coins used as currency throughout Varlid, was buried in a spot they'd picked near the secret beach. Time passed with a certain symmetry and order. Gumus Ay's Cinsel Iliski came and went. The color change Mina had noticed earlier in Gumus's eyes grew more pronounced until they were a swirling mix of the colors of the campfire they lit every night. Gumus kept his intake of food at a minimum. Just enough to keep him able to function.

Things were working, they were making progress, Gumus felt in control, at least since they'd arrived in Sanddyner. Mina had pains every so often. She complained so bitterly at one point Gumus offered to take some of their money and find a healer. She stopped complaining so much after that. Mina talked about her life in Rasima and Kazi, her best friend and she told Mikachiari stories that Gumus only vaguely understood. When she started repeating her stories Gumus knew she was homesick much in the same way he missed his brothers. He was not that surprised when Mina brought someone new to their camp and did not object when Mina asked if she could stay.

He watched as Mina fussed around the huddled mass wrapped in rags. When she was able to coax the hood off, a

disfigured Mikachiari quickly covered her face with her hands. Mina pulled them away so she could begin grooming.

Gumus watched on, expressionless until the ministrations seemed too intimate for his monastic sensibilities, then he picked up a fishing net and left camp.

Kertenkele had no equivalent. They were close and had a connection, addressing each other as brother, but not in any demonstrative way. *Kertenkele*. Gumus rolled the word around in his head as he tossed the net into the water. He was Kertenkele, from Buyuk Col. Though he never saw another one of his kind he heard stories that not all Kertenkele made the Sabah Yuruyusu march to Rasima to beg for mercy from the Elyun. He learned that not all Kertenkele followed Onyx Ay's teachings or beliefs. His anger at Onyx Ay continued to grow and harden in his bones.

By the second night Gumus learned that the Mikachiari's name was Cita. Soon Mina was talking about Cita joining them and earning her passage to Dong Tochi too. Gumus hoped Mina didn't run into any more orphaned Mikachiari or they would never earn enough to leave Sanddyner.

When the newness of the strange Mikachiari wore off Gumus looked at her more closely. She didn't speak above a whisper and only directly to Mina, never to him. Cita's scars marred her face and one ear looked as if a lizard had chewed it off. Mina mentioned Cita had endured the Nodoshiku but for the rest of the damage there was no explanation. Her situation moved Gumus to pity and wonder again why these beings should continue to suffer.

Cita's deception took him completely by surprise and it shouldn't have.

Gumus had never heard Mina scream before. At first he thought she was having a nightmare so he closed up tighter around her only she wasn't there. He shot up, his bulk sending out a cloud of sand. A fiery torch swung across his knees, singeing

the skin. Edges of blades, claws, blunt objects didn't come close to hurting a Kertenkele. Fire was a whole different matter.

He stepped back only to hit the rock wall surrounding three sides of the campsite. Torches barely above his knees let him see who was attacking, Vartalf. Lots of them. Three piled on Mina. Cita cowered to one side, alone. She was saying something to Mina. Although Gumus couldn't understand the words the tone sounded a lot like an apology.

Gumus balled up his fists and twisted his body from side to side, arms swinging wide to catch as many Vartalf in his wake. More poured into the camp as he scooped up Mina and headed to the water. The camp burned merrily behind them. The light from the torches reflected in the goggles the Vartalf wore and their whoops of celebration echoed in the night air.

"Did you tell Cita where the money's hidden?"

Mina wailed from the perch on his shoulder.

Gumus took that for a yes. "It's all right." He stayed as deep as he could until a pike fish tried to take a chunk from his leg. The Vartalf soon made off with anything of value from their camp and the money they had hidden and worked so hard for. Gumus and Mina waited on the other side of the beach until they were done.

Mina cried and repeated an endless stream of apologizes.

"It's not your fault. I should have known better." The anger of the Cinsel Iliski danced inside. Gumus tested it. Found he could sip from it if he needed to. He would kill anyone who got in his way from now on.

They sat on the beach as the sun rose over the hills. Gumus truly did not know what to do now. Working day in and day out in the mines while being well-fed and cared for with his brothers had been easy. Half starved, his concentration taken up with trying to control the Cinsel Iliski while working all day to hunt and gather for a pitiful amount of money... and now this. Everything gone. Starting over. He could not think beyond it.

His eyes trailed over the glittering water. He'd never heard how long it would take for a Kertenkele to drown.

Mina tugged at his arm. Tears, soot, and singed hair marked her face.

Gumus had to get her on a boat to Dong Tochi even if he had to toss her on deck from the shore. Tragedy followed them like a cloud. Aventyrare and Free Porters looked away and parted as they approached. Gumus took a couple of money, all that was left of their work over all these months, bought a steamed fish wrapped in paper and sat Mina down on a bench to eat it.

She tried to share but he lowered his bulk until he could look her in the eye and said, "Stay here until I come back."

By now Gumus knew every inch of Free Port. He headed to the shadier parts of town, under the buildings in dark corners, places of desperation. Anger rolled off of him in waves and he used it to scare the Elyun and Manskliga. Other than paying passage, no one knew of a way to get on board a ship. They were locked up tight to prevent stowaways.

In the darkness under a building a purple flame flickered close to the ground. "Ho, there!"

Gumus grunted in reply.

The purple flame swirled higher in the air until it lit the face of the Asistan Ti they'd first come across at the oasis. "What did I do to deserve being dismissed by someone so unfortunate as you?"

"You have nothing I want."

Child-like laughter rang out. "You're so wrong. I have valuable information. Now, in exchange, what have you got that I want?"

"Nothing, the Vartalf stole everything."

"Wrong again! Are you still traveling with that lovely Mikachiari? From the look on your face I would say you are. Good, we can make a deal. Tell me where she is and I'll see you get on the boat to Dong Tochi."

Gumus swelled with hatred for this little, petty being. He growled in answer, taking a swig of anger from the Cinsel Iliski. *Why not just take what I need like everyone else?* He moved forward his torso glowing.

A purple flame shot through the air and burned a streak across Gumus's bicep. Pain coursed through his entire arm making him drop to one knee.

The Asistan Ti sighed. "I don't believe you have what it takes to be Aventyrare. Before you get any more big, stupid ideas let me give you a hint. I have seen another Kertenkele. He works on the boat going to Dong Tochi. I'll wait while that information penetrates your flea-sized brain."

Gumus grabbed a handful of sand and flung it at the Asistan Ti as he launched himself in his direction. Another purple flame coursed across his leg.

"Modi!" cursed the Black hat Asistan Ti. "It's a simple exchange. I take you to the Kertenkele and you tell me where I can find the Mikachiari. Not just any, mind you, the one you are traveling with. I'll take care of the rest."

Panting, Gumus hung his head. "Take me to my brother first and then I'll tell you."

There was a beat of silence before the Asistan Ti answered, "Fine. You know I will turn you into charcoal where you stand if you try and back out. And then, I'll just find her myself."

"Why not do it now?"

"Because I'm bored. Meet me by the docks at sunset. Don't be late."

Mikachiari sat right where Gumus left her. She had long since finished the fish and was scanning the area. When she saw Gumus Mina brightened. When he drew closer and she noticed his limp and burnt arm, she raced to him.

"What happened?"

"I'm okay. Sit down." Gumus positioned her back on the bench and sat in front. "I may have found a way to get you on the ship but it will be difficult." He explained what happened and what he'd told the Asistan Ti about handing her over. He didn't want Mina surprised or to mistrust him by playing down the seriousness of the situation or his part in it.

As Gumus spoke and searched her face and eyes for comprehension he realized he didn't have the faintest idea what she was thinking, how her mind worked, or, Gudina help him, if she understood half of what he was saying. Gumus paused in his explanation. *Why am I doing this? Why have I tied myself to her?* It would have been far easier to accept his punishment at the hands of his brothers and gone wherever Kertenkele went in the next life. Even though he hadn't lived a full life, hundreds of years, dying was beginning to look easier than living.

"We try again." Mina said, pointing to the gate that led to Sanddyner.

"No. I can't. I don't have the strength. I was sentenced to die. I don't know a way to reverse what I have become. In that sense Onyx Ay's decision was correct. I will get you on the ship, somehow." He didn't voice the rest of his thoughts. After she was gone he'd have to take his own life before the Cinsel Iliski turned and the Ofkelenmek took over.

Mina shook her head. Gumus knew she didn't understand all his words. His frame bellowed in and out with a loud sigh that made passersby stop and stare. It didn't matter. He handed Mina a cloak that he'd taken off a drunk Elyun sleeping off a night at the Free Port saloon. She wrinkled her nose at the smell.

"Come on."

Gumus had no idea if the Asistan Ti was watching them so he wandered down as many alleys as he could before finding a hiding place for Mina. He took an equally circuitous route to get back to the meeting place by the docks. The Kertenkele Gumus was

supposed to meet stood out. He was enormous. The Asistan Ti slid out from his side.

"Ah, ah, ah. Where is she?"

Gumus sped up trying to take him by surprise. The Asistan Ti rolled his eyes and drew back to fire at him.

"Stop!" Mina cried.

*No! Why did she pick now to not follow my words?*

The Asistan Ti smiled. "We have an arrangement then. Mavi Ay will take you from here."

Gumus stepped in front of Mina and addressed his brother. "Mavi Ay, I am Gumus Ay. We're from the same clan. It is this Mikachiari that needs safe passage to Dong Tochi, not I."

Mavi Ay drew a step closer. "Brother, you don't appear well."

"I am not."

Mina shot forward to attack the Asistan Ti. She screeched "Teka torin!" as a purple flame met her halfway. Mina collapsed on the ground.

"Kindly tell her to stand down," said the Asistan Ti. "I don't want to harm her."

Gumus lowered himself to charge.

"Enough!" Mavi Ay stepped between them. "Nwa Chapo Yon Sel return to the ship."

After a pause the Asistan Ti said, "As you wish." Then spread his arms wide creating a black swirling whirlpool of smoke. When it winked out he was gone.

"Mina?" Gumus picked her up.

She moaned cradling her head.

"I am sorry about Nwa Chapo Yon Sel. She was never in any danger from us. And she did try to attack him," Mavi Ay said.

"Because he is Asistan Ti. You know what they did."

"Of course, but not all Asistan Ti condoned the war. The Black hats have revolted entirely against Prezidan Jules. They are being hunted by their own and have sought sanctuary across Varlid. Surely, she knows that."

Gumus shrugged in reply. He had no idea what she did or did not know. "Why didn't he speak frankly to me then?"

"I have never known Asistan Ti to be frank and Nwa Chapo Yon Sel even less so. Unlike us he likes to play games. I am sorry for the confusion. Where have you come from brother?" asked Mavi.

"Rasima."

"Ahhh. You follow Onxy Ay."

"You know his teachings?"

Mavi Ay said carefully, "After a fashion. What ails you brother and how can I help?"

While Mina crouched and rubbed her temples, Gumus Ay gave an abbreviated story of how they came to be at Free Port and seeking passage to Dong Tochi.

"I am not well and ask for Mina's safe passage, not myself, except that I will pay off her debt in any way I can."

Mavi searched Gumus's flame colored eyes. "How exactly are you unwell?"

Gumus bowed his head. "Does it matter? I don't believe I have long and would like to give what time I have left in her service."

Mavi's face scrunched up in true puzzlement. "Forgive me, but your words sound as if—I don't know how it is in Rasima but brothers in general are frank with each other. How are you unwell?"

Gumus shifted from side to side. "If I am frank brother will you still promise to help her?"

"You have my word."

"I suffer from the Cinsel Iliski."

"And you left before the brothers in Rasima could help you?"

"There is no help. Onxy Ay teaches us to control our minds and bodies and I failed his teachings."

Mavi Ay was silent for a full minute. "Brother, I will take you both to Dong Tochi. There is a doctor there, Kirmizi Gunes who will help you. No harm will come to her. Mina, is it? We learned

from other Mikachiari in Dong Tochi about rumors one had escaped. They are frantically searching for her. She is special to them. They believe she is... whole. Is it true?"

"I'm not sure what you mean... was it that Cita? Loana! She sent the Vartalf after us and they stole everything."

"I know nothing of her and the Vartalf but we did pay her for information about Mina. It is very unusual if she is whole. There is great interest in Dong Tochi about a Mikachiari in her condition."

Mavi Ay leaned over to make eye contact with Mina. "Forgive me, Mina, there is a Mikachiari in Dong Tochi who will want to talk to you. Her name is Teke."

Mina stammered, "Nodoshiku, no. She hate me. Or trick me."

"She's been betrayed by every Mikachiari so far except her best friend over this ritual called the Nodoshiku. I don't understand all of it." Gumus explained.

"Neither do I but Teke is a friend of mine." Mavi addressed Mina again. "I know Teke and she will do neither of those things. In fact, I think she'll be very happy to meet you."

Mavi Ay was not the captain of the ship but his influence as someone needed and strong enough to defend the ship against pirates and haul impossibly heavy loads such as the anchor and cargo meant he could walk up to the captain and ask safe passage for Gumus and Mina. Gumus noticed Mavi was also clothed in a mixture of armor and civilian dress.

The captain of the boat to Dong Tochi exclaimed after Mavi finished. "Goddess Gudina save me from your bleeding heart." He motioned at Gumus. "What is he the runt of the litter? No matter, they bunk with you and they help, understood?"

Mavi nodded and shepherded them down below. He pulled out some clothes for Gumus. "We don't dress so simply in the rest of Varlid."

"Thank you." Gumus had lost so much weight the clothes meant for the usual massive frame of a Kertenkele billowed around him like the sails of the ship.

## Country: Varlid, Area: The great sea Bred Hav

A week went by as they sailed the Bred Hav. They passed Rasima in the distance and kept sailing until they reached Port Plaj in Asistan Ti territory just long enough to restock before they headed out again to Dong Tochi. Mavi Ay led Mina and Nwa Chapo Yon Sel to a hidden compartment behind the cargo. Nwa Chapo Yon Sel cast magic at Mina.

Mina slapped at the air. "What that?"

"To hide your smell. Otherwise I couldn't stand being locked in here with you."

Mavi motioned for them to be quiet. "Behave," he told Nwa Chapo Yon Sel.

After they left Port Plaj the next stop was Dong Tochi. During the trip they didn't encounter pirates but Mavi Ay warned this was an exception, not the rule. With better food and care Gumus let his guard down. The Cinsel Iliski overtook him as they drew near to Dong Tochi.

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in Crowning Fantasy Book 1, so far. . .** a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

### FAR WEST

The city-state of Dong Tochi. Rumors are that it is filled with Aventyrare and is in constant turmoil with Chim Sung Saram (three different types of beasts). The second port goes to a remote camp - Seo Jog Mo Seo Li

The beasts of Chim Sung Saram attack the city in hopes to capture it and drive out the Aventyrare. Du Beon Jae Dosi is the walled staging area to protect Dong Tochi during battles. Seo Jog Mo Seo Li have wandering traders called Kyun Ha Da

Four generals organize the guard for Dong Tochi: Elyun - Ahm Rahis, Kertenkele - Tomutan Okuz, Asistan Ti - Nwa Chapo Le Sel, Mikachiari - Jikutokushikazu

Goddess of Chim Sung Saram - Yu Shi

Kertenkele in Dong Tochi:

Gumus Ay

Mavi Ay

Kirmizi Gunes

General Tomutan Okuz

Mikachiari in Dong Tochi:

Mina

Teke

Luru

Noki

Asistan Ti in Dong Tochi:

Nwa Chapo Yon Sel

Nwa Chapo Fo Defe

## Country: Varlid, Nation: The Far West, City: Dong Tochi

The port authorities and the captain had wanted Gumus Ay dead. Nwa Chapo Yon Sel fired magic at Gumus to keep him contained in a circle so Mavi Ay could summon Kirmizi Gunes.

Kirmizi Gunes organized ten Kertenkele to restrain Gumus. "Why was he allowed to reach this stage?" he shouted to Mavi Ay.

Mavi shouted back, "He is one of Onyx Ay's disciples."

"Lanet! Even Onyx knows the results if it's allowed to progress this far."

"Onyx killed them."

Kirmizi cursed again, "Lanet tanri! Onyx you mad fool!"

Teke and her crew milled around. Some crying hysterically over the Mikachiari who'd been brought into Kirmizi's office with the ill Kertenkele.

"Get them out of here!" Kirmizi yelled.

A struggle broke out between the Mikachiari with long strings of unbroken language the Kertenkele didn't understand.

"She won't leave him," Teke said.

"You're going to want to get out of here," Kirmizi warned.

Mina clawed her way to Gumus's side.

"Mina!" Teke and several others took hold of her limbs to pull her back.

Kirmizi gave up. "I can't wait." He brandished an impossibly long needle and inserted it through a spot in Gumus's abdomen. The commotion in the room continued in the background while Kirmizi worked. "There! Stand ba—" He was interrupted by an explosion of green slime in the room that brought everyone to a standstill.

"It's all over me!" screamed Teke.

"It's all over everyone," Mavi said.

"Is it poisonous?"

"No," Kirmizi answered.

Mina drew closer.

"He'll be fine now after a few days rest. Do you want to help?"

Kirmizi asked Mina.

"Why would she help a Kertenkele?" Teke asked.

Kirmizi tossed some rags to Mavis and began wiping down the walls. "Mavi Ay seems to think they're bound."

"Not possible." Teke said shaking her arms to fling off some of the green goop.

Kirmizi tossed a rag at Teke with a frown.

"Mina stayed with Gumus when the Cinsel Iliski overtook him on the ship," Mavi explained. "Clung to his chest as long as she could. It was the only reason Gumus didn't tear apart the ship before we reached Dong Tochi. The only thing that prevented the captain from throwing Gumus overboard until we docked."

Mina shrugged off Teke and the others. "I stay."

Three days later, Gumus sat in a corner of Kirmizi's now clean office with Mina curled up in his lap. Kirmizi, Mavi, and several others stood while half a dozen Mikachiari, including Teke, discussed their predicament.

"Whether you like it or not Gumus has bound himself to her," Kirmizi said.

"For what purpose?" Teke said. "Never matter. That means nothing to Mina."

When Mina protested Teke shouted at her, "You can't! Look at us. We're deformed by our own kind. It is a miracle you've come to us whole. We must protect you."

Teke turned to Kirmizi. "It's possible a female Kertenkele exists somewhere in Varlid for him. Let him search!"

Nwa Chapo Yon Sel hung in the air in the corner of the office on a black cloud and said, "Like it's possible there's a male Mikachiari somewhere in Varlid?"

Teke hissed at him. "Silence demon."

Kirmizi crossed his arms. "Enough, I'm telling you what is, nothing more. Cinsel Iliski in it's true form is a bonding ritual between male and female Kertenkele. The Ofkelenmek is only one of the changes that have occurred since the destruction of our race. This seems to be another. Gumus had no control over what happened. If he had gotten to us sooner maybe, but not now." Kirmizi held up a hand to silence Teke. "We cannot hold Mina or insist she honor the ritual since she is not Kertenkele."

Teke turned and prostrated herself before Gumus. "Mina is the first whole Mikachiari we've seen in many generations since the war. With Goddess Jimotekuari's blessing Gumus you will be worshiped as a savior for bringing her here."

Gumus finally spoke. "It's not my decision. I can't make Mina honor the bond."

Kirmizi stooped close to Teke. "Be careful what you do. If the bond is true and Mina does not honor it, Gumus he will sit there until he dies. Kertenkele bond for life."

Teke jumped at the opening. "But we won't take her away. She's free to come and go as she pleases, who do you think we are? We won't imprison her, only protect her."

"Does Mina understand what is happening?" Mavi asked.

"Mina was held by our priestess Tado in Rasima who has exceeded her authority. I hear you have the same problem with one of your own?"

"Onyx Ay? I wouldn't argue with that."

"It's been difficult to explain to Mina. We need time. Do you know anything about our language?"

"Other than when you explain something that takes us a paragraph it sounds like you're saying one word."

"You're not wrong. We can speak the entire history of parts of our culture with one word. The details are contained in the small chunks of the word, that's why when we talk about the war everything is contained in these two words - Chikitofu Meikizikashiteari. If something significant happens we add or detract from that word. Talking with you is like running halfway across Varlid. It's exhausting. With Mina we're getting there but our language has changed being separated from our priestesses and scholars, our shared experience."

Teke spoke to Gumus, "She has to come with us for a couple of days at least. We will bring her back. We will honor her decision."

Mina looked up at Gumus and patted his cheek.

After they left Kirmizi laid his hand on Gumus's shoulder. "Rest, Gumus. I've known Teke for a while and trust her judgement."

Nwa Chapo Yon Sel snorted from where he'd been watching the whole exchange. "I wouldn't."

Mina waited until she was out of eyesight before letting herself relax into the embrace of her kin. Her memory flashed on the traitor, Cita and then on Tado in Rasima. It made her hesitate even though Teke and the others stroked and reassured her.

"We never thought this day would come. Our priestesses turned on us so absolutely. Goddess Jimotekuari must have wept for us." Teke shook herself out of the painful reverie. "And here you are. Now, we are going to clean you up. Goddess knows you have wandered in the wilderness to reach us. This is Dong Tochi. It is not a safe place, so don't wander by yourself. We'll post guards to protect you at all times."

Mina heard Teke but there were gaps in her understanding. New words she had never heard before to describe events she had no knowledge of. Dong Tochi was made of wide stone avenues with winding alleyways branching off again and again. She immediately lost all sense of direction. Only the vague salty smell of Bred Hav let her know which direction the harbor might lay. A dense, rotting smell of vegetation was carried on the wind to her from the opposite direction.

She was hurried along until they came to a door that gave way after Teke spoke through a slot to someone. The rooms Mina entered were as luxurious as the Sayid's house in Rasima. Colorful carpets and cushions covered the floor. Water trickled nearby. Fresh water that made Mina realize she was so thirsty.

They pulled and pushed her down corridors to a wide open bath. Against the walls were faucets with stools and cups for scooping up water. In the middle of the room was a large tub with steam drifting up from the surface. The smell of a flower from their homeland, Nokashikatekiariku, brought tears to her eyes.

The entire group stayed with Mina and ran their hands over her, grooming, picking sand and dirt from her ears, mites from her tail. They cleaned and filed her nails. Hot, scented water flowed down her body until she was more at ease than she'd been since leaving Rasima. She wasn't allowed to assist. It was as if she were a priestess. When she was sparkling they led her to the bath and everyone eased in to relax.

Mina dozed off as Teke petted her, spoke to her about the changes to their common words to fit a life in Dong Tochi. It made Mina a bit uncomfortable being asked to change her understanding of their history without a priestess or scholar's blessing.

"We have decided we would like to grant you a Priestess name to commemorate our rebirth, Mina." When Mina shifted uneasily Teke added, "It is only to honor you and your sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?"

After a brief pause, Teke said, "Your journey to us must have been filled with sacrifices."

"It was eventful. Except for Gumus's condition we might have stayed in Sanddyner."

"We will honor Gumus Ay at all our celebrations. You were very lucky to find him."

When Mina didn't answer, Teke added, "We are considering the name Mina Rinkishikamitaku."

Mina blushed at the honor. "I have had no formal training. Surely Rikijiri Noshikikuarichiari would not approve."

"We don't see ourselves beholden to her or their ways any more. Goddess Jimotekuari has delivered us from the curse of the Nodoshiku by bringing you to us." At Mina's look of concern Teke added. "Gumus Ay Rinkishikamitaku will also be remembered."

Mina smiled. "He will be a good ally for us. Gumus is different now, I could feel it." As Mina's vision grew blurry she realized too late that she had been drugged. Mina thought she heard a whisper before she slept, "Forgive us. Forgive me."

Mavi Ay cradled Nwa Chapo Yon Sel in his arm as he entered Kirmizi's office.

"What happened?" Kirmizi said.

"I found him. I'm not sure he still lives." He laid Nwa Chapo Yon Sel on a cot.

"His pulse is very weak." Kirmizi sniffed the air just above him. "White hat magic. Who attacked him?"

"I saw no one. We need to send a warning to Teke. Nwa Chapo Yon Sel knew why they were hiding Mina."

"There's no need."

"Why?"

"They're gone."

Mavi glanced at Gumus still sitting in the corner like a rock placed there as decoration. "What do you mean gone?"

"A ship left in the early morning hours for Seo Jog Mo Seo Li and the Mikachiari were aboard."

"What in Varlid could Teke be thinking? We offered her our protection. They have no better ally than Gumus. Bonded to Mina, there's no limit to what he would do to protect her."

Another Black hat, Nwa Chapo Fo Dife, hurried in. "Where is he?" Her voice chirped.

Mavi Ay motioned to the cot.

After a minute of inspection she confirmed Kirmizi's earlier analysis, "It's white magic."

"How can white magic hurt? I thought it could only heal and protect," Mavi said.

"Healing and protecting magic when cast at Black hats hurts us." Nwa Chapo Fo Dife rested her hand on Nwa Chapo Yon Sel's forehead. "He is the strongest Black hat. If he was hurt it must have been Blan Chapo Yon Sel."

"Why?"

"There are only three Yon Sel's at any one time. Next to the Prezidan they are the strongest. If anything happens to the Prezidan, Nwa Chapo Yon Sel would replace him. I think Blan Chapo Yon Sel tried to kill him to take his place."

"What about the Grey hats?"

"They're too weak. Only if the Black and White hat Yon Sel's perish can a Grey hat take over. It has never happened but in all likelihood a Grey hat would inherit the Black hat magic." Nwa Chapo Fo Dife straightened. "Only time will tell if he survives. If Blan Chapo is caught she will be punished."

"So far from Patri Peyi?" Mavi Ay asked.

"The Prezidan can reach an Asistan Ti anywhere in Varlid. Asistan Ti may not harm each other, even if they turn Aventyrare

and no matter how far they stray from the Prets nan Magic, it is our law."

Kirmizi and Mavi exchanged a doubtful expression.

"Nwa Chapo Fo Defe, why are the Asistan Ti so keen to capture a child-bearing Mikachiari?" Kirmizi asked.

She plopped down on the side of the cot, her tiny feet dangling in the air. "Look at us. Our devotion to Deyes nan Magic mutated our bodies, corrupted our souls and drove us from our land. Yet our Prets nan Magic insist on continuing their experiments. The Mikachiari priestesses found out. It's why they started mutilating their own, rendering them barren. Prets nan Magic are looking for a way to restore our bodies to how they once were. They may restore our bodies but I'm afraid our souls are already lost. The Prezidan has made bargains with the Manskliga and Elyun. Traded foul magic for Mikachiari. Teke has played right into their hands."

"How? Tell us what you know."

"The Manskliga have already turned over all whole Mikachiari to the Asistan Ti for a weapon and some of the skill at manipulating bodies. The Manskliga are not the same as during the Varlid War."

"Changed how? They look the same."

"I don't know. The Elyun hold the rest of the Mikachiari but the negotiations with them are more complex."

"Why doesn't the Prezidan imprison the Black hats for leaving the Prets nan Magic? You could start another Varlid War with what you know."

"No one is stronger than the Prezidan. He will call us all back when he's ready. We will not be able to resist. Our freedom is an illusion. The Black hat revolt is an illusion."

"Why can't you resist? This makes no sense, you travel about Varlid now, what could he do to call you back?"

"It's part of the Deyes non Magic, it's why no one but Asistan Ti can use Magic."

Mavi motioned toward Gumus Ay. "What will happen to him?"

Kirmizi said, "If Gumus considered the Cinsel Iliski a true bonding with Mina, he will never rise again."

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in Crowning Fantasy Book 1, so far. . .** a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

#### THE ELYUN

During the Varlid War the Elyun invaded and captured the area of Dohla bordered by the Bred Hav and El Kebida. Capital is Rasima. Language is Loha. Their nation has taken in two different races that asylum: Kertenkele and Mikachiari.

The nation Dohla consists of three areas - Shimel Sahaerat, Zeroob Sahaerat, Waha. A river with underground tributaries runs through Dohla - The Great Nahara. They accept the Varlid Goddess Gudina but also worship their God Gala.

Elyun in Rasima:

Emperor - Rehis Abja

Sayid Esarotarahis

Ashiha Esarotarahis

Lurazat Esarotarahis

Sudawa - Military of Dohla

Phrases in Loha:

Curse you - Loana

Bless you - Miralikalafike

Bescha Gala - Enjoy your meal

There are four powerful races native to Varlid that live in the Galen besides numerous animals - Vartalf, Grampus, Padda and Faglar.

Vartalf - wandering fishers, hunters, tradesmen. Their main homeland is an area off of Dohla called Musten Ka but they are travelers and can be found anywhere in Varlid.

Padda are cave dwellers that inhabit the mines the Elyun are plundering. They are gorilla fighters and consider Kertenkele their mortal enemies.

## Country: Varlid, Nation: Dohla, City: Rasima

*Be satisfied in your ignorance for there is no safety in knowledge. -*

**Eylun Scholar**

Lurazat Esarotarahis shifted through the charts, graphs and notes flung across a massive desk. The Esarotarahis family controlled the largest share of wealth along with a dozen or so Elyun families in Dohla. As the youngest son of the family he had the unenviable position of keeping track of the family fortune.

It was good to be rich in Dohla. The fell-funded Sudawa controlled not only the general population but also the two relatively peaceful races seeking sanctuary in Rasima, the Kertenkele and Mikachiari. At this point the Elyun were running out of places to spend their money. The pressure on Lurazat was to find other areas of business in Varlid even if they were not entirely legitimate.

One of those not entirely legitimate areas of business was trafficking.

The majority of Mikachiari and Kertenkele lived in Rasima. The majority of adolescent Mikachiari in all of Varlid lived in Rasima. The Asistan Ti were keen to get their hands on one. Lurazat squeezed the bridge of his nose. The Priestess Tado had taken the vow of making every Mikachiari barren very seriously and there were only a dozen or so left that could reach maturity. After that the Mikachiari for all intents and purposes would be a dead race, just like the Kertenkele.

Sayid and Ashiha Esarotarahis, his father and mother, had informed him earlier this evening that his favorite Mikachiari, Mina, and one of the Kertenkele, Gumus Ay, were gone.

"Are they together?" asked Lurazat

"It is assumed so since they were both found in the Kertenkele's cell earlier in the week. It is unclear how long they had been planning an escape."

"Well, send the Sudawa after them, she's worth a fortune! A Kertenkele would be hard pressed to hide."

Sayid and Ashiha exchanged a look. Ashiha explained, "I needed some leverage over Tado. There were rumors she tried to kill Mina and I didn't want a full-blown conflict among the Mikachiari in my courtyard."

"Kill her? Like there are so many of them left they could afford it. Ridiculous," Lurazat exclaimed.

Sayid Esarotarahis asked Ashiha Esarotarahis to leave them. After Ashiha closed the door to Lurazat's office Sayid said, "You know how complicated this trade is with the Asistan Ti. The Emperor Rehis Abja has asked that we not try too hard to intercept them."

"If the Asistan Ti catch her outside of Dohla then our hands are clean but the trade is still complete and Ashiha gets to keep her courtyard peaceful."

Sayid smiled. "My son is wise beyond his years. Onyx Ay has told the Kertenkele that Gumus Ay is dead, killed by his own hand to avert the Ofkelenmek."

"And they are satisfied?"

"Quite."

Lurazat was disappointed. He had hoped since Ashiha controlled the courtyard where Mina lived that she would eventually be his personal servant. He had spent nights dreaming about her long flowing lavender and silver hair. Since the Mikachiari was reaching maturity her body hinted at a future full, yet petite, figure. Lips tinted with just a blush of pink. Eyes a shining, golden brown and a small nose with a splash of light brown freckles. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together thinking about how soft the brown fur covered pointed ears and

tail would feel to the touch. Their body was also covered in light downy fur. He sighed. Well, it was not to be.

His father set down his drink harder than necessary on his desk. "How is your work?" Sayid asked.

Lurazat blinked thoughts of Mina away. "Fine, it's just some numbers are not matching up and it's giving me a headache."

Sayid brought his son a glass of expensive liquor made from a cactus in Dohla. "Don't work too hard. Nothing here is worth straining yourself over. Emperor Rehis Abja protects Elyun business affairs especially those of your family, the Esarotarahis."

Lurazat let the smooth liquor work it's magic. "Yes, Sayid."

After his father left Lurazat made an attempt to straighten up his desk. Numbers still danced before his eyes. "Loana," Lurazat cursed to himself. With Mina gone he turned immediately to another pleasurable diversion that had recently caught his attention, a Manskliga secretary to a minor dignitary just arrived from Rike. Kunskap Forskare, a scholar in Fond, had sent word a student of his earned the appointment to Dohla and Lurazat could trust her.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair to better remember this secretary's features. Classic Manskliga characteristics, long limbs, shapely torso and sharp features as if they'd been chiseled from the same rock used in building their capital, Fond. In particular the secretary's hair fascinated Lurazat. Manskliga hair was smooth like cascading water. Hers was so black it had blue highlights. No matter how the wind blew or the physical exertion, the hair never tangled or looked mussed. Lurazat closed his eyes and behind his eyelids thought of running his fingers endlessly through her hair.

Lurazat had made it known to Ashiha Esarotarahis that he expected the Manskliga secretary to be invited to the next family dinner along with the minor dignitary. Ashiha had barely disguised the disgust at her son's indiscretion.

Manskliga were the exact opposite of Elyun. Elyun were much shorter and although the women were lush in frame and features, Lurazat obsessed over long limbs and flowing hair much as he had the petite Mikachiari.

He opened his eyes to the pile of reports on the desk. The projections weren't making sense. He set his glass down and left for dinner and a new adventure.

Around the large dining hall, Lurazat sat surrounded by his family. Sayid and Ashiha had six children, three sons, three daughters. Lurazat was the youngest of them all. A Mikachiari called from the entrance to the room, "Please welcome Radgivare Ledare and his secretary Kvinna Speja."

Lurazat rose and greeted Radgivare with a firm handshake. To Kvinna he gave a slight bow and touched the top of her hand to his forehead. Lurazat heard his mother's tiny gasp at the intimate gesture. His ears would burn from her scolding later. The Manskliga towered over Lurazat as he led them to their seats at the table. Kvinna was seated next to him and Radgivare on the other side.

More guests were announced and escorted to the dining table by the family members who shared common hobbies or business. Plates of food arrived so large they had to be carried by two or even three Mikachiari. The pitchers of drink where also maneuvered around the table by at least two Mikachiari. When everyone was seated and the table ready, Sayid stood and blew a small horn set in front of his plate. "Welcome everyone to the Esarotarahis home. I hope our hospitality suits your needs. If you want for anything ask the Mikachiari as they pass. Bescha Gala, eat, drink and enjoy!"

Radgivare and Lurazat immediately leaned in and conversed at length about current trade and finances. Elyun banks

controlled most of the wealth in Varlid. Although Rike had natural resources of wood, water, and farm land, Dohla held the richer resources of minerals, precious metals and stones. Elyun introduced money made from those precious metals and over the years that power had concentrated in the hands of the top Elyun families.

"I have recently been studying Kunskap Forskare. I believe he is a famous scholar of yours?" Lurazat asked.

"Ahhh yes, Kvinna knows more about him than I do."

"Forgive me, Kvinna. I have neglected you," Lurazat addressed Kvinna for the first time that night.

Kvinna greeted him with a smile. "We heard from our predecessors you were very passionate about expanding Elyun business in Varlid. You wanted to know about Kunskap?"

"Yes, but first, how's the food? The drink? Are you comfortable?"

Kvinna nodded. "Your family has seen to it we are surrounded by luxury. Is this common among all Elyun in Rasima? We had to pass through a large area of Elyun where the conditions did not look at all like this."

"I'm sorry you had to see that. We are building a different route through the city to avoid that unpleasantness."

"I'm surprised in a country so rich there are those in want."

"We have not figured out the answer either I'm afraid. Do you have an interest in social issues?"

"Not overly much. This is my first trip abroad."

"Wonderful, feel free to call on me anytime you're interested in sight-seeing."

"I'm glad you brought that up, Lurazat." Radgivare interrupted. "I do have some tasks I'd like Kvinna to inspect personally. Would you be willing?"

"I'd be delighted."

"I'll have Kvinna contact your secretary then."

"No need. Kvinna can call on me personally whenever she's ready."

"How gracious of you Lurazat. I can tell our stay will be most pleasant in your capable hands."

The Sayid blew his horn at the head of the table again bringing the conversations around the table to a halt. "Guests, please retire to the courtyard at your leisure for refreshments and entertainment."

Radgivare begged off saying he had an early meeting with his superiors early tomorrow morning but Kvinna was free to stay as long as she liked.

Several days later Kvinna called on Lurazat carrying the latest writings of Kunskap in her bag. They toured the mines, the different quarters of Rasima, and short trips into the countryside of Zeroob sahaerat.

"Can we explore the Waha?"

"I'm afraid that would require a complete retinue of Sudawa and Kertenkele. We have not tamed all the parts of Dohla. The Waha is one of the most wild. Most of Zeroob sahaerat is accessible and the parts around the mines in Shimel Sahaerat."

"But you do go there?"

"Most definitely since we have not fully charted all the resources available in that area."

"And the Padda, Vartalf?"

"Only nuisances, really. Everything will come under our control in time as in Rike and Patri Peyi. We hope to make the Vartalf amiable trade partners and the Padda have been mostly pushed back to the Slat Galen."

Kvinna smirked. "The Vartalf as trade partners? I'm afraid the Manskliga have some experience with them and you will be hard pressed to ever trust them."

Lurazat smiled. "I look forward to hearing all your opinions during your stay here in Dohla."

Over the weeks that followed Lurazat found himself in deep and pleasurable discussions with Kvinna on a wide range of topics. Lurazat finally broached the subject that had been puzzling him for months.

"These numbers are frustrating. You mentioned the areas of town you passed through when you arrived. We've invested in education and training and you would think with a willing workforce to do the manual labor... "

"Kertenkele?"

"And Mikachiari. I mean there are wealthy families. I'm from one of them but the rest... I don't understand if it's a lack of ingenuity, willingness to take risks, effort in applying oneself to a trade but the results have been disheartening to say the least."

"How so?"

"Looking into the history, the Varlid War saw a leveling of the playing field so to speak. I'm glad we have formal relations now and we're no longer enemies. At least, I hope you don't see me as one," Lurazat teased.

"Of course not. I think after so many years we've come to realize the good that came out of the war and acceptance of Elyun and Asistan Ti among us."

"We did introduce an economic system and established a monetary system. It was supposed to and did for a while create a vibrant exchange of business."

"But not now?"

"That's why I've been reading Kunskap's papers. Competition was supposed to help regulate business and keep things moving forward and upward. I don't know about Rike but Dohla's growth has slowed. This has produced the most absurd traditions. Competition to marry into wealthy families has become entertainment for the masses. They've got it into their

head that's the only way to wealth, through marriage, alliances. It's an archaic system I had hoped we'd put behind us."

"You're single?"

"Yes, and you should see the pressures my Ashiha brings to the dinner table almost nightly to remind me I need to marry and soon. But something is missing from Kunskap's explanations. I'm keen to make a trip to Rike to talk to Kunskap directly. Would you be interested in chaperoning me?"

"Of course." With that Kvinna leaned down and kissed Lurazat. After their lips parted Kvinna said, "I would like nothing better than a cross-country trip with you all to myself."

A fierce red crept up Lurazat's neck. "I... have admired you all this while but I never thought... ."

Kvinna kissed him again then said, "Sometimes Lurazat, you think too much."

They talked about the possibility of a trip to Rike and despite Ashiha's sour face whenever Kvinna arrived at the Esarotarahis home, Lurazat enjoyed her company more and more. He took her into his office and poured over his own work and the history of Varlid business and finance he had been working on for several years. He was impressed that Kvinna's interest in the matters seemed genuine.

The privacy of Lurazat's office also allowed him to indulge in his Manskliga hair fetish. Kvinna would sit on the floor at one end of the lounging couch and let her hair cover the seats behind her. Lurazat would strip and lie down on the seats rolling around in blissful oblivion. He exclaimed on several occasions how it was like bathing in warm water without getting wet.

Meanwhile Kvinna poured over his documents and helped him organize his desk and files. After months of working together Lurazat walked into his office and found Kvinna stuffing a leather document pouch with papers.

"Kvinna what a pleasant surprise. Where you borrowing some of my research?"

Kvinna dropped the pouch on top of his desk and crossed in front of it to sit down on the lounging couch. She patted the spot next to her and offered her hair to be stroked.

Lurazat crossed the room in a rush to sit down next to her. They hadn't planned to meet until tomorrow. "I can't tell you how refreshing it is to have someone genuinely interested in these matters," he said, reaching for her hair.

While Lurazat stroked her hair, Kvinna said, "My family had a pet once. My siblings and I were in charge of feeding and watering it. It always fell on me though. I'm the one who noticed when there was no food. I'm the one who noticed when there was no water. I'm the one who noticed when it needed to go outside. I wanted to teach my siblings a lesson so I stopped feeding and watering the pet. I stopped taking it outside. I waited for them to notice. And do you know what happened?"

Lurazat murmured absently.

"No one ever did," Kvinna continued. "So when the pet was tied up outside as punishment for relieving itself in the house, it died. My guess is it had not drunk water in so long, it died quickly in the heat."

Lurazat paused stroking her hair. "Kvinna I'm so sorry. We can't always predict the outcome of our decisions even when they're made with good intentions."

"True, I didn't plan it but it did teach me a valuable lesson." Kvinna pulled away and wrapped her hand around Lurazat's face and squeezed until his jaw cracked. "I'm the responsible one. I'm the one who sees what needs to be fixed and I'm the one who will do whatever is necessary. Even let a filthy Elyun like you touch me if in the end it gets me close to my goal."

Lurazat's face turned red as he tried to yell and breathe at the same time. He kicked at Kvinna. She casually threw one of her long legs over his, pinning him to the couch.

"You know what I see Lurazat? A scourge upon the face of Varlid called Elyun. The Varlid War may have brought the

outward signs of peace, it may have introduced economics and money but who has benefited? The Elyun. This has not gone unnoticed by those Manskliga who have plotted and waited for the opportunity to make things right."

Lurazat raked his fingernails across Kvinna's hand.

"Take this to the grave with you Lurazat." Kvinna brandished a long thin needle in her free hand. "The Dold of Manskliga have a new weapon and we will use it to wipe out anything that stands in our way. The Varlid War begins again and this time our victory is assured."

Lurazat's eyes widened as it followed the needle until it passed from view behind him. He felt a small burning pain at the base of his skull, and then, he felt nothing.

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in *Crowning Fantasy Book 1*, so far. . .** a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

#### THE MANSKLIGA

Original rulers of all Varlid. During the Varlid War the Asistan Ti and Elyun invaded taking large territories. They retained Rike with Fond as their capital. Leadership through military forces called Vakt is their legacy. They accepted a truce with the Asistan Ti and Elyun and jointly built the central city in the neutral area called Enade. Their language is Sprak. It is the most widely used language in Varlid. They worship the Goddess Gudina, and celebrate Gudina Dag. They believe in a devil named, Jakel. There are two schools, religious (Prast) and scholar (Forskare).

They are ruled by the family Stark Harskare.

Manskliga in Rike:

Rektor Alfild

Fina

Furstinna

Ganska

Befrielse

Hem

Kvinna Speja

Radgivare Ledare

Kunskap Forskare

Otrolig Ledare

Stor

Mitt

Ringa

Vakt - military

Phrases in Sprak:

Jakel Forbanelse - curse

Gudina Prise – blessing

There are four powerful races native to Varlid that live in the Galen besides numerous animals - Vartalf, Grampus, Padda and Faglar.

Grampus - Hemlig grotta stronghold. They live in the hill areas of Rike and other Galen. Manskliga are killed on sight and are considered devils - Jakla Sak.

## Country: Varlid, Nation: Rike, City: Fond

*To spend all your energy either embracing Goddess Gudina or avoiding Jakel leaves precious little for anything else. - Manskliga scholar*

Rike with its rolling hills and rich forests was a feast for the eyes. The Manskliga had ruled most of Varlid before the invasion of the Mikachiari and the Elyun. When the Asistan Ti invaded and went to war with the Mikachiari, the Manskliga declared neutrality while working to profit as much as possible from the conflict. After the blood from all sides had washed away they proposed with the Assitan Ti and Elyun to maintain a jointly occupied city, Enade. Wild territories, Galen, would be used as a buffer between the nations with the added benefit of funneling off dissidents from each of their countries. There were always dissidents. Those unsatisfied or unsuited to the life they were born into could take their chances in the wild.

The Rektor was fielding an international emergency in the Dohla capital Rasima over the death of a son from the house of Esarotarahis. The Sayid and Ashiha of that house insisted that a secretary and dignitary were to blame. The Rektor had called for their immediate removal back to Fond and sent another Manskliga delegation to investigate. The Rektor didn't need the added domestic emergency that was unfolding before him tonight at his own dinner table.

Goddess Gudina, of the Manskliga, was worshiped not only in Rike but in most of Varlid. Rektor's wife, Fina, was a devotee almost to the point of obsession. Rektor believed in part because of three failed births. But then Furstinna was born. Tall, shapely,

perfect features like her mother. Rektor thought Fina's devotion would switch to their daughter.

Instead Fina pulled Furstinna into her worship of the Goddess. All still seemed well while the child was young. Now, at dinner, Rektor realized how futile his hope for normalcy had been.

"I won't," said Furstinna.

"What do you mean you won't?" cried Fina, fanning herself as if she'd faint.

"Now, now, dear, she has a right to not be involved as much in the worship rituals as you," said Rektor.

"But she's not saying that at all!"

"Furstinna, please tell your mother."

"I have and I will not. Worshiping any Goddess is a waste of time. Fearing the Jakel is an even worse waste of time."

"Blasphemy! How could this happen? You read the first holy book I gave you until it fell apart. You went with me every Gudina Dag to the cathedral. Helping those in need through our charities? Did you not feel the Goddess's spirit running through it all? It was with the blessing of Gudina you were even born!"

"I feel the spirit of community with my fellow beings in Varlid and it has nothing to do with the Goddess. As for the rest I've come to a logical conclusion."

Fina snorted, "Logical? Rektor it's all your fault for not being more involved in her life."

Rektor stared into his drink so as not to make a biting reply.

Furstinna looked from her mother to her father as if they were two strangers she'd never laid eyes on before. "You needn't worry. I want to be a good Manskliga but I don't believe I need to worship a Goddess for rewards, or worse, fear a Jakel for punishment in order to do that. Instead I consciously choose to be good and to do good."

"The only reason you have any idea of what that means is because of Gudina, the Prast and my guidance all these years."

"No, mother, because my idea of what constitutes a good person can and will change over time. What I decide is the right thing to do now may change in the future."

Now Rektor saw the problem with his daughter's 'logic'. "Enough! We were supposed to enjoy a rare family dinner together. We can discuss this another time."

"Meanwhile, you will continue your studies with the Prast," Fina added.

"That's what I've been trying to explain to you mother, I'm done."

"Rektor, do something!"

"Fine and then this discussion is over. Furstinna will not continue her studies or worship with the Prast. I've thought it high time she went to study with the Forskare. However, she will continue helping with the charities. Surely, Furstinna, your definition of good includes doing good works for those less fortunate?"

"Of course, but I've been thinking Father, shouldn't the government be doing more to lesson the reliance on charity?"

Fina gave the Rektor a look saying, 'See?!'

Furstinna held Rektor's gaze longer than he would have liked for a demure daughter. Instead of answering he stabbed the food on his plate and shoved a mouthful in and forced himself to chew.

After signing up for classes with the Forskare, Furstinna took every opportunity to be out of the house. Today she wandered the market with the excuse of buying fresh vegetables for the food pantry charity. A half hour later her basket was still empty.

Furstinna felt a jab at her ribs and turned around to see her best friend Ganska.

"How'd it go?" Ganska asked.

"As well as can be expected."

"And... ."

"I start with the Forskare the first of the week!"

Ganska and Furstinna squealed and linked arms. "So what are you doing at the market?"

"Other than hoping to run into you, pick up vegetables for the charity food pantry and spend as little time as possible at home."

"Save some kindness for your mother, there has to be a reason she leans so heavily on the Goddess." Ganska slipped a note into Furstinna's basket. "You must get into Kunskap's class, here's the information."

Furstinna looked at the note and handed it back. "I tried but they said the class was closed. It's the only class I couldn't get with you."

"That's odd. Kunskap knew I was inviting you." Ganska's face tightened with concern.

Furstinna didn't notice and exclaimed, "Ask if I can spend the night at your house. Please! The whole weekend. My mother is going to be intolerable until I finally start classes."

"I'll ask. I'm sure it'll be fine. Wait by the fountain for me."

Furstinna threw a coin in the fountain and circled it several times dipping her fingers in the water. The statue in the middle of the fountain was one of Goddess Gudina standing tall and serene looking out over the market and Fond in general. The statue did not move her as it used to only a few years ago. It wasn't any particular teaching of the Prast that she disliked, but rather the unwavering attention demanded from supplicants. At no point did the Prast ask Manskliga to contemplate or look inward, search themselves. All attention was focused on the battle between Gudina and Jakel. It was a perpetual, albeit, spiritual war. Even though Gudina was the official deity of Varlid, a holdover from when the Manskliga ruled all of Varlid, the Prast no longer sought inclusion of all who lived in Varlid. It was now strictly a Manskliga Goddess. The Elyun had brought

their God Gala and he held an equal place alongside Gudina in Varlid. The Prast hinted Gala was really just an extension of Jakel. That had been the last straw for Furstinna and she'd been slowly severing ties with the church. Her declaration to her mother had been the final tie to break.

Ganska skipped toward Furstinna. A good sign that Furstinna would be welcome in Ganska's home over the weekend. "Yes! Lets get your vegetables delivered and then pack a bag for the weekend."

Finna didn't put up a fuss over Furstinna's wish to spend the weekend away from home. She seemed relieved. "That will be fine. Rektor is busy with some current crisis so I can take time to attend church."

Within minutes Furstinna had packed a bag and called a quick goodbye as she fled the house.

Ganska's house was alive with siblings jostling for position around the dinner table, to use the bathroom, and the new communication device, Skal. Her parents watched on patiently, teasing when necessary to stop any escalation to outright fights between their children over who could do what when.

"You'll get access when you start school," Ganska showed Furstinna a small device that hugged her ear.

"Who can you speak to?"

"The Skal network is open to anyone but you have to belong to a Lanka. Here I'll add you to mine but we don't own two of them so we can't talk yet. Do you think Finna will allow you to use it in the house?"

"If it's assigned through school I don't see why not. Plus, I can just say my studies depend on being able to use it after school."

"Just so you can see how it works I'll call my school Lanka and hopefully someone will answer," Ganska put the ear piece in Furstinna's ear. There was a soft sound of ocean waves before a chime.

"Ganska?" a male voice asked. "It's urgent. We need an emergency meeting tonight."

Furstinna's face puckered. "Ganska someone is saying it's urgent."

Ganska took the device from Furstinna. "Hello?"

"Ganska! I've been calling all day. Kunskap is gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Ganska's voice dropped to a whisper.

"His classes have been canceled. I've been trying to get in touch with him all day but there's been no answer. I think we should meet tonight."

"Can you put the signal up?" asked Ganska.

"Not now, I can't get away. Will you do it in front of your shop?"

"Yes." Ganska removed the Skal from her ear.

"Who was that?" At Ganska's silence Furstinna said, "I realize you've had a new circle of friends for a while now since we've been going to different schools. I was hoping now I'd get to meet them. I'd love to tag along tonight," Furstinna said.

"Follow me." Ganska tossed the Skal to one of her brothers in the hall who disappeared into a bedroom trailed by two more siblings anxiously waiting their turn to use the device.

Furstinna followed Ganska outside. Ganska took a flower pot and moved it from the left side of the door to the right side. "I'm going to ask you to trust me. I'd hoped to wait until Kunskap could talk to you personally. So the answer is yes, you're going to meet my other friends from school."

"Great!" Furstinna grabbed Ganska's hands. "I've missed you and none of my other friends will talk to me anymore since I broke with the Prast. Oh, I knew this would work out." Furstinna pulled Ganska into a hug.

"Furstinna, it's a little more complicated than that. We're going to have to sneak out of the house tonight."

"Tonight? We're not going to meet them now?"

Ganska pulled away. "No. Promise me whatever you hear or see tonight you share with no one, especially your family."

"Okay. But Ganska what are you up to? I mean we're not going drinking are we? I'm not into drinking it just makes me fall asleep."

Ganska shook her head.

"Not smoking! Please not smoking it makes me want to itch my face off."

Ganska shook her head and smiled. "No, not that. We'll just be talking."

"Talking. Oh, like a secret discussion group? Some banned book or something?" Furstinna dropped her voice to whisper. "Something that goes against the Prast?"

"Yes! It's a bit like that. These are subjects Kunskap Forskare brought to the attention of a couple of his students. We've been meeting to discuss his findings."

"Oh, so you discuss school outside of school?"

"This is new material that cannot be discussed in public. I just need you to keep a secret."

"You know I'm good at keeping secrets. Remember when you told me never to tell who broke the—"

"Yes, and you never did. Thank you!"

Ganska and Furstinna returned to Ganska's house only to sneak out a few hours later after everyone else had gone to bed. The moon was high and bright but the tall stone buildings and walls of Fond cast long shadows. Ganska kept to these shadows as she led Furstinna through the alleys. Furstinna's pulse raced. She'd never done anything like this before.

After passing an alcove several streets away from Ganska's home a hand shot out, grabbed Furstinna's arm and pulled her in. Another hand clamped over her mouth. She struggled briefly until Ganska's face appeared in front of her own whispering, "It's all right. We're making sure we weren't followed."

"You scared me," she said in a harsh whisper after the hand was removed.

An unidentified female voice behind her said, "Better to be scared for a second than dead forever."

Furstinna shook off the hold of the person behind her. A hooded figure stood back and introduced herself. "I'm Kvinna Speja."

"Well, were we followed?"

"Doesn't look like it. This way."

They followed Kvinna through narrow alleyways Furstinna never knew existed. She guessed they were traveling into the farthest outskirts of Fond. The moon shone unobstructed on a tiny courtyard encircled with waist high flowers.

"Moonflowers? I've never seen so many. Where are we?" Furstinna asked.

"Not much further, this way," said Kvinna.

A dark patch across the courtyard led to another short alleyway. Kvinna turned to the right and the darkness gave way to the feeble light of an opened door. Furstinna couldn't see who was holding the door open as they entered single file. No words were exchanged as the door closed behind them. The one room house was a combination kitchen, living room, sleeping room. From Ganska's description she thought the group would be bigger. There were a total of five Manskliga.

They squeezed together so the door could be closed. Furstinna tried to meet Ganska's eyes but Kvinna and the other figures blocked her view as they maneuvered around the small space. A table scraped the floor as it was moved back a few feet. In the floor hiding under the table and a rug was a hatch. Kvinna pulled it open and motioned for them to descend. Ganska took the lead and disappeared from view.

"Be careful. We don't have a light down here," Kvinna said as Furstinna started to descend.

"Anywhere?" Furstinna asked.

"These are the catacombs that run under Fond," said Ganska. "They've been sealed up for years."

"You'll soon learn the official version from the Stark Harskare government is rarely the truth. In fact, none of them have been sealed up. The catacombs have been in use and very busy for years," warned Kvinna.

Furstinna landed at the bottom and traveled between Ganska and Kvinna while the other members not yet introduced brought up the rear. They wound through the catacombs until Furstinna had no idea which direction was up. Abruptly a sharp right led to a door. A Manskliga from the back came forward with a key and opened it. Everyone filed into the spacious room with a vaulted ceiling. There were shelves with books and papers and chairs scattered around the room.

Ganska turned to Furstinna and motioned her to sit in a chair. "This is it."

"This is what?"

Everyone lowered their hoods so Furstinna could finally see Kvinna's features. She was beautiful with blue-black hair. A rare color among Manskliga. "You already know me," Kvinna said.

A male Manskliga with a long braid of red hair stepped forward. "I'm Befrielse."

The other male with short brown hair stepped forward. "I'm Hem."

"Hello." Furstinna nodded.

"Please excuse us we need to talk in private for a minute," Befrielse said. Furstinna could tell by the tone the conversation was tense but when the four faced her again they appeared calm.

"There's no way we can bring you up to speed by just talking to you. There are some things by Kunskap you can read here but it would take time."

"Get me up to speed on what?"

Ganska sat down on the other side of Furstinna. "I'm afraid the Manskliga have made some dark bargains with the Asistan

Ti. Kunskap found the evidence of this plus other issues happening across Varlid."

"Only Kunskap has disappeared. The school is saying he's fallen ill and taken a sudden trip to Trask Galen to recuperate. The son of an Elyun family he was corresponding with died recently," Befrielse explained. "Kvinna were you able to meet with him?"

"I was able to drop off the papers but we didn't have time to discuss them. He had found some business anomalies that mirrored those Kunskap found in Rike. Before he passed he talked about making a trip to Fond," Kvinna said.

"Do you think he was killed?"

"I just heard today from the Rektor the death was by natural causes. It could be a coincidence."

The mood of the group darkened.

"None of this makes any sense to you," Hem said.

Furstinna shook her head. "Not a clue."

"We'll just have to show her," Ganska took her hand.

The others nodded in agreement and Kvinna led the way back into the catacombs.

"It's pitch black down here, how can you tell where you're going?" Furstinna asked.

"Just follow for right now. We'll tell you what you need to know when," Kvinna said.

The warm palm of Ganska's hand enclosed hers as she shuffled forward in the darkness. Her other hand brushed ice cold stone walls. She squeezed Ganska's hand and her friend squeezed back. It seemed like an hour in the darkness when Furstinna smelled the hills of Rike. She was about to ask when the silent group came to a halt.

Ganska was pushed back as Befrielse and Kvinna moved Furstinna forward. They formed a triangle while both held on to her arms. Furstinna wasn't sure if they meant to steady her or stop her should she decide to bolt. She was about to protest when

she heard a mewling sound coming from the entrance up ahead. They pushed her forward up an incline with firm hands until she could just see over the top. The exit from the catacombs to Rike was cut into the side of a hill. In the dark Furstinna couldn't tell exactly what part of Rike she was looking at. On the ledge, exposed to the elements lay a row of babies. Not Manskliga, their bodies and limbs were shorter and thicker. Their heads were like misshapen onion bulbs with smaller bulbs for eyes, ears and nose.

As they began to wave their arms and kick their small heels into the ground in frustration, Furstinna pushed against Befrielse and Kvinna realizing what these babies were, Grampus.

Although Befrielse yanked on her arm several times to try and slow Furstinna, she stumbled blindly on. Befrielse relented and urged the whole group to move faster and gave up any hope of keeping them silent. They reached the chamber and Furstinna moved to the far wall, her face away from the group. Ganska stood by her side. "I know it's a shock."

Everyone in the chamber waited patiently until Furstinna was ready to face them. "How do you know they are descended from us? Maybe we're kidnapping Grampus to use in some bizarre Asistan Ti sponsored experiments. These rumors surfaced when large numbers of the Mikachiari disappeared from Rike. Maybe we're simply looking for a way to defeat them, they raid and kill Manskliga with impunity in Rike all the time."

The group looked to Ganska to respond. Ganska took a step toward Furstinna. "Kunskap put the pieces together. He has the evidence and we have anecdotal evidence from nurses who reported a high number of Manskliga miscarriages. It may take you a while to grasp this but the Grampus are Manskliga. We're the same."

"How? They don't look anything like us. Not even remotely. Manskliga are killed on sight if they come into contact with Grampus. We can't even communicate with them."

"We don't have all the information other than the Asistan Ti gave Manskliga the power to manipulate fetuses before they are born. Sometimes they are born looking like us and sometimes they are what are called Grampus."

"To what end?"

"We don't know what it means. What changes are they creating in us? The ones they decide to keep. We ruled the whole of Varlid once. After the loss of most of our territory during the Varlid War maybe they're hoping to improve our race in some sick, twisted sort of logic. Whatever the reason it's unnatural and has created a race that is persecuted without question. We think they're also using Asistan Ti magic to build a powerful weapon."

Furstinna sagged against Ganska. "Why are the babies on the ledge?"

"We watched and Grampus do come for them. For reasons we don't understand sometimes they are left to die," Ganska said.

"Which Manskliga are being targeted for these experiments?"

Ganska tightened her arms around Furstinna. There was a long moment of silence before Befrielse replied, "It could be anyone. Kunskap believed you are the forth child born from your mother. The first three were Grampus."

Furstinna sputtered. "Yes, my mother suffered miscarriages but what you're saying is impossible. That I'm some planned mutation? My parents are involved? They wouldn't agree to these experiments!" Furstinna laughed on the verge of hysteria. "If you only knew my mother's devotion to the Goddess Gudina you'd understand how ridiculous this sounds."

Ganska looked sick with uncertainty. "I shouldn't have brought you."

"No Ganska you shouldn't have." Furstinna said pulling away. "What have you gotten yourself mixed up in?"

"Furstinna," Hem said. "I think you misunderstand our intentions. We want to understand the Grampus. We do think the common population have a right to know what their government is doing and have some voice in the matter."

"So come forward with what you know."

"Kunskap was going to do just that," Befrielse said. "Now he's missing and someone he was corresponding with is dead."

"What do you want of me?" Furstinna stared hard at Ganska. "Why involve me?"

"Your cooperation."

"In what?"

"You are in a unique position to look for information we don't have access to."

"A spy?"

"No, you're in a better position than that. You can prove us wrong. If you can, please do. If you can't, give us the information we need to make changes."

"Changes?"

"We'd like a representative government. In the end Manskliga might decide this is a just cause or use of resources. But right now royalty follows royalty in Rike and there are no avenues for questioning or seeking the truth within the Stark Harskare regime. There are those of us who think this is a strong enough issue that the common populace will demand answers or at the very least a reasonable explanation."

Furstinna took a deep breath and lowered her head. "I plan to prove you wrong and misguided."

"I sincerely hope you can," Befrielse said.

Kvinna hadn't lied about the Fond catacombs. Sections had been sealed off officially by the government to give the impression they were no longer used for nefarious purposes. Those who knew of

other sections not officially sealed had worked to expand the catacombs under Fond over the centuries. Entrances and exits were heavily guarded secrets. So heavily guarded, death was not an uncommon punishment or insurance against discovery.

Kunskap Forskare's group had been given the idea to meet in the catacombs by Kvinna. She knew several sections very well because she secretly worked for the Dold. The week after meeting Furstinna, Kvinna was back underground in a different section to meet Otrolig, her handler, from the Dold. She walked into the chamber and plopped down a bag stuffed with Lurazat's papers she'd smuggled out of Dohla.

"May I be the first to congratulate you on the Dohla mission," Otrolig said as he rifled through the papers.

"Thank you. How much suspicion was raised from my involvement?" Kvinna asked.

"Quite a bit from the Rektor's advisers. Which is why we need to push this forward with Kunskap's secret group. What do they know or think they know?"

"A fair amount. The magic manipulations of the Manskliga that produces the Grampus and they're sniffing around the weapon you're building."

"Jakel forbanelse," Otrolig cursed. "How can they know about the Vapen?"

Kvinna shrugged. "Have you interrogated Kunskap?"

"Yes, but we haven't broken him, yet. We don't know how deep this group of dissidents goes. The Dold has determined they're the largest one we've encountered yet. What are they going to try and do next?"

"The largest? At the last meeting there were only five and that included Furstinna."

"May I remind you again, Kvinna, you are only a small piece of the whole puzzle."

"Yes, sir. If it's any consolation they've enlisted Furstinna of Rektor's house to look for clues."

"Bold move. Like I said the Dold have decided to force their hand. We don't have time to pit them against another group. We're also not ready to reveal this group to the greater Rike populace so we can't sabotage or discredit them, yet. Trust me, when we're ready we'll use our full arsenal against them."

"If they get too close to the truth I can discredit the group by admitting to the assassination of Lurazat. Then you can release choice documents about their activities. No one would ever follow or take them seriously again."

"I admire your loyalty to the cause Kvinna but you're too valuable an asset to waste. Besides there have been important new developments since your mission in Dohla. We believe Kunskap's group is being helped by another group on an island off the coast of Sanddyner. Befrielse obtained three rare items from various hunting trips in Rike. We believe these items will grant him access to this group's hideout. You need to make him leave for Sanddyner now so we can follow him and discover the exact location of the stronghold."

"How?"

"Convince them they're all in danger. Shouldn't be too hard to do. Our path is clear. First, isolate Kunskap's group. Second, identify and re-educate any sympathizers among the general Manskliga population. Finally, and only then will it be effective to plant evidence to drive home the point that this group and their ideas are not to be trusted."

"What about Furstinna?"

After a thoughtful pause Otrolig answered, "Take her with you. Her disappearance will weaken her family's standing with the ruling family, Stark Harskare." Otrolig held out a document with an official seal stating that Kvinna was to appear at court for questioning in the death of Lurazat Esarotarahis. "In case they need some more encouragement show them this. It won't hold up against inquiries so don't give them time to think."

As Kvinna turned to leave, Otrölig gave some parting advice, "Kvinna during this mission you will be deep in enemy territory with no support like you had in Rasima. If you are caught remember your training: do not admit to knowing anyone from Dold, deny any association with Dold, and vigorously accuse your accusers."

Kvinna skipped going to Befrielse or his best friend, Hem. That would arouse too much suspicion if Befrielse did have the key to entering the island. Instead, she hurried straight to Ganska in her father's shop. She walked behind the counter, grabbed Ganska by the arm and drug her through the back door.

"What are you doing?"

"Can we get in touch with Furstinna?"

"Yes." Ganska showed her the Skal. "She got one from school and she knows some of the codes."

"Call her."

"What do I tell her?"

"If there was an emergency, what did Befrielse tell you to do?"

"Is there an emergency?"

"There will be if you don't help me."

"If it's an emergency meeting I switch a pot in the front of the store and call and say, 'My father's shop is chaotic this time of day.' If we're to meet at night then I say, 'at night'. We're supposed to meet at a marked tree not too far from the East Gate."

"Can you change the meeting place?"

"Yes, if the tree is compromised then we're to meet in the market. But Kvinna this is only to be used in an emergency."

"I wouldn't risk being seen here if it wasn't important. Tell her to meet us at the market. The seafood stall from Sanddyner."

Ganska worked the Skal into her ear. Kvinna heard her side of the conversation with Furstinna. "Make sure she leaves now," Kvinna insisted. As soon as Ganska finished, Kvinna grabbed Ganska.

"Wait, let me tell my father."

"No." Kvinna pulled her protesting through the back alley and all the way to the market. When Furstinna met them at the seafood stall, Kvinna grabbed them and started for the catacombs.

They reached the meeting house but Kvinna didn't uncover the secret door to the catacombs. "Call Befrielse and Hem. Tell them to meet us here."

"Not until you tell us what this is about," stated Ganska flatly.

"We're in danger. Kunsap was right about everything. Our group has been targeted because of him and the government is coming after us."

Ganska and Furstinna exchanged worried looks. "How do you know this?"

"The dignitary I traveled with to Dohla is trying to frame me for the murder of the Elyun businessman, Lurazat."

"Does your group condone violence?" Furstinna asked her voice shrill.

"No, no our group doesn't, at all, for any reason. We're trying to stop the killing of Grampus for Goddess Gudina's sake," Ganska answered.

"They're trying to frame me," Kvinna said slowly. "They don't care about the truth. They'll make up anything to discredit me and if they succeed then our group will be exposed."

Ganska called Befrielse. He arrived shortly with Hem in tow. "What is going on?" Befrielse asked.

Kvinna handed him the forged document and gave him her simple story. Befrielse looked befuddled. "What can we do? It's not true so you should have nothing to fear."

"Nothing to fear? As I've been saying, do you really think the truth will bother them? Do you think the truth will save Kunskap, if he isn't already dead? They're going to implicate me and destroy all the work we've done so far. We need to leave Rike," Kvinna said.

No one spoke for several minutes.

"I've worked with Kunskap and this group since the beginning. By your silence do you mean you're going to abandon me?" Kvinna's mouth trembled.

"No, of course not," Befrielse said. "I'm sure you're frightened but I don't know what we can do. Perhaps hide out here in the catacombs until things calm down?"

"I don't think murder charges are going to simply go away. What if it becomes an international incident? The government is looking for scapegoats and if Kunskap has disappeared then we've become their target. We're his group! Is there no place outside of Rike we can hide? I thought you said there were other groups in Varlid that feel similarly to us."

Befrielse eyes roamed around the room as he cleared his throat.

"Befrielse if you know of somewhere, tell us!" Ganska exclaimed.

"I was working on making contact with a larger group. It was a contact to use if we really needed it."

"I think we need it now." Kvinna said.

"They're outside of Sanddyner... ."

"Good, how long will it take all of you to get ready?" Kvinna moved toward the door.

Everyone looked startled. "Wait, you mean all of us should go?" Befrielse asked.

"If they're trying to get to me, they're trying to get to the whole group. We're all in danger now."

"Not me!" Furstinna cried. "I'm not really a part of this group."

"Yes, Furstinna, even you. And you'd be a big catch. Someone close to the ruling family caught with dissidents. Imagine."

Furstinna turned to glare at Ganska. Ganska tried to take Furstinna's hand but she pulled away.

"What is this place called?" Kvinna asked.

"Refuge," Befrielse answered.

"Never heard of it."

"It was created by a faction of Manskliga who left the Stark Harskare rule a long, long time ago."

"That's just a legend," Furstinna huffed.

"It is more than a legend," Befrielse assured.

"How do we get there?" Kvinna asked.

"We need to get to a cove in Sanddyner. Refuge is really a peninsula off of Sanddyner. There is a portal they created to seal it off from the rest of Varlid."

"This will work. We need more information and support and Refuge can give it to us. Then we'll be able to return to Fond and confront those that are trying to discredit the movement," Kvinna laid a hand on Befrielse's shoulder. "Thank you, I knew I could count on you."

"I'm not going," Furstinna said.

Befrielse stopped Kvinna from answering. "Hem, Ganska are you in?"

Both nodded.

Befrielse walked to Furstinna and guided her to a chair. "Listen, none of us like what's happening. Right now Kvinna is the only one in trouble but I'm afraid she's right. With Kunskap also gone they mean to implicate the rest of this group and I can't guarantee the situation won't spread to you and your family. You might think you're not involved but Stark Harskare won't care. If you stay in Fond and they can't reach the rest of us they will pull you in just to have someone to parade to the public. Help us get Kvinna safely to Refuge and then if things turn out to be fine we'll return to Fond."

Furstinna looked at Ganska, tears streaming down her face. "Ganska how could you?"

"I'm so sorry Furstinna, I never meant for it to happen this way."

"We're all sorry Furstinna. We had no intention of including anyone who wasn't comfortable with the risks involved." Befrielse said. "Everyone gather your things and meet back here. Make certain you're not followed. Although if they're watching us we'll lose them in the catacombs. Ganska go with Furstinna."

"No!" Furstinna stood up.

"It's alright. I'll go with her," Hem said.

"Grab everything you've kept from Kunskap. We don't want it falling into the wrong hands," Befrielse said as they left their secret chamber for the last time.

**Country: Varlid, Nation: The Far West Wilderness,  
City: Dong Tochi**

The Suk Chae glowed in alternating colors of cream, blue, red, and green. The sphere sat in the middle of a miniature reproduction of the city of Dong Tochi. It's pulsing stream of colors radiating outwards. The Suk Chae was the sole source of power for the city-state of Dong Tochi and allowed it to cling to the harbor surrounded by wilderness and hostile enemies. Large stone walls surrounded the city and the outer fortified staging area, Du Beon Jae Dosi, where the beast attacks were held at bay.

The beasts, Chim Sung Saram, mounted offensives against Dong Tochi periodically to try and steal the Suk Chae. They believed by capturing the Suk Chae they could drive the Aventyrare out of the city and stop further encroachment into their territory. So far, they had not succeeded.

Anarchy reigned in Dong Tochi until the bells warned of an impending Chim Sung Saram attack.

The peal of the alarm bells rocked the air. Four generals: Ahm Rahis the Elyun, Tomutan Okuz the Kertenkele, Nwa Chapo Le Sel the Asistan Ti, Jikutokushikazu the Mikachiari were in charge of defending Dong Tochi. The bellowing voice of Tomutan Okuz with the aid of a bull horn rang throughout Du Beon Jae Dosi, "It is time! Non-combatants need to leave the area immediately."

A mad scramble ensued while anyone not equipped or able to fight fled through a series of large gates into Dong Tochi. Merchants wrapped up their wares in large rugs and joined the hasty retreat leaving behind permanent vending stalls made out of stone.

Nwa Chapo Le Sel sent a magic burst into the sky from the top of the gate between Dong Tochi and Du Beon Jae Dosi signaling the impending invasion. Jikutokushikazo and Ahm Rahis shouted into their horns while they strode through Dong Tochi cajoling Aventyrare to exit the bars, tea houses, and market places.

"It's time to fight for the life you've enjoyed in Dong Tochi. The only home you have as Aventyrare. Grab your armor and weapons! Damage dealers to the front, magic users to the back!" There was no use trying to issue instructions any more complicated than that to the mostly drunken rabble assembling in the main square of Du Beon Jae Dosi.

Captains with a small contingent were assigned to guard the Suk Chae. If the enemy breached Du Beon Jae Dosi, they would remove the orb and head to the second harbor to catch a boat to Seo Jog Mo Seo Li, the second city the Aventyrare were attempting to build in the Far West Wilderness. Despite the lack of organization a full retreat to the outpost had never happened since the Chim Sung Saram began attacking.

Ahm Rahis spoke through the Skal used by the Generals and Captains. "Who is it this time?"

"By the size of the dust cloud, Chim, the giants," said Tomutan Okuz.

"How much time do we have?" asked Jikutokushikazo.

"Ten minutes till they breach the outer gates."

"Are the archers in position?"

"A few."

"Do I need to round up more?"

"No, Chim can knock them off the top of the stone walls. A few archers are just there to aggravate them on the way in. Nwa Chapo Le Sel seal the gates!"

A gust of air and a blue ball of light flashed in front of the gate. The doors inched shut as Aventyrare squeezed through the gate from Dong Tochi at the last second. Those stragglers that

didn't make it in time to use the main gate broke off to use the much smaller side gates.

When the massive main gate clanged shut a light blue glow sealed it's outer edges separating Dong Tochi and Du Beon Jae Dosi. If Nwa Chapo Le Sel fell in battle the magic he'd cast on the gate would be lost. His magic also held the seal around the doors to the Suk Chae. A personal guard followed to protect him during battle.

The bells doubled the pace of their ringing as the Chim drew closer. Those that were not fighting climbed the high walls to watch the battle from the Dong Tochi side. An air of festive merriment and wild excitement ran through Dong Tochi. There was no where else to go. Either the Aventyrare held the gates or there would be a mass slaughter as they fell into the sea. Private and commercial ships pulled out from the harbor to await the outcome. The doors to the eateries, bars, and tea houses were flung open to cash in on the possible apocalypse. Those that had permanent shops closed and locked massive doors optimistic the battle would be won in their favor.

Kirmizi Gunes and Mavi Ay made their way toward the staging area. Gumus Ay had not stirred since Mina left. Kirmizi didn't think he would make it another week. Nwa Chapo Yon Sel had recovered and floated by Mavi's side while Nwa Chapo Fo Dife floated next to him. Jikutokushikazu waved at the familiar figures as they entered Du Beon Jae Dosi through one of the side gates.

"They're here, the party can start now!"

A festive atmosphere of dancing, singing, and talking Aventyrare gathered in Du Beon Jae Dosi. They would win or die trying. Some still swung tankards of drink or finished gnawing what was left of their dinner. Friends who hadn't seen each other since the last attempted invasion waved and formed parties. The Generals tossed medical supplies and magic enhancers down to the Aventyrare. "Don't use them all at once! I can't guarantee

when you'll get more," the Generals warned. Cheers rang out as Aventyrare caught and applied the various potions and ointments ignoring the warnings.

The bells stopped and the sudden lack of sound hushed the Aventyrare. It was almost time.

"Aventyrare," roared Tomutan Okuz. "You're finest hour is at hand! We fight for our way of life in Dong Tochi. We do not invade the Chim Sung Saram. They invade us. We want only our little piece of freedom from all in Varlid. Drive them back from our home!"

A roar went up from most in the crowd, while others laughed and booed.

"Bah! I don't know why we bother sometimes," said Tomutan Okuz into his Skal. "We should just find a nice beach and settle there."

"This used to be a nice beach," said Ahm Rahis.

The ground started to tremble. From their positions at the top of the walls the Generals could see a group of Mikachiari slinging arrows at the Chim as they approached. As Tomutan Okuz had warned the Chim swatted at the Mikachiari who easily dodged out of the way. The arrows were scratched off without slowing them down one step.

The Aventyrare started to split up into parties. Some of the more adventurous ones headed toward the main gate into Du Beon Jae Dosi to be the first to attack the Chim as they entered. Other, less experienced Aventyrare, hung back and used the stone stalls, stairs and low walls for cover.

Chim were three times as large as the largest Kertenkele. The leader's voice growled as the first Chim clashed with the Aventyrare. "Pitiful vermin. Wreckers of the land. Meet the wrath of Goddess Yu Shi!"

The massive horde of Chim, their half-tamed battle animals and mechanized automatons forced their way through the entrance and scattered into the Du Beon Jae Dosi. The action

was a blur of flying weapons and bursts of magic. The Generals yelled out weak points they saw from their perches above. The Adventyrare for all their faults knew how to fight.

The tide of the haphazard battle flowed back and forth. Badly hurt Chim withdrew. Their automatons fell in pieces. Chim took the time to throw the parts on the backs of their animals to be salvaged for another time.

Tomutan Okuz yelled above the din, "Who in Goddess Gudina's name is that?"

All eyes swiveled to the main gate as a blur cut through the Chim and their automatons. Adventyrare cheered. A break in the fighting showed a lone Kertenkele wielding a massive axe. He mowed a path through Chim as Adventyrare came together in his wake to clean up.

Kirmizi's party noticed the lone Kertenkele and the Generals saw them swing around to intercept. The lone Kertenkele refused their help and continued on his lone path through the Chim. Asistan Ti launched spells to assist him as best they could. The lone Kertenkele continued on oblivious to the support.

Tomutan Okuz caught Kirmizi's troubled eye across the battlefield.

A single horn blew and the Chim retreated. The lone Kertenkele followed them past the outer gate while a cheer went up from the rest of the Adventyrare. The drunk ones who were still standing chased after him laughing and cursing.

"Our hero!" became the rallying cry along the walls were the spectators had watched the battle unfold.

Kirmizi made his way to Tomutan Okuz's perch. "Brother, we have a problem."

"We always have problems. What makes this problem so special to try and talk to me in the middle of defending Dong Tochi?" Tomutan Okuz asked as he directed Adventyrare to pick off Chim stragglers not retreating fast enough.

"That Kertenkele is Gumus Ay. He was far gone in the Cinsel Iliski when he arrived here because of Onyx Ay."

"I don't have time for religious fanatics. I'm busy repelling a hoard at the moment."

"Ofkelenmek."

"Lanet tanri!" General Tomutan Okuz cursed. "How do we stop it?"

"Other than killing him, I don't know."

## Country: Varlid, Nation: The Bred Hav between Dong Tochi and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li

The ship pitched up and down as it scaled waves three times as high as the vessel. Seo Jog Mo Seo Li was across another part of the Bred Hav from Dong Tochi and only the second settlement the Aventyrare were able to hold from the Chim Sung Saram.

"We are boxing ourselves into a corner," complained Luru.

Teke grabbed her glass as it slid along the table. "No one will follow us. The Kertenkele sympathized but only if we stayed within easy reach."

"I was speaking more of the Asistan Ti," Luru said with ears flattened.

"I'm counting on them following us."

Luru hissed.

"Our revenge has been a long time coming."

Mina slid into the cabin. Luru caught Mina as the ship lurched to one side and tossed Mina into her lap.

"How much farther? This sea trip is too long," Mina said not masking her distress.

Teke bared her small teeth in a smile and scooted closer until all three cuddled together. "Not long now. How are you?"

Mina turned her face away. Teke pulled closer to nip her ear. Mina swatted at her face and missed. "Not happy."

"Mina, how many times have we apologized. The Mikachiari cannot trust anyone. We had to leave. We had to give you the gift we've kept hidden all this time," Teke purred.

"Hmmm," Mina made a noncommittal tone. "We can trust Gumus. You should have brought him."

Teke and Luru both started stroking Mina's arms, shoulders, back. "You know he couldn't follow now. It's too dangerous," Teke said.

Mina broke their embrace and said on her way out, "You should have done it for me."

Luru turned to Teke and asked, "Do you feel bad about lying to her?"

Teke shook her head. "This is her fate. She had no future with the Kertenkele and now the Mikachiari have a future for the first time in many years."

**Country: Varlid, Nation: The Far West Wilderness,  
City: Dong Tochi**

Gumus Ay strode through Dong Tochi. Adventurars lifted their hands in mock salute, swung mugs of wine, and cheered as he passed. Brackish colored liquid streamed down his body, the blood of all the Chim Gumus Ay had slain that day.

Kirmizi and Tomutan watched from the perch on top of the wall.

"What do you mean you don't know how to stop this?" Tomutan said.

"This behavior is old and barbaric. It was the last resort when we were overrun by the Bocek. No one has seen it since tales that Golo succumbed to the madness."

"If the other generals find out they'll cage Gumus and only let him lose to fight the Chim Sung Saram. If he gives them too much trouble they'll just put him down," Tomutan said.

"I can't let that happen. Golo was driven mad because of Onyx Ay. Gumus is different. Look at him, he seems to have his senses, unlike the Kertenkele used in the war against the Bocek."

Tomutan had a more expressive face than most Kertenkele. He narrowed his eyes and lowered his chin. "You don't know how far gone he is or if it'll get worse. Can we take the chance he won't turn on all of us?"

Kirmizi did not answer and stared on as Gumus Ay marched stone-faced past the cheering and saluting. He headed to the port, jumped the gate blocking off the loading and unloading docks and slipped into the water up to his neck. The Elyun guards on duty looked around knowing they shouldn't have let him pass but unsure how to stop him.

"What is he doing?" Tomutan asked.

Kirmizi didn't state the obvious, he didn't know.

Gumus waved his arms to part the trash floating around him before splashing water on his face and through his hair. With long strides he made his way back to the gate. Jumped it again and strode back to Du Beon Jae Dosi. Mugs of alcohol were shoved toward him as Gumus passed but he ignored it all and marched back through the massive gate.

Gumus Ay saw General Jikutokushikazu screeching orders to the clean up crew. She saw Gumus and started to issue him an order to pick up loose stones that had been knocked off a staircase leading to the upper deck but never got the full sentence out. Gumus used his finger and thumb to encircle her neck, lift her up and slam her against the closest wall.

"Where is Mina?" Gumus snarled.

General Jikutokushikazu's eyes popped forward as she struggled for breath. Her nails scratched at the surface of Gumus's hand without leaving a mark.

Bystanders staggered back shocked at the gall of a lowly Adventyrare attacking a General.

"Mi-na!" Gumus banged the General against the wall twice for emphasis.

The General composed herself enough to lay her ears back flat and snarl. She pushed her legs off the wall and flung them around Gumus's wrist loosening his grip enough to take a breath. "I'll have you drawn and quartered before the sun sets for daring to lay a hand on a General of Dong Tochi."

Gumus pulled his arm back to fling her to the ground when Kirmizi and Tomutan intervened.

"Put her down!" General Tomutan shouted.

"I was just about to," answered Gumus.

A stream of Mikachiari entered into the square, weapons drawn. Generals Ahm Rahis and Nwa Chapo Le Sel followed close behind.

"Gumus," Kirmizi said. "You won't leave this square alive if you don't put the General down, unharmed." Kirmizi expected to see defiance in Gumus, instead he saw a flicker of despair followed by a slight sag of his shoulders.

"Teke promised I could stay by her side. She promised I would be allowed to watch over Mina."

General Nwa Chapo Le Sel threw a blue-white air spell at Gumus. Several more Asistan Ti appeared, magic swirling in their palms.

The magic attack flung Gumus backwards. He sprang up and was immediately hit with multiple spells: red, orange, purple. His steps slowed to a crawl and smoke rose from his skin.

"We know nothing of Teke's plans!" General Jikutokushikazu shouted to Gumus above the hiss of magic. The Mikachiari gathered around her and they blocked the Asistan Ti's attack on Gumus. "I know the real reason you cast your spells, wizard demons. Don't bother!" General Jikutokushikazu spat at General Nwa Chapo Le Sel.

"What are you talking about? We've always used our magic for everyone's benefit in Dong Tochi," General Nwa Chapo Le Sel said.

"You think by protecting us we'd take you into our confidence? We'd trust you after what you're planning to do? You must think us fools."

"That's enough!" General Tomutan interrupted. "This is not the time or place for your personal war."

A popping sound overheard drew all eyes toward a swirling grey cloud. "Oh, but it is exactly the right time." Two Asistan Ti floated above, one clothed in white, the other in grey. The one in grey addressed Nwa Chapo Le Sel. "The Prezidan will be pleased with this new development."

Nwa Chapo Fo Dife cried out, "They attacked Nwa Chapo Yon Sel! Blan Chapo Yon Sel you defy our own laws to follow the Prezidan's madness!"

The response to Nwa Chapo Fo Dife's words was swift. Multiple weapons and magic flew through the air. The Asistan Ti in white, Blan Chapo Yon Sel, spread her hands and multicolored shields of magic closed around her and the Asistan Ti accomplice in grey. The black hat magic sizzled against the shields and weapons clattered to the ground. Blan Chapo Yon Sel flung her arms out once more and a second later they winked out in a ball of white.

The Mikachiari huddled together in agitation. The Asistan Ti withdrew to General Nwa Chapo Le Sel's side. General Ahm Rahis took a stand between the two groups as they hurled insults at each other.

Kirmizi caught General Tomutan's arm as he rushed forward to help General Ahm Rahis. "Banish Gumus. You have bigger problems to deal with in Dong Tochi right now."

General Tomutan gave a dismissive wave. "I banish him and you. If I ever see him again I'm holding you responsible. If he becomes a massacring monster, I'm holding you responsible. Your time is done here in Dong Tochi."

Kirmizi gave a slow nod and pulled Gumus toward the massive outer gate the Chim had retreated through not too long ago. "Teke must have had her reasons. You're going to have to trust they moved Mina to keep her safe and they couldn't confide in you for the same reason. Within moments Prezidan Jules will know something is going on which puts Mina in grave danger. That was Blan and Gri Chapo Yon Sel, the two highest White and Grey hat magic users." Kirmizi paused. "Brother, what woke you? We thought you wouldn't find the strength to go on after Mina was taken."

"I felt bound in body but my spirit drifted. I saw back in time to before the Bocek invaded. Then I saw Onxy Ay tie the dead

body of his mate and daughters to his waist and drag them during the Sabah Yuruyusu. My spirit gathered at a cave covered with paintings on the walls."

Kirmizi inhaled sharply. "Kutsal Magara."

"Then my spirit returned and I was no longer bound."

"Your Ofkelenmek was given a focus."

Gumus agreed. "I must find Mina and help her. She is part of something greater but exactly what is unclear to me."

Once outside the cacophony of the Chim wilderness filled the air. Kirmizi continued. "Go to the east corner of the wall and wait for me. I'll bring supplies. It's a long trek through Chim strongholds to reach the other outposts and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li."

"How will I know the way, brother?" Gumus asked.

"I'm coming with you."

## **Country: Varlid, Nation: The Far West Wilderness between Dong Tochi and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li**

Gumus was used to being a giant in his own right but the beasts here were regularly twice his size. They had to dodge and stick to the shadows, following small paths through thick underbrush to reach heavily guarded outposts. Kirmizi had transport papers from Dong Tochi so the only hard part was reaching one of the outposts without having to engage Chim Sung Saram or other wild animals. On several occasions they had to make a run for the outpost after being spotted and chased all the way to a fortified gate. There the guards were keen to keep Chim Sung Saram and animals away and repelled the attack while cursing Kirmizi and Gumus for not being more careful.

For Gumus there was a particularly nasty animal that plagued him. A tiny specimen that bit his ankles and caused them to swell. That only lasted through the heavily wooded areas. Next on their journey came a shore line they followed for days and then a hot, dry volcanic landscape that stretched on forever. When the landscape finally changed to another heavily wooded area, Kirmizi announced. "We're almost there."

"This trip has taken us many months. How do we even know they're still there?" Gumus asked.

"I've checked at the outposts along the way. There is communication with Dong Tochi. Mavi Ay said they arrived by ship and the ship left again but with no Mikachiari on board. They had to have made camp somewhere outside Seo Jog Mo Seo Li."

"Any sign of Asistan Ti?"

"No, but they just need scouts. The Grey and White hats both have spells similar to the Black hats. They can use magic to transport long distances as long as they've been there once and set up a marker."

"How do we fight their magic?"

"We don't. The Mikachiari were right. Although the Black hats are still on their side they cannot be fully trusted. Nwa Chapo Fo Dife said as much because the Prezidan still holds some kind of power over them."

"There must be some weapon or shield the Black hats can help us make."

Kirmizi shook his head. "None that I know of and they wouldn't make one that could be used against their own kind. The Asistan Ti do not possess magic. Maybe in the beginning it was so but not now. Now they are magic. The most I've seen them do is make small objects that hold power for the Manskliga and Elyun. The Black hats made the Suk Chae that powers Dong Tochi. What works in our favor is the White hats can only cast protective and enfeebling spells. The really strong ones like Blan Chapo Yon Sel can revive the dead. Since the Black hats revolted against Prezidan Jules, he created Grey hats. Their magic is similar to the Black hats but far less powerful. It is unclear if they can kill anyone but they definitely can maim."

"But the Black hats can still kill."

"Yes."

"Good thing they're on our side."

"Yes. For now."

## Country: Varlid, Nation: The Far West Wildernes outside Seo Jog Mo Seo Li

A door closed cutting off the panting of a Mikachiari in labor. "Mina's with at least five cubs," Nori said.

"Thank you, Goddess Jimotekuari!" Teke cried. "How soon?"

"A couple more hours."

"How soon until we can impregnate her again?"

Noki sobered, her ears turned down. "Why? No one has discovered us."

"They're looking. We know they're somewhere around Seo Jog Mo Seo Li. It's too dangerous to move any farther away. All it takes is for one Asistan Ti to let the Prezidan know and we're done."

"But this, sacrificing her, after all she's done?"

"She will be remembered forever with our words. It is her fate."

"A fate you've decided for her. What of your fate?"

"I—I will be cursed. I will be cursed for far more than what I've done to Mina."

A muffled cry sent Noki back into the small room. Hours later she brought five cubs for Teke to hand over to five Mikachiari.

"Take them to the sanctuaries, protect them with your life. Our existence depends on it," said Teke as she handed each mewling cub to its new mother.

"Should we name them before we go?" one Mikachiari asked.

"Yes." Teke laid a hand on each one saying, "You are our hope, Ri, so your names are: Riari, Rito, Riku, Rimei, and Rika. Our hope after more than a hundred years of despair."

The Mikachiari dispersed from the camp.

"How soon can we impregnate Mina?" Teke demanded from Noki. "The sooner we hand her over to the Asistan Ti, the sooner the hunt for our Ri will end."

**Country: Varlid, Nation: The Far West Wilderness,  
City: Seo Jog Mo Seo Li**

Seo Jog Mo Seo Li was a smaller version of Dong Tochi. Traders called Kyun Ha Da made this area their home. They stood no taller than three feet but their features were long and delicate. Their jaws and nose tapered to a point jutting out five inches from the rest of their face. The fingers of their paws were long and ended in dull talons. They reminded Gumus of the Vartalf only more meek. They hid at the slightest change of tone even in the middle of haggling a deal. Kirmizi and Gumus were the only Kertenkele and no Mikachiari could be seen within the city. When Kirmizi questioned passersby, none had been seen in town for months. When he asked about the ones that had arrived by ship, there was no answer.

"What gate did they leave from?" Kirmizi questioned a guard.

"I think the north gate. In truth I don't remember."

Gumus wanted to start off right away but Kirmizi held him back. "There are no outposts past Seo Jog Mo Seo Li. We'll be totally on our own against the Chim Sung Saram. I know the Kyun Ha Da look docile in town but once outside, they are very different."

"But the Mikachiari made it out."

"They must have information we don't. We can't rush out there blind. Lets sleep tonight and in the morning find scouts who know more about the land outside Seo Jog Mo Seo Li."

In the morning when the Kertenkele emerged from their sleep along a far wall, the air crackled with electricity.

"Where is everyone?" Kirmizi asked a guard.

"We're about ready to sound the alarm and send everyone to the port." The guard eyed the size of Kirmizi and Gumus. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in helping us?"

"Helping against what?"

"It feels like magic is in the air. There were rumors the Mikachiari were going to bring trouble here."

Gumus shook his head 'no', but Kirmizi replied in the affirmative. "Where do you want us to stand guard?"

"Right here is fine." The guard tapped the Skal communicator in his ear and informed the rest of the guards there were two Kertenkele recruited to help with whatever arose.

They didn't have to wait long as popping sounds echoed in the distance. Gumus and Kirmizi tensed. Gumus unleashed his war axe while Kirmizi unsheathed a sword.

"What?" the guard asked.

"We've heard that sound right before Blan and Gri Chapo Yon Sel appeared," Kirmizi said.

"They're after the Mikachiari, still? I thought the war was settled. What use are a bunch of neutered pretty pets?"

Gumus growled his answer.

"Hey, no offense. Just wondering why they're worth all this trouble."

"Will you protect the Mikachiari if Asistan Ti find them?"

The guard shifted his weight. "Not our business. We don't have the forces." He touched his ear and cocked his head to one side. "Understood."

"What?"

"We're standing down. Someone is talking with the Asistan Ti."

Gumus shouldered Kirmizi. "We need to find them."

"You are not to interfere," the guard warned.

The Kertenkele climbed the stairs three at a time. They knew the guard below informed his captain they had gone rogue. At the top of the wall they could see a mass of fifty or more Asistan

Ti in the middle of the adjoining square. Blan Chapo Yon Sel was talking to the captain of the guard with a small contingent. The rest were taking turns floating higher than the walls getting the lay of the land outside Seo Jog Mo Seo Li.

Gumus strained forward but Kirmizi said, "Relax. They don't know where Mina is any more than we do."

"I have an idea," Gumus said. He turned and sought out some Kyun Ha Da hiding under their cart. With a swipe, Gumus had one by the throat and lifted it to eye level.

"Gumus!" Kirmizi cried in alarm.

"Mikachiari where?" Gumus asked and added a little shake so the Kyun Ha Da knew he was serious.

The Kyun Ha Da squeaked and trembled. The rest of them peeked out from under their cart but made no move to stop the assault.

"We don't even speak their language," Kirmizi said.

"Here." Gumus dug into the waistband of his clothes and pulled out a leather necklace and shoved it underneath the Kyun Ha Da's nose. "Take me to the Mikachiari who wore this."

The Kyun Ha Da's whiskered nose twitched and wrinkled and finally sniffed the necklace. Gumus set the creature down. "Where? Take us, now."

The Kyun Ha Da darted for a corner of the stairs they'd just ascended. Gumus followed thinking he had cut off too much oxygen to the creature, but as they drew near the Kyun Ha Da ran down the stairs. Gumus hurried and could hear Kirmizi following behind him.

Gumus looked over the side in time to see the Kyun Ha Da disappear. He jumped over the side to catch up and realized under the staircase was a tunnel. Ducking low he squeezed into the dark passage. At the other end Gumus popped out into a small clearing surrounded by heavy brush. The Kyun Ha Da stuck a paw out and flicked it against a bush. The rustling sound alerted Gumus and he motioned for Kirmizi to follow.

"This could be a trap. I told you they're different outside."

"We have no choice."

Even though the brush was tall, the Kertenkele couldn't move stealthily. An alarm sounded behind them.

"It's the Asistan Ti, they've seen us," Kirmizi said.

The Asistan Ti didn't descend upon them, instead they flew parallel and to the right. The Kyun Ha Da stopped in front of them and pointed. Gumus and Kirmizi changed direction and crashed through the brush following the Asistan Ti.

A clearing ahead showed a sight that chilled Gumus. Mina was in the hands of several Asistan Ti. "Mina!" Gumus bellowed. His axe swung high to try and catch the Asistan Ti floating above him. Magic flew threw the air and he was brought to his knees. He heard Kirmizi groan behind him in pain. Gumus crawled forward. Mina's eyes were closed and she sagged held up by a white mist that encircled her like a cloud.

Blan Chapo Yon Sel appeared and didn't even spare a glance at the two Kertenkele struggling to reach Mina. She swirled her child-sized hands and a portal appeared. Blan Chapo Yon Sel guided the white mist that held Mina through it and they winked out of sight.

Gumus roared his frustration and threw his axe. Gri Chapo Yon Sel cast magic to meet the axe in mid air and sent it tumbling harmlessly to the ground. One by one the Asistan Ti winked out through grey and white clouds until the clearing was empty.

Gumus sat while Kirmizi dragged himself to his feet to gather their weapons. A smoldering patch on the ground drew his attention. He struggled forward and saw Teke. He reached down to close her eyes, believing her dead, when Teke blinked.

Gumus raised both fists high in the air to pummel Teke in his rage. "You promised me!"

Kirmizi knocked Gumus to the side and gasped, "Teke, you should have let us help you."

Teke struggled to speak. Kirmizi lifted her up to his ear. When her body went limp he lowered her to the ground again. Mikachiari slowly emerged from the brush around them.

Gumus spun around. "Why didn't you defend Mina? If you were too cowardly to protect her than why didn't you keep your promise to me. I would have given my life for her!"

The Mikachiari looked grief stricken but didn't address Gumus.

"What did she say?" Noki asked.

"She said, 'Nodoshikumite.' What does that mean?"

Noki knelt beside Kirmizi. "It means we have a future."

The group made its way back to the port. Gumus pressured Noki and Luru to tell him what would become of Mina. Noki explained that Teke had implanted a virus in Mina. When the Asistan Ti tried to use her to alter their own makeup they would become infected.

"Infected how?" Kirmizi asked.

"It's something we've been working on. The Asistan Ti are magic now, their magic is written in their bones. That's how the Prezidan controls all the Asistan Ti. The Black hats may have revolted and disagreed with his plans but they can't escape it. They were no better than spies. They couldn't help it, it's how they were created."

"Will this kill them?" Kirmizi asked.

"No, but they will be weakened enough to kill."

"Will it kill Mina?" Gumus asked.

Noki looked at Luru. "More than likely, yes."

"Was she carrying cubs?" Gumus asked, his voice gravely with emotion.

"Yes, they're fine, they've been moved to a safe place. Mina didn't know about any of it." Noki's ears twitched. "We couldn't

tell her. She thought we'd abandoned her in the end. Mina killed Teke, or rather, Teke let her."

"Aren't you afraid of retribution from the Elyun and Manskliga? They rely on Asistan Ti magic devices," Kirmizi said.

"They've never cared what happened to us. Some of us are headed to Port Plaj to be ready when the virus strikes. Some are going to intervene with Priestess Tado. If the High Priestess comes out of hiding then she will be dealt with as well."

"Dong Tochi and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li will fall," Kirmizi said. "The Suk Chae was made by the Asistan Ti. Without that power source the cities will fail. I must warn the Generals to evacuate before the next Chim Sung Saram attack."

"I'm going with them." Gumus motioned to the Mikachiari. "To Port Plaj and then Patri Peyi. Until I see for myself, my Ofkelenmek hasn't changed." Gumus grasped Kirmizi's hand. "Thank you, brother."

"I hope you find Mina. If you need to find me or Mavi, we'll eventually head to Dohla to deal with Onyx Ay. That confrontation is long overdue."

Noki said, "I can't wait until Varlid uses the names for our homeland again. No more Asistan Ti language to pollute the air. We'll call a council meeting at Enade once this is over."

At Seo Jog Mo Seo Li they parted ways. Noki, Luru and a small group of Mikachiari along with Gumus boarded a ship bound for Port Plaj. Kirmizi waited for a ship to take him back to Dong Tochi.

Teke had been right. The map of Varlid was going to be rewritten soon.

**Country: Varlid, Nation: The Galen Wildreness  
Sanddyner, City: Free Port Sanddyner**

*The overriding quality of the general populace of Varlid is the ability to sympathize with others. - Manskliga scholar*

Most of Varlid traveled by foot. At great expense a ram found in two or three Galen across Varlid were tamed and used to pull carts or to ride. Furstinna and the group hopped on a cart with a merchant headed home. The emerald green of the hills and trees of Rike ended at the valley leading to the Galen, Hojder. The trek across Hojder with its mountains, deep crevasses, and clear blue lakes was long and arduous but uneventful. Only small wild animals made their home in Hojder, the area had been over-hunted for ages by the Manskliga. Grampus and occasionally Vartalf roamed there as well. The northern end of Hojder led to the Galen Trask and then on to Enade. The southern end of Hojder led to the Galen Sanddyner.

Sanddyner, hot and dry with endless dunes of white sand made Furstinna homesick for the cool green hills of Rike. After reaching Free Port Sanddyner, the group secured a campsite outside the gates. Furstinna had separated herself from Ganska during the trip from Rike to Sanddyner and spent most of her time with Kvinna. She knew it wasn't fair but Furstinna blamed Ganska for dragging her into something she was not ready to do. Sensing the tension between the two former friends, Hem usually took Furstinna and Kvinna and Befrielse took Ganska across Sanddyner to search for the secret cove that hid the entrance to Refuge.

"How much farther?" Furstinna asked.

"I'm not sure. We're checking the farthest point this time so we won't be back until very late," Hem answered.

Furstinna was frustrated. She thought Befrielse knew exactly where Refuge was and had not expected to be trampling around a Galen for weeks. She was tired of sand. Sand in her shoes, her ears, her hair, even her food. "How many more sections of the map do we need to check?"

"We're nearing the last sections on the map" Hem replied patiently.

"What if we don't find it?" Furstinna asked. Refuge was a legend and the longer they spent searching a nagging doubt grew it would remain just a legend.

Hem ignored her question and they trudged on. Their feet sunk down causing a burst of sand to fly outward with every step.

"The sun is sinking fast, Hem. I think we should turn back for today." Furstinna warned.

Hem pointed to the edge of the southern most beach where mangrove trees looked as if they were walking out to sea. "We'll stop there."

When they reached the mangroves Furstinna rushed into the waves to splash water on her face. A hand pulled her back as a sword slid into the water. A gush of purple rose to the surface. "These fish bite. Be careful," Kvinna scolded.

The three plopped down on the beach letting the waves wash over their feet. Hem passed the canteen to Furstinna.

"Why would anyone live out here? The ones who do are barely surviving. I'm sure they'd have a better life in their nation," Furstinna said.

Hem grunted. "Why don't you ask them yourself?"

"I don't want to pry. They might be embarrassed at their situation. I know I would be."

"We come from wealthy families. There are many more who don't. All they have is their labor to offer and that doesn't earn much," Hem said.

"They should learn a trade if they can't get an education. That would help. There is always the military too. I think expanding trade apprenticeships would cut down on the need for charity."

"I'm sure we'll have more time to talk about it in Refuge," Hem said as he rose and pointed to an outcropping of gray rock jutting past the green of the mangrove trees. "We need to search to that point. Have your dagger ready."

Furstinna mumbled as she withdrew two daggers from her waistband. Anytime she tried to draw the others into conversation they talked about Refuge. Kvinna was the only one who at least attempted to talk with her but only in private. They'd had long, whispered conversations at night while the others slept.

Kvinna lifted the tip of her sword. "Stick close to me and stay in the sun lit water as much as you can. These fish hide in the shade of the tree roots and dart out to attack."

They made their way slowly, the setting sun shrinking the pathways lit by water. "We'll never make it back before the sun sets," Furstinna warned again.

"We can make camp there if we need to," Hem said in a reassuring tone.

"We don't even know if there is a place to camp."

"This is the place. I can feel it," Hem pressed on. They had killed several small fish along the way and Hem had secured them to his belt.

In the fading light they could see a darker opening ahead of them. "We're going to make a dash up these roots and climb along those the rest of the way."

When they reached the edge of the trees a small, peaceful lagoon appeared. Across that stood the opening to a cave. They sprinted to the large, black opening as the last of the sunlight disappeared. Furstinna and Kvinna collapsed on the beach while Hem edged closer to the entrance. "There's a faint light at the back. Catch your breath and then we'll have a look."

Without the aid of a lamp they clung to the side of the cave as they inched forward, weapons at the ready. There was no sound of scurrying animals, even their footsteps were swallowed up by the inky blackness. Furstinna was ready to insist they go back when a faint blue light appeared and grew brighter as they approached. As they got closer the blue light expanded from a dot to a swirling, funnel-shaped mass.

"This is it!" Hem cried. "We've found it. We'll be in Refuge within the week."

"Can we enter now?"

"No, Befrielse has three objects that will activate it. Look." Hem walked forward and passed through the swirling funnel. "It's just colored mist without those objects."

"How did he get them?"

"Befrielse traveled all over Varlid to several remote areas for items. He was gone for months. I don't know what the items are, I haven't seen them yet either."

"So he's the only one that can open the portal?" Furstinna asked.

"Yes, the items are marked so only the person who found them can use them. Kunskap shared the information only with Befrielse."

"Apparently he didn't trust the rest of us?" Kvinna whispered.

"You must have a lot of faith in Befrielse." Furstinna said as she cleaned the fish.

"Befrielse's actions speak louder than his words." Hem snapped as he strode off. "I'll get some firewood."

Hem, Furstinna, and Kvinna started a fire, ate their fish and relaxed.

"How long have you known Ganska?" Hem asked Furstinna.

Befrielse and Hem had been asking these sorts of questions during the trip to try and patch her relationship with Ganska. Furstinna had avoided the ploy but now that it seemed they were going to reach their final destination, she sighed and gave in.

"Since I was young. We both started classes with the Prast. I had an assignment I forgot to do and the teacher had told the class if anyone didn't have the lesson ready they were going to be in trouble and to see him afterward. Ganska noticed I was waiting and asked what was wrong. When I told Ganska she stayed with me so I wouldn't face the teacher alone even though she had already turned in her lesson."

Hem stretched his legs toward the fire. "That sounds like Ganska. I've tried to treat this trip as an adventure. Tried to look at everything that happens from one moment to the next as a twist in one big adventure. That's something Ganska told me once."

Furstinna stretched out in the sand and used the crook of her arm as a pillow. She'd heard Ganska say those words too but she wasn't ready to admit it yet. She listened as Hem and Kvinna talked excitedly about what lay beyond the portal.

In the morning they made the trip back to Free Port Sanddyner. The weeks of trudging through the sand were forgotten as Hem explained to Befrielse in hushed tones where the portal was hidden.

"We need to leave as soon as we can. I think a Manskliga is following me around Free Port," Befrielse said.

"Should we split up?" Hem asked.

"No, lets stay out of Free Port and leave before the first light. Give away everything except our water and weapons. We'll travel light and fast."

Before the first rays of the sun touched the white sand, Befrielse moved the group at a quick pace. "We have to make the portal as soon as possible. Kvinna keep watch to see if we're being followed."

They reached the edge of the beach where the mangroves took over. "There are fish," Hem warned drawing his sword. "Stick to the light as far as you can then climb the roots. Furstinna, and Kvinna know what to do."

The group collapsed at the entrance to the cave, their breathing ragged gasps for air. Befrielse urged them to get up. "One more push and we'll be safely on the other side, in Refuge."

The blue-white swirling funnel of mist was exactly as Hem's group had found it. Furstinna swiped her arm through the mist without altering it. All eyes were on Befrielse as he bent down over his pack and pulled out three objects: an Elyun shaped skull white with age, a small animal's tail and brown cloth with a large, purple stain.

Furstinna gasped and sought Kvinna's hand. "That's a Jakel worshiper's robe."

Kvinna squeezed Furstinna's hand but remained silent.

Befrielse laid the objects at the base of the funnel. Nothing happened. Befrielse straightened and stepped back. The funnel continued to swirl for several seconds then winked out plunging the group into darkness. A heartbeat later a pinpoint of light above the objects grew into a large oval of sparkling white like sunlight reflected in a mirror.

Furstinna squinted to try and see what was happening. A dark shape, Befrielse, stepped forward and vanished.

"Lets go!" Hem cried.

Kvinna stood to one side and motioned Furstinna and Ganska to enter the portal. After they disappeared, Kvinna wrapped a piece of paper with details on how to open the portal around the Skal she'd used to stay in contact with the Dold. She laid it carefully on the ground surrounded by three rocks then disappeared into Refuge.

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in Crowning Fantasy Book 1, so far. . .** a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

#### REFUGE

Island only accessible through a portal in Sanddyner. They are a collective from all over Varlid but are mostly made up of

Manskliga. They are an agrarian society based on simple principles and leading simple lives.

Refuge citizens:

Maja

Albin

Nova

Alma

Tuva

Olle

Nils

Caj

## Country: Varlid, Nation: Unknown, City: Refuge

*A Manskliga teacher from Refuge asked her students, "How do you control a ram? It's bigger, faster, stronger than the average Manskliga yet we use it to ride and cart our belongings all over Varlid." When her students offered no answer, she said, "You never let it know it's a ram. Once a ram knows what it is, it can no longer be controlled."*

A green meadow opened up before Furstinna. Grazing animals wandered in large herds back and forth. The crash of waves could be heard in the distance. On the other side of the meadow was a large rope and wooden bridge swaying over a rocky chasm.

Befrielse was already at the bridge. "It looks sturdy but don't start until I'm halfway across." One by one everyone made their way to the other side. The grassy and rocky terrain continued until it ended at the entrance of a cavern.

"I don't know the welcome we can expect from whoever rules here. Just be calm and on your best behavior."

They stayed close together and entered. There was no gate or welcome or warning. Torches lit the way down a wide corridor. It opened up into three new routes: left, right and straight ahead. Befrielse hesitated and then continued forward. At the end two guards stood before another well lit entrance.

The guards didn't look startled to see complete strangers approaching them. They did simultaneously lower their spears until they crossed blocking any further advancement by the group.

"With what items did you enter the portal?" the guard on the left asked.

Befrielse spoke for the group and answered the guard's question and added, "I have passed your test and proven my worthiness and intent to learn your ways."

The guards studied the group. "You weren't squeamish about killing a Jakel worshiper?"

"Not after seeing their rituals first hand."

The guard on the right nodded. "Here are some guidelines before you enter. If you have any weapons they will be turned in here and we will check them into the armory. They are yours, you just cannot carry them inside Refuge. Violence in any form is not tolerated."

"Except by you?" Kvinna smirked.

The guard grinned. "We only guard the entrance to Refuge. Beyond this point is a commitment to non-violence. You'll feel the difference and hopefully learn to appreciate it. Please withdraw all your weapons and place them here." He pointed to his side.

Befrielse looked at the group then withdrew his sword and stepped over to the guard to lay it down. One by one the rest of the group deposited their weapons.

"Who is the ruler here?" Befrielse asked.

"There is no ruler. The structure of government here is very different from the rule of Stark Harskare or anywhere else in Varlid. Everyone is encouraged to take part. Right now the council for newcomers consists of Maja, Albin, Nova and Nils. Whenever there are newcomers a meeting is called immediately. I'm going to take you to a waiting area. It may take a day or two because members have to come in from the fields."

"Everyone in Refuge is called to this meeting?"

"Yes."

"But you said there was a council. Aren't they elected to decide?"

The guard on the left stuck out his hand, "My name is Caj. All will be explained over time. No need to try and learn it all in one

day. Please, follow me." He stepped toward the entrance. While Caj had been talking to them the guard on the right had communicated with a Skal. Another guard appeared to take Caj's place as the group entered Refuge.

The tunnel opened up into a huge three level cylinder. The area was well lit because the ceiling opened up to the sky. They were on the top level. Ramps to the left and right led down. Straight ahead another rope and wooden bridge connected the cylinder across the middle. Caj gave them a moment to take in the grandeur of the structure carved from the inside of a mountain. "The entrance to this cavern and this level was natural. We widened the top to let in more light and carved down two more levels. On all three levels there are areas for storage, sleeping, and a cafeteria. The majority live in Refuge but like I said earlier there are those out in the fields."

"Farmers?" asked Befrielse.

"Yes and herders. We have several flocks of animals."

On the other side of the bridge there was an open area with a large plaque hanging on the wall. Candles flickered on a cabinet underneath and several stone benches were placed in a semi-circle facing the plaque. On either side there was another set of stone ramps.

"What is that?"

"A monument to the founders of Refuge. Copies of their diaries are kept in that cabinet. You can read them any time you like."

Caj made a right and descended the ramp. The group followed. Caj continued along the corridor on the second level to the other side and then followed another ramp down to the first level. Along the way they saw mostly Manskliga. Only a scattering of Elyun, Mikachiari, and Asistan Ti appeared to live in Refuge. They had not seen a Kertenkele yet.

In the center of the bottom level stood a tree. Members of Refuge sat reading, talking, or playing instruments. At the

bottom of the ramp Caj turned right into a large area filled with tables and benches.

"I'm sure you're hungry after your trip. Have a seat." Caj motioned to an empty row. After they were seated he walked further back to a large counter and asked for food to be brought.

Furstinna had watched everything with wide eyes. "They're dressed plainly here. I wonder if we'll be asked to do the same."

Ganska poked a finger through a hole in her trousers. "I for one could do with a new pair. I can't believe they carved this out of a mountain. Must have taken years."

Kvinna faced Befrielse. "I don't like that we had to turn over our weapons."

"You are seeking asylum here Kvinna," Befrielse answered. "Besides I don't see anything we need to defend ourselves against."

Caj brought a tray of food and returned a moment later with a tray of drinks. The group descended on the food and drink. It was good, prepared simply. When Furstinna asked for some spice Caj apologized saying he'd never seen it in Refuge.

When they were finished. "Lets go to your rooms where you can rest for a bit."

"When can we speak with the council?" Befrielse asked.

"As soon as I hear something I'll let you know. You're the most exciting thing that's happened in Refuge in about five years so you won't have to wait long."

"You haven't had anyone new visit since then?"

"As you know the information and items to enter aren't easy to get," Caj said. "That's on purpose. So no, we don't get many visitors."

After exiting the cafeteria they turned right again and continued around the corridor to an entrance in the middle. They followed another corridor, passing several entrances with wooden doors. At the end he stopped at two. "Befrielse and Hem

can rest in here. Furstinna, Ganska, and Kvinna in here. Is this alright or did any of you come as couples?"

"No couples," Furstinna answered as she opened the door to a room.

"There will be guards posted outside your doors," Caj said.

Kvinna backed out of the room in alarm. Befrielse held up a hand to stop her.

"You've nothing to fear here. Just rest until our community is ready to talk to you. We can't have you wandering around until we know you better, that's all. If you need anything, just ask the guard." As Caj finished speaking, two unarmed guards approached behind him.

"It'll be fine," Befrielse said looking at Kvinna.

"Would you rather stay together in one room? That can be arranged," Caj said.

"No," Kvinna answered.

The guards closed and locked the doors behind them.

Two days later the center of the bottom room was packed shoulder to shoulder. The upper levels held more people looking over the sides to watch the proceedings below. All in all there were some five hundred souls living in and around Refuge, seventy-five percent of them Manskliga.

Four council members, two male and two female Manskliga, introduced themselves: Maja, Albin, Nova, and Nils. Befrielse's group stood in front of them.

The acoustics were excellent and Befrielse's voice rang throughout the three levels as he introduced the group.

After he finished Maja asked, "Can I get a brief answer as to why you've sought us out?"

Befrielse stepped forward. "I'll speak for the group. We've come to Refuge because we learned from Kunskap Forskare

about certain things going on in Rike and Varlid. He's the one who set me on the path to gather the necessary items to enter here."

"How is Kunskap?" Albin asked with a smile.

"I'm afraid he's missing," Befrielse answered. "When he disappeared another member, Kvinna, felt in danger from the authorities in Fond so we decided to make the trip ourselves."

Albin's smile faded. There were several Manskliga close to the group who frowned and looked concerned. "Kunskap was a valued member of Refuge in the past. There was always hope he would be able to return."

"What exactly do you know about Varlid?" Maja asked.

"We know about the Grampus. We think there is a secret group running Fond called the Dold. Kunskap believed this group was developing a new weapon called, Vapen. His latest project was working with an Elyun in Dohla on possible reforms in the monetary system."

The silence in the room was deafening for a moment after he finished speaking. Then different groups started talking at once. Maja rang a gong hanging from a branch in the tree behind her. After a moment everyone quieted down.

"Did Kunskap share any of the information he was working on with the Elyun?" Maja asked with an undeniable note of hope in her voice.

"No."

"Kunskap trusted you with valuable information," Nova said.

"May I ask, are you planning a revolution? Kunskap hinted that your group would move out into Varlid." Kvinna challenged the council. Befrielse gave her a sharp frown.

Maja smiled and several giggles echoed through the chamber. "You'll have to live with us for a time to understand that our idea of a revolution is probably different from yours."

Nils was the last one of the council to speak. "You've brought us much to think about and we will split up our members to

work on separate parts for discussion." He then rattled off four meeting places, one each for the Grampus, Dold, Vapen, and monetary system. "I move that people meet tonight and tomorrow morning and report back in the afternoon. All in favor say 'Ay.'"

A thunderous response of 'Ay!' answered.

"Is anyone opposed to granting provisional membership to this group from Fond?"

"Will the council provide an introduction to our system first?" someone in the crowd asked.

"Of course," Nils answered. "Who has the help wanted assignments?"

Another voice in the crowd answered in the affirmative.

"All in favor of bring this meeting to a close say, 'Ay.'"

"Ay!"

"Meeting adjourned."

Maja, Albin, Nova, and Nils led Belfriese's group to the cafeteria after the meeting.

Maja brought refreshments then was the first to start. "What Kunskap has told you is correct. The Grampus are Manskliga. The Asistan Ti shared some of their technology with the Manskliga. That's when the Grampus started appearing in Varlid. They are the byproducts of producing what is now considered 'true' Manskliga. The Grampus were not supposed to live. Their deformities were considered too severe. But whenever you try to cage something there are always a few that slip through. They are their own species now. We still don't know how to communicate with them mainly because we can't find a way to approach them peaceably. They try to kill anyone not Grampus on sight. This led to two revolts. The Black hat revolt of the Asistan Ti because Prezidan Jules was using Mikachiari to further his own experiments and for sharing the information with the Manskliga. Mastare was the first Manskliga who left to form Refuge. Does this sum it up for you?"

Everyone nodded in agreement except Furstinna. "I still don't believe my family would have anything to do with this. My mother is a devout follower of Goddess Gudina."

"I'm not implying your mother was a willing participant. Our colony was founded on our attempt to intercede in the killing of Grampus and the manipulation of our race that produces Grampus. What we have every reason to believe is that high-ranking families in Rike take part," Maja explained.

"I can agree with you that we shouldn't be killing Grampus." Furstinna relented. "They are a race with their own culture."

"Then we will rest this discussion on that positive note."

Albin continued, "The Dold is an organization outside the Stark Harskare ruling family of Rike. Other than that we don't know much more about them. They seem to be violent and not above assassinations, infiltrations of groups, and overall disruption but to what end is a mystery to us. They haven't sought to overthrow the ruling family and may have some symbiotic relationship with the higher class in Rike. If you have any more information, please share."

Everyone shook their head, no, including Kvinna.

Nova spoke next, "The Vapen is also a weapon most likely developed with help from the Asistan Ti."

"I thought the Asistan Ti's magic couldn't be weaponized," Hem said.

"We thought so too. I'm not sure if the ruling family or the Dold just expanded on the magic Prezidan Jules originally shared. The Black hats who live here in Refuge are also unsure. We do know Stark Harskare handed over any Mikachiari they found to the Asistan Ti. The Mikachiari who live in Refuge escaped Rike during that time."

Nils cleared his throat. "The monetary system was something new. As you know each nation has it's ruling family as king, emperor, or Prezidan in the case of the Asistan Ti with a provisional government of mostly wealthy families. Lurazat

Esarotarahis was studying the history of money since the end of the Varlid War. The War changed the landscape of Varlid substantially and there were promises of reform made to the general populace who fought in that war. Those changes never materialized. Lurazat started following Kunskap and was gathering data to show how the wealthy through inheritance stayed in power. Through marriage it was easier to rise in class and status than any amount of work, investment, ingenuity, or risk-taking. There have been popular uprisings based on these assumptions but without data to back it up. These uprisings have been summarily put down over the years by their governments. Some of those dissidents made their way to Refuge."

"Which is why I've been advocating building skills and apprenticeship training," Furstinna added excitedly.

"Those were a course of action promoted after the war and in some part they were implemented. We're not saying they should be abandoned since we value education in general, but the data showed those types of programs by themselves were not capable of bringing about real or lasting change for the general population."

"But we have lost that data," Befrielse said solemnly. "Kvinna worked with Lurazat in Rasima."

"Really?" Nils remarked. "Do you have anything to add?"

"I'm sorry, Lurazat showed me the data and it confirms what you've just said but I don't have any of his papers. He was planning a trip to meet Kunskap but died suddenly. I was being framed for his murder which is how we ended up here."

"That data was the last piece to our plan," Maja remarked.

"What plan?" Furstinna asked.

Maja continued ignoring Furstinna. "This is a lot of information to take in and the community will be talking about these topics today and tomorrow. You're free to move about Refuge and take part in any of the discussions. If you wish to leave Refuge, you may but you will not be able to return for any

reason. If you stay and become a member in full standing you will be able to come and go within limits. For the communities safety of course."

"How long will that take?" Hem asked.

"That depends on you and the community. I'll explain how we operate. You'll choose the work you would like to do. The cafeteria, the baths and the common area are always open. You have your rooms and we have fresh clothes for you."

"What kind of work do you do here?" Ganska asked.

"Everything that needs done. There is a help wanted board in the common area with a council that oversees each area."

"Who does the work no one wants to do?" Furstinna asked.

The council members laughed. "That always adds a bit of excitement every month or so. The work no one wants to do piles up and causes a mess or interferes with other work or falls on the same people too often so they quit... . There are some interesting, often heated, discussions following one of these episodes but it always works out in the end," Maja said.

"Why doesn't someone just assign the work?" Befrielse asked.

"That isn't how we decided Refuge would run. Varlid looks like a giant upside down funnel. Everything that is produced, manufactured, and labored is funneled upwards into the hands of the few. We purposefully set up Refuge to be the exact opposite of the rest of Varlid. That's not to say that we stay the same. We are open and willing to experiment with how we live along some basic guidelines which we'll share with you in the coming days. You've already learned one, we're committed to non-violence and part of that is no weapons are allowed in Refuge at any time other than work implements."

"What if you're attacked?" Hem asked.

"We are committed to meeting that attack without the use of violence. But we are realists. That's why the portal was created. That's why you will be worked into life in Refuge in stages," Maja

said then pushed back from the table. "I'm about all talked out. Someone else want to take over?"

Albin nodded. "I think that's the most I've heard you speak in a week. Please ask questions if you have any but maybe you'll learn more by doing."

"I have a question," Befrielse added. "So who owns Refuge, how is it divided up?"

"No one owns Refuge," Albin said. "It is a small community. It's another aspect of Varlid we are trying to turn on it's head. There is no personal ownership of property or most items."

"But you can't produce everything you need here on this small area."

"No, we can't. Full members come and go into Varlid and trade or buy the things we need. We operate on mainly necessities: food, shelter, clothes, pursuit of knowledge and interests. The basics does take up most of your time but the load is shared."

"We don't claim to have all the answers," Nova said. "As you talk to other members you'll probably hear a different view on what we've been talking about and that's fine, encouraged even."

"One more question," Furstinna ventured.

"Of course."

"What about the Goddess?"

"Our first rule is to non-violence in any form. You are free to express your beliefs however you like but they cannot include sacrifice or violence. That's all we ask. Again, we don't have all the answers and we are not implying we're experts on everything about Refuge. Once you join daily life here and talk to others you'll have a better idea of what we're trying to build," Nova said. With that the council bid them farewell and they were free to get started in Refuge.

Caj walked up a grassy path to a pasture overlooking the Bred Hav. The council members who had spoken to the newcomers were there plus fifty other members of Refuge. Nils opened the discussion. "We're gathered to talk about the loss of Kunskap and Lurazat."

"Is there a problem?" Caj asked.

"That's why we're here. Kunskap recommended Kvinna to be appointed to the dignitary specifically so she could facilitate a meeting with Lurazat. The fact that she is with the newcomers, was trusted by Kunskap and also had access to Lurazat warrants some discussion. The fact that two of these three people known to Refuge is either missing or dead concerns me," Nils explained.

"You're not the only one concerned," Albin said.

"It could be a coincidence," Caj said.

"Refuge is still alive because we don't believe in coincidences," Maja said. "We've dealt with infiltrators before."

"The rest of the group seems to trust Kvinna, they brought her here to save her."

"True," Maja said. "Kunskap never had any reservations about Befrielse and trusted him to add people who were trustworthy."

"Kvinna's explanation is reasonable given the history of Stark Harskare's government. They could have found out about Lurazat's research and his correspondence with Kunskap and tried to frame Kvinna to undermine their group," Caj said.

"I think Befrielse may have more information to share than he thinks. He wasn't supposed to gain access to Refuge yet. There was a broader plan with Kunskap to bring a larger group to Refuge in a couple of years. We need to ask him about that."

"Could Befrielse be a part of some plot?"

"If we really want to get paranoid they all could be."

"Caj, I'm putting you in charge. Use anyone from this group to search everything they brought with them, their clothes, their rooms, the baths, wherever they stay or work in Refuge. Maybe

one of them will be eager to establish contact outside of Refuge," Maja said.

"What about the Grampus?" a member asked.

"We haven't had one breakthrough in communication with them in all these years. Unless something drastically changes we'll have to put that aside for now," Nova said.

"And the Vapen?" another member asked.

"They might intend to threaten all of Varlid with a weapon like that," someone else answered.

Caj moaned. "Start another Varlid War? If the Asistan Ti withdraws their magic support it makes many more smaller machines, like the Skal, useless. The Elyun would stop shipping raw materials and could seriously disrupt the flow of money plus having the Kertenkele on their side in a fight is a huge advantage. I don't think one weapon will cripple any of the other nations enough to make them surrender."

There was a minute of silence then Maja spoke slowly and clearly so everyone gathered could hear. "There is one place they could cripple with that kind of weapon. Us. Refuge."

"The three items not only guard the portal but also our location," Nova said. "It makes a weapon like Vapen useless against us."

"We're so close to finishing what the founders of Refuge started," Caj said. "We need to take the next steps. Our secret location has kept us safe for many years, but we can't take that for granted."

Maja paused to let the murmuring among the group die down then issued a decision. "Step up the memorization of the Phases and the Ninety-nine Ways. Once we do a final check that everyone in Refuge knows those two books by heart, burn all physical copies. They can't kill an idea, they can't stop a leaderless movement and they can't purge what they can't find."

**Country: Varlid, Nation: Patri Peyi  
(Nokashikatekiariku), City: Vil Peyi  
(Nokushilukumichi)**

*Whatever you change, changes you.* - **Mina Rinkishikamitaku**

Mina floated, semi-conscious, while Asistan Ti worked around her prone form. Her homeland floated above, clear blue skies, white wisps of clouds, and snatches of green leaves on branches. She was home. How? Then Mina remembered, it had all been a trick. While she was in the Far West Wilderness she thought she'd delivered babies. Noki was by her side. Luru and Teke came and went. Small, mewling sounds of babies, alive, she was almost certain there had been babies. When she awoke again it was to a scene out of a nightmare.

Asistan Ti surrounded the clearing, floating along the tops of bushes like large insects. Teke held Mina at arm's length, offering her to the Asistan Ti. She spoke about a trade, Mina in exchange for the rest of their race. Teke assured them, Mina was whole so the Asistan Ti could use her for their final experiments to heal themselves. To grab this opportunity that would not come for another hundred years since Priestess Tado from Dohla mutilated all whole females through the ritual, Nodoshiku.

Mikachiari howled in anguish at Teke's words. At her betrayal. The only thing holding them back from tearing Teke limb from limb was the Asistan Ti's magic.

Mina lost her mind at that point and wondered at how easily she was able to grab the shiny dagger from Teke's belt. Dark purple liquid flowed from the stab wounds Mina repeatedly inflicted upon her even after Teke sunk to the ground.

All that training and Teke never fought back. Mina wondered if in her heart Teke knew what she had done was beyond the ability to forgive.

Mina's anger at what had happened throbbed like a dull ache in her belly. So much deceit from her own kind. Gumus was one of the few who'd kept his word. Where was he now? Did Gumus know she was in the hands of the Asistan Ti?

A mass of green leaves entered her peripheral vision, then larger and larger branches came into view until a massive trunk blotted out the sky. She could see magic swirls of different colors float and move around her. An archway carved from the tree plunged her into cool shade.

Chishikuku, the sacred tree. She was entering the sacred tree of the Mikachiari she'd only heard about in stories. Mina wanted to spit and swipe at the magic users surrounding her. She could not move a muscle. It had to be a paralyze spell. No one spoke directly to her.

They guided her through rooms and down a long ramp in the bowels of the tree. Once in a dimly lit room they fastened her to a table. All around the room the stench of magic filled the air, a combination of singed hair and static. Jars of every size, filled with every color of liquid and gas lined the shelves in the room.

Blan Chapo Yon Sel barked orders to the other magic users. They poked needles in her. Rows and rows of needles in every part of her body. Mina tensed every muscle to make it harder for them to insert the needles. She squirmed and twisted an inch here and there. They cut her open and took things out. When the pain grew too much she arched her neck and howled.

Mina would awaken to see Blan Chapo Yon Sel standing over her cloaking them both in an immense and blinding white and peach colored light.

Then the pain would begin again.

The surviving Mikachiari from all over Varlid had amassed at Port Nomoshichi in Aririnkatata. The Grey hats could only annoy them with their weak magic spells. Mikachiari archers brought some of them down before the White hats could assist.

Priestess Tado had refused to send the Mikachiari from Rasima without the blessing of the Elyun government. Batu and Kazi managed to lead a small group and escape Rasima with the help of a few Kertenekle.

The Mikachiari didn't have long to wait. The Asistan Ti had used Mina immediately and during the next skirmish the Grey hats dropped out of the air, dead. The White hats cried out. Blind they flew into buildings and trees. When they dropped to the ground the Mikachiari pounced on them and ripped them apart with teeth and claws. Others used weapons to skewer them, laughing and shouting, "They taste bad!"

Gumus watched at the entrance of Port Nomoshichi, waiting for the carnage to be over. Luru walked up the main alley towards him spitting out a White hat's head and flinging it's body aside like the inedible skin of a piece of fruit. She laughed and jumped on Gumus's back. "Are you ready?!"

Noki, Batu, and Kazi joined her and they screamed, "Sisters, Nokashikatekiariku is ours!" They marched through Aririnkatata where the Faglar joined them. Sensing the difference in the Asistan Ti and after the Grey hats started dying the Faglar had attacked without mercy. Dried purple blood stuck to their bright colored feathers, beaks and talons.

Gumus Ay entered Nokushikumichi with his great axe swinging killing any Asistan Ti who crossed his path as he made his way to Chishikuku.

"If Mina is alive, that's where they're keeping her," Luru had told him. Gumus grabbed Noki to go with him in case Mina needed help.

The giant tree stood quiet, impassive to the chaos and violence happening under its shade. Gumus ignored the cries of

the scattered White hats crawling on the floor. "Mina!" he called over and over again.

Mina lost count of how many times Blan Chapo Yon Sel had revived her. This time was different. The intense light snapped out instead of fading. Mina gasped at the fresh pain. Blan Chapo Yon Sel faltered above her wiping at her eyes.

With tiny hands outstretched Blan Chapo Yon Sel felt her way down to Mina until their faces met. "What have you done?" she cried in an ear splitting, high-pitched voice. Her eyes covered with an opaque film.

Mina gathered what little moisture was left in her mouth and spit in Blan Chapo Yon Sel's face.

The other White hats in the room cried out for guidance. Blan Chapo Yon Sel withdrew and Mina could no longer see any of them. Soon the room was completely silent. She looked down at her body. She squirmed and tugged at her straps. The needles felt like tiny fires, except her legs. Below her waist Mina felt nothing. Time passed, the colors in the jars faded and then vanished. No one came back for her.

Hunger clung to her belly and thirst made her delirious. She thought she heard her name. Then she recognized the voice. It was Gumus, she was sure of it, shouting her name over and over again. Mina could only whimper in reply. She heard wood splinter and crack, then he was above her. The axe he brandished slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. "Noki!" he called.

Gumus's hands floated above her unsure of what to do first. Mina tugged at her wrists and with one snap of his finger she was free. She began picking needles from her body. Noki entered whispering, "Oh Goddess. This is a miracle."

Mina threw needles at Noki her face pinched in rage.

"No—it's okay!" Noki stammered. "Your babies live. Five strong males, they are safe!"

Gumus pulled a canteen from Noki's back and placed it to Mina's lips.

Once all the needles were out Mina could still not move her legs.

Tears rolled down Noki's face.

Gumus picked up Mina and carried her outside.

Mina closed her eyes.

When Mina opened her eyes she was immersed in water. A giant animal, again something she'd only heard about in stories, splashed through the water. It had long legs and a long neck and was munching on leaves from branches high above. Mina heard a snuffle and turned her head to see Noki still crying.

"They kept the zoo open. These animals are from all over Aririnkatata," Noki said as she wiped her nose.

Gumus raised his hand dripping with water and let it splash over Mina's head. "Bring me a large piece of cloth," he told Noki.

Mina didn't speak, didn't know when she would want to again. Her eyes drifted over the rich greenery, her other senses filled with the smell of flowers thick in the air, the buzz of insects and animals nearby. Across the pond where Mina floated, Mikachiari pulled a sobbing White hat from a house onto the patio and methodically ripped her apart.

Among the uppermost branches of the Chishikuku, Prezidan Jules floated in a clear bubble, one milky white eye darted about as his body twisted in pain. He was half the size of the other Asistan Ti gathered around him.

Blan Chapo Yon Sel knelt at his side weeping. "They have overrun Patri Peyi. Give me your blessing and I will drive them into the Bred Hav!"

Prezidan Jules took a small drag of air that sounded like rusty springs. His tiny hand broke through the bubble and touched Blan Chapo Yon Sel. "I would have been happy to make you the next Prezidan."

Blan Chapo Yon Sel's face turned as white as her clothes. "No—"

The Prezidan withdrew his hand and the bubble began to glow and then burst into a sprinkling of gold colored dust. Before the dust faded hundreds of popping sounds filled the air as Nwa Chapos, Black hats, filled the branches of the tree.

Where The Prezidan had vanished Nwa Chapo Yon Sel appeared.

"You don't deserve to be Prezidan! You have forsaken the Deyes nan Magic! Look at what has happened to Patri Peyi now!" Blan Chapo Yon Sel screamed.

Nwa Chapo Yon Sel called out to all the Asistan Ti. "I am your new Prezidan, Prezidan Boni." He reached forward and grabbed Blan Chapo Yon Sel's hand. "The White hats loyalty to Prezidan Jules has blinded you all." At his touch she relaxed. He tucked her hand into his waistband. "Hold on." To the rest he called out, "Nwa Chapos our exile has ended. Find every Blan Chapo still alive and protect them."

The new Prezidan Boni rose from the branch and floated out to the main courtyard in the center of Patri Peyi. Mikachiari and Faglar who had been dancing and singing stopped at the sight of Black hats floating down from Chishikuku.

A cry went up and weapons flew at the Asistan Ti. Black magic whistled through the air knocking Mikachiari and Faglar to the ground in bursts of color. Blan Chapos cast protection around the Nwa Chapos.

Prezidan Boni yelled from above, "Where is Teke?"

A Kertenkele he recognized carrying a Mikachiari in a sling across his chest spoke, "She's dead."

Noki hissed. More weapons sailed through the air and were swatted away with bursts from the hands of the Nwa Chapos.

"You cannot hurt us. The Gri Chapos are dead. The Blan Chapos are weakened and blind, but us," Prezidan Boni spread his hands toward the Nwa Chapos. "We're fine. We are leaving Patri Peyi. Every single Asistan 'Ti you kill from here on will be avenged." He drew close to Noki ignoring the screams and hisses from the Mikachiari. "I know you have five Ri's so talk your agitated sisters into settling down, or I'll find those Mikachiari babes and kill them now instead of later."

Luru flung herself forward from behind a small group of Mikachiari with dagger raised. Noki grabbed her by the waist. "No!"

Prezidan Boni rose into the air and bowed. "Orevwa, for now. I'm sure we'll see you soon in Enade."

## Country: Varlid, Nation: Unknown, City: Refuge

*To challenge who determines who lives, who dies, and how they live and die—that would be revolutionary." - Refuge diary*

Furstinna wiped the sweat from her brow. Growing food was hard work.

The soil in Refuge wasn't the best to start with. It was hard to find between the numerous rocks her hoe hit every other time she used it. Furstinna had learned a great deal about soil, how to make compost out of food scraps from the cafeteria and dead leaves and grass, whether it was alkaline or acidic, how deep it had to be to properly support plants. Goddess forbid you should ever walk on the mounded rows of soil and compact the earth. Her ears burned from the scolding she'd received from the 'earth steward'. Weeks afterward he still shot her looks of contempt.

That was just preparing the soil, the foundation for growing food. If done right then the work continued to planting, weeding, mulching, crop rotation, and the constructing, taking down and moving of cloches to extend the gardening season. Then there was the never ending battle with pests, insects and animals, looking for a free meal. There were also seeds to be saved in order to start the whole process over again for the next season.

It was mind numbing work. Furstinna stood up one day and looked out across the rows she'd help build. Until Furstinna had participated in this work duty she'd never realized what it took to feed a person let alone a group of people. Vegetables were at least five producing plants for each person. Five hundred people in Refuge equaled two thousand five hundred plants. This didn't account for fruits, trees, and tubers like potatoes and beets which

you would double and sometimes triple the amount per person. Then there was corn and grain to be planted.

The 'earth steward' took his job very seriously and Furstinna appreciated it, otherwise they would starve. Every opportunity was made to save and store food, but one bad season would wreak havoc on Refuge's carefully planned system. When she'd asked him if a crop season had ever failed he'd muttered, "We've been extremely lucky as long as I've lived here."

Furstinna had chewed holes in her cheeks to stop from speaking out during every discussion she heard around her. A general disdain for the Sudawa of Elyun and the Vakt of Manskliga. The argument against the Vakt were numerous. Too much money allocated, too many resources, too much government investment, for what? Furstinna had squeezed her eyes shut and thought. *To keep you free, to keep you safe, to keep you able to wander across Varlid to Refuge to set up your experiment in living*, she wanted to yell at them. *Do you really think you could have done that without the Vakt?*

Tuva had noticed Furstinna's discomfort and winked. When she was out working in the fields Tuva had picked up a hoe and started talking. "You shouldn't be afraid of voicing your opinions with others here. Conflict in society is inevitable and sometimes even desirable. I think the Manskliga have made the mistake of using the Vakt to negotiate all our conflicts instead of just the important ones because it is commonly thought that violence works quickly."

"We lost the Varlid war," Furstinna said. "Violence didn't work then at all."

"Do you think our cause was just?" Tuva asked.

"To hold on to lands that traditionally were ours against invaders, yes."

"What of the Vartalf and Padda? They held the land before the Manskliga rose to power."

Furstinna let her mouth slide into an easy smile. "That was before my time."

"What did we do to them to conquer this land, I wonder?"

"I'm sure our forefathers did whatever was necessary and we're here to enjoy the fruits of it so I can't very well condemn their choices."

"This is a conflict-filled world and societies should have the capability to defend themselves. Refuge is not waiting until the outside world is more cooperative or that forces like the Vakt disappear or that justice and equality exist before there is any action. There will always be a need for the Vakt."

Furstinna nodded in agreement.

"But," Tuva continued. "The use of violence is not always just. Especially when it is concentrated in the hands of the few. How many citizens of Manskliga participate in the Vakt?"

"A small percentage?" Furstinna guessed.

"A very small percentage. What if civilians were able to defend themselves?"

"You mean, arm everyone?"

"Goddess no, I can't hit the broad-side of a wall. Civilian defense would be nonviolent at its core. Surely Kunskap encouraged discussion such as this?"

"He disappeared right when I was supposed to become a part of these discussions. To be honest I don't see it's practicality in any kind of defense."

"Nonviolence is rooted in a citizen's general disposition to be stubborn, to be tempted to do what is forbidden, and to refuse to do what has been ordered."

"To what end?"

"We're talking about shifting away from reliance on the use of force as strength and instead a society that is strong and able to organize. Would you be willing to attack a society that is able to undermine the use of force?"

Furstinna shook her head. "I don't follow you."

Tuva patiently continued. "Nonviolence does not act less quickly than violence, it is not coming from a place of weakness. It can be so powerful that it disintegrates the power base of a government. All governments need the assistance of citizens to rule. Without this cooperation they have no power, no authority, no legitimacy."

"What do citizens control that the government can't simply take?"

"Oh, everything! They have to obey, cooperate, and assist a government with their knowledge, resources, skills. The wielding of power is a very fragile thing without the cooperation of those being ruled over."

"I thought nonviolence simply meant to not use violence. I don't see how civilians by just standing around not using violence can change anything let alone defend themselves from anything."

"There are two things that must exist for nonviolence to work. A citizen must have the willingness to defy authority and to work to undermine sources of power for that authority if need be. Remember, everyone is basically stubborn, likes to do what they've been told they cannot do and what it has been told is forbidden to do."

"You're assuming that a citizen's basic stubborn nature will do all that?"

"Maybe. Lets assume civilians are organized to disobey, distract, disorganize. They would be more focused on the original outcomes of the conflict rather than how much damage was done to the enemy. This would lead to fewer casualties and less destruction. It would reduce the size of the government and money spent on forces such as the Vakt or Sudawa. Right now all gains we've made have been due to spending and maintaining the Vakt. The Skal for instance, it was first produced so the Vakt commanders would have a faster way to communicate with each other. Civilians would have to ask themselves, what are we acting for and why?"

Furstinna chopped at the ground with her hoe. "It seems very... ."

"Unrealistic." Tuva said with a grin.

"You said it, not me." Furstinna kicked a rock in front of her than bent to pick it up. Better to carry it to the rock pile than have to dig it up later. "I just don't see any concrete actions that could be taken that would lead to change. Real change."

"It is easier to destroy than to create."

"I only had to work in the fields for one day to know that is absolutely true."

"So you never made a conscious decision to follow Kunskap?"

Furstinna looked out across Refuge. "No, I've been thrown in feet first I guess. I'm trying to understand. Even though the work is hard I enjoy it, sometimes."

Tuva said patting Furstinna on the shoulder. "As for concrete actions there is a list. We keep trying to add ideas. Read it sometime, maybe you'll add a few of your own. What's your next work assignment?" Tuva asked.

"I'm going to try and move inside for a while. Maybe take up sewing." Furstinna waved as she walked toward the shed being sure to drop the rock in the pile next to it.

Kvinna watched Furstinna and Tuva part ways while she tut-tutted some sheep close to her. Why the Dold were so worried about this conclave was beyond her. There wasn't a single weapon to be found. She'd used her time outdoors to search every part of the small island. There wasn't a part of Refuge she didn't have access to besides some private rooms. Kvinna had been silent and watchful. She'd listened to Furstinna rail against Refuge discussions, quick to offer a friendly ear.

Kvinna had confirmed that most of the citizens of Refuge harbored a crazy idea that ordinary citizens through nonviolence

could upset the balance of power in Varlid. The Stark Harskare family had ruled the Manskliga and most of Varlid for centuries. But the Refuge discussions talked about a time before Stark Harskare had come to rule. A time when communities worked together without a central ruler. A time when things were done differently. *Ridiculous*. Kvinna sighed. *A waste of time. This mission was an utter waste of her time.*

Kvinna thought the last act she'd committed towards righting the outcome of the Varlid War was months ago when she'd killed Lurazat. Even that was tied to Refuge and Kunskap and... she sighed again. It was time to leave Refuge but until their group was made full-fledged members, Kvinna didn't see how she could escape. She jabbed her stick at a sheep passing too close to her. The sooner she could get to the Dold and report back the sooner they could move forward to take back Varlid.

Caj had met with Maja in her room at least once a week for months since Befrielse's group had arrived. "We can't deny them member status for much longer without arousing suspicion," Caj said.

"Tuva just reported in. We believe Furstinna is the weakest member but not an infiltrator. Not someone who would have done any of this on purpose. Certainly not involved with Kunskap's disappearance or Lurazat's death." Maja asked.

"And the others? Several have worked well within Refuge, even paired off with members."

"Except Kvinna."

"She has kept to herself. Other than that she's been exemplary."

Silence ticked by. Maja rubbed her eyes, the first sign of weariness Caj had seen in years. "So we make them members?" Caj asked.

Yes, but I can't help feeling trouble will follow soon after."

Caj reached forward to rub her back. Maja took hold of his hand instead and gave it a squeeze. "It's time. They will become members and we will start moving out of Refuge," Maja said.

"Then this is what we've been working towards. Don't look so worried!"

"Not everyone will want to move back into the world. What if they're not ready? What will they do? How will they survive?"

Caj laughed. "The citizens here have more skills than most in Varlid. They'll make do and form communities. Galen are there for the settling."

"With the Vartalf and Padda, not to mention the Grampus?"

"We've learned as much as we can. There is no sense to what we've done if we never put it into practice. No one will be forced out of Refuge. This will simply be another option." Caj withdrew his hand from Maja's and stood. "I'm off to teach a class and make sure everyone is as ready as they can be."

Caj strolled to the hilltop where one hundred Refuge citizens sat waiting. He spotted Kvinna with Ganska in the front row. "Lets begin. I'm going to go through the phases one at a time, then you're going to repeat it back to a partner. Remember you need to be aware of the possibility of alienation from within and without. Also we're not talking about waiting for a change of attitude by those in power. The most likely outcome will be compromise on both sides. Nevertheless, nonviolent struggle can be so strong and skillfully targeted through the Phases and Ninety-nine Ways that it weakens the opposition or causes it's outright downfall. Above all plan your actions so that success is possible through your own actions and not relying on outside forces.

Phase one. Take an assessment of both sides. What is at stake? Analyze the different systems the population have at their disposal. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the conflict. Identify which source of power can be weakened or

removed. What is the time frame? Not everyone will participate at the same level all the time. Alright, take a moment and repeat this with your partner." Caj paced between pairs and small groups listening and offering comments.

Kvinna rolled her eyes.

Ganska giggled and pushed her shoulder. "Come on, you can do it. This is at least the fifth meeting I've been too."

Caj began again pausing after a recap of each Phase for the citizens to repeat back to each other. "Phase two. Don't miss the overall picture. Can your objectives be achieved in one campaign or does it need to be broken down? Maybe the objective is too broad, does that need to be changed? The Ninety-nine Ways is a list of methods but you'll need to decide which ones will work the best and for how long.

Phase three. Once you've selected those methods are you sure they can be implemented by the citizens you're working with? If not what do you need to change, strengthen? Are there outside influences you can use but not rely on?"

During this call and repeat break, Kvinna asked Ganska, "Why are we memorizing this? I thought all of it was written down in the Refuge library."

The corners of Ganska's mouth drew down as she shook her head. "I don't know. I think it's part of their overall plan not to have just one leader or even a small group of people with all the knowledge but rather spread it out as widely as possible."

Caj raised his voice. "Just two more Phases and then we're done. Phase four. When you plot your strengths and weaknesses on both sides of a conflict make sure you match them up in your favor. Look for methods and broader activities that strengthen the movement. Make sure all methods are conducted without violence. Plan for access to resources. Keep opponents off-balance by sticking to the methods of nonviolence. Act, don't react. If something isn't working, change it.

And finally Phase five. How did you do? Plan for the future you've created. Any questions?"

A voice in the back asked, "I've asked for a list of the Ninety-nine ways but they're saying it's been destroyed."

A disagreeable murmur rose up from the crowd.

"Yes, that is happening."

The murmur rose to angry shouts.

Caj held up his hands. "We've decided to move to an oral history instead of a written one. Just for the time being."

"You're saying we can't write it down?"

"For the time being we're asking nothing be written down. In the future this might change."

"What community discussion took place about this change? I must have missed it," a Manskliga stated followed by sounds of agreement from those around him.

Caj opened his mouth to speak, but someone shouted. "Look!" Caj turned. A huge ball of white light hung in the air above the island.

Kvinna grabbed Ganska's hand. The huge ball of light started to descend. She heard cries of 'Run!' but there was no where to run. The ball of light grew bigger. It was going to descend on Refuge. Kvinna covered her eyes and when it didn't seem the light could get any brighter, the world exploded.

Kvinna squinted as her vision cleared and particles of soil and rock rained down on her. She shook her head since what her eyes were telling her couldn't possibly exist. There was a large chunk of earth above her. There were Manskliga pulling others up. Then there was a scream and a Manskliga went hurtling past her. Kvinna swiveled her head to follow his descent when Ganska cried out.

"Kvinna! Help me!"

Kvinna threw herself halfway off the edge of the chunk of earth she was on and they grabbed forearms. "Hold on, I've got you!"

Kvinna couldn't tell which side was up. The island of Refuge appeared to have broken up into large chunks. Instead of the whole island sliding off into the Bred Hav, masses of intact pieces floated at various levels in the air. Amazingly the city of Refuge itself was intact. Kvinna started to pull Ganska up when a violent tremor rocked the chunk they were on. Ganska lost her footing. The only thing stopping her fall to the depths below was Kvinna's arm. "Just hold on!" Kvinna strained to pull her up.

"Tell Furstinna, I'm sorry," Ganska cried.

Kvinna shouted, another Manskliga joined to help pull Ganska to safety. "Tell her yourself!" she said as they both lay panting on solid ground.

Kvinna walked the edge of the torn off chunk of Refuge. Other different sized chunks floated past until eventually they slowed to a stop. They were stranded. There was no way to jump to another piece, they floated too far apart. Other citizens of Refuge were in similar situations. They yelled back and forth to each other, all ignorant of what had caused the destruction. Kvinna knew. It had to be the Vapen. Why hadn't they invaded? Why blow apart something they didn't understand or even know about? Why not wait for her to report in? With those questions heavy on her mind she lay down in the middle of the floating island and fell asleep.

Ganska's shouting woke her. Kvinna sat up to see a Manskliga waving to them from one side of the floating island. A shiny white portal had opened up. An exact copy of the portal she'd used to first enter Refuge.

"Hurry! These aren't stable. I don't know how long it'll stay open," the Manskliga yelled.

Kvinna stumbled to her feet and they ran and dove head first through the portal. She landed on solid ground on the other side. Ganska right behind her. A small group of Manskliga were there to greet them. Kvinna learned that while she slept a force of Vakt had entered Refuge through the main portal. The main bridge and the city of Refuge itself were still standing. After the Vakt entered the city, portals began appearing on the different floating sections. They stayed open for a short amount of time and seemed to have a pattern they were still trying to figure out.

"All we can do is wait. We're trying to work our way back to the city and gather as many survivors as we can."

The fields that Furstinna and the others had labored so long in were broken up and scattered. It is easier to destroy than to create. When they landed on one of these floating islands they gathered as much food as they could and waited to jump. The river that wound through Refuge now cascaded down through several floating islands so that it resembled a giant, hand-carved waterfall. Once they were within a portal of reaching Refuge, Kvinna looked back at what was left. The land was still beautiful but broken like a colorful picture reflected in a fractured mirror.

The Vakt greeted them when they stepped through the final portal. Kvinna recognized Dold operatives among the leaders and knew better than to draw attention to herself. When they wanted her they would make a scene and separate her from the group.

The remaining food was confiscated and they were herded into the city. On the bottom floor, Maja stood beneath the tree, a noose around her neck. Nervous glances and whispers spread among those gathered, the Vakt had killed all the Elyun and the Mikachiari had been moved to another area.

A Vakt stepped forward from the shadows below and set his foot on the stool that Maja was standing on. He tilted it making

Maja scramble to keep her footing. Silence descended like a blanket.

"Now that I have your attention. You have all been declared traitors to Rike. However, we are prepared to show leniency to those that assist us. We have entered this illegal stronghold but it seems there is a key needed to get out. What is that key?"

Maja's voice was strained as she struggled to answer. "You damaged the portal when you attacked us. We're all trapped here." Deep hollows surrounded her eyes. She had stood there for at least a day if not longer.

"What used to be the key? We won't know it doesn't work if we don't try." The Vakt played with the stool again.

Caj cried out from somewhere on Kvinna's left. "I need her to make a new one!"

Kvinna searched the crowds for the other members of her group, Befrielse, Hem and Furstinna.

The Vakt still toyed with the stool. Maja gave a weary cry as she almost lost her footing again. Soft crying echoed through the chamber.

"I can't make a new one without her," Caj insisted. The Vakt looked doubtful but righted the stool and with a flick of his wrist several more Vakt sprang forward to release Maja. She dropped to the ground exhausted. Vakt surged toward Caj and seized him and they disappeared into the bottom level.

Vakt tore through the crowds with sabers and clubs. Kvinna was surprised how the citizens kept their calm. No one resisted. Kvinna managed to catch sight of Befrielse before she was grabbed by her hair and forced to her knees.

"This one," someone said.

Ganska tried to grab her arms but a Vakt struck her down with a club. Kvinna's hands were tied behind her back and she was marched off to a room at the back of the second floor. On the way she heard snippets of conversation. One Vakt was complaining the citizens were unarmed. No weapons had been

found. "There's no threat here," he said to a companion who agreed.

When the door to her room opened a Vakt strode in and smacked her several times with a club in full view of those in the hall. He then turned and closed the door. "I'm Mitt from Dold. Had to make it look good," he said helping her into a chair. "Why haven't you reported in?"

"I didn't have the key."

"Why?"

"We weren't full members yet so they'd withheld that bit of information. Why did you attack?"

"Above my pay grade. They said strike, so we struck. It might have something to do with the downfall of the Asistan Ti."

"What?"

"Patri Peyi has fallen to the Mikachiari. The surviving Asistan Ti have fled to Enade to seek sanctuary. When that happened we received orders to attack."

Kvinna sat mute as she let the news sink in.

"Who knows how to make a key?"

"Everyone except the group I came with."

"That's why threatening her didn't phase anyone. And the other Manskliga who spoke up doesn't need her."

"I don't know what it takes to make a key. Maybe it does take two of them."

"Are any of your group still alive?"

"Ganska and Befrielse. I don't know about the others. Look Refuge practices nonviolence, they won't resist you."

"Don't be foolish, they already have. Where are the weapons?"

"We turned ours over to them when we arrived but I've searched the whole place and can't find where they've hidden them."

"Who would know?"

"Probably the two you just took away to make the key."

"Find your group, if you can and stay with them. If we need you, we'll get you."

Mitt walked her out the door and down the hall. Right before Kvinna was to join a group of citizens Mitt untied her hands and shoved her forward. Several helped Kvinna to her feet. The Vakt moved through separating them into smaller and smaller groups. Those that stepped forward to ask about food, water, or medicines were shoved or beaten back.

Kvinna asked about Befrielse, Hem, Furstinna. Had they survived? There was a commotion and Kvinna saw Mitt tossing a Manskliga about, Furstinna. He was putting on a show so everyone would see she'd been singled out and removed.

Just before they were moved into rooms for the night. Befrielse and Hem appeared. They clasped hands with Kvinna.

"I saw them take Furstinna away," Befrielse said.

Kvinna nodded.

"Have you seen Ganska?" Hem asked.

"We were separated but she's here somewhere," Kvinna reassured them.

Befrielse and Hem looked dumbstruck, the adventure was not supposed to end like this. A club separated them into different rooms. Once inside the citizens whispered amongst themselves. Had all the copies of the Phases and Ninety-nine Ways been destroyed? There was a grin chuckle of satisfaction as someone explained the cooks were fueling their fires with them, so yes.

Conversation drifted from topic to topic. How did this happen? How did they find Refuge? What was going to happen next? How to resist, refuse to leave the room or once out refuse to move? Wait for a signal and join in once someone had decided seemed to be the only solution.

Two days later Kvinna was once again standing on a balcony overlooking the bottom floor. This time it was Hem balanced on a stool with a noose around his neck under the tree. The Vakt that had addressed the crowd earlier propped one foot on the

stool and pointed in front of him. "These two have failed to produce a way out. I know for certain, he," the Vakt thumped Hem on the chest with his club. "Does not know how to make a key and doesn't know a way out of this place." The Vakt pushed on the stool with his foot. "Therefore he is of no use to us."

Kvinna squeezed her eyes shut and gasped. She was the reason they knew Hem was of no use. She grabbed a handful of her shirt and rubbed her thumb over the fabric. It was just a threat, Caj wouldn't let Hem come to harm.

"We did make the key and it doesn't work anymore because you damaged the portal," Caj yelled so everyone could hear.

"Nonsense. Even animals don't build their burrows with only one way in and out. There is another way. Tell me now or he dies."

"We need more time to figure it out. That's all we're asking for."

The Vakt drew back his foot and kicked the stool. Hem swung limp from the end of the rope, his neck broken.

Kvinna felt herself shoved forward by the crowd her eyes still squeezed shut. She'd known Hem since being assigned to Kunskap's class. Deception, destruction, death, these were possibilities she'd accepted by joining the Dold.

A small explosion and a flash of sparks shot from Caj and Maja's direction. A symbol illuminated the air above the tree. Kvinna squinted and strained to remember where she'd seen the symbol before. There was a push from the citizens who outnumbered the Vakt in one direction. Those who could jumped to the bottom floor off of the ramps.

Kvinna felt a firm grip on her shoulder turn her around in the direction of the bottom floor. "This way," Befrielse yelled above the chaos.

The ranks of Manskliga fell all around them from being run through with a sword or beaten down by clubs. Through the stampede Kvinna caught sight of the symbol over the top of

double doors at the end of one curve of the great room on the first floor. So this is where they were headed but why? Kvinna hung on to Befrielse and tried to ask but the noise around them was too great.

In what seemed like an eternity Kvinna was dragged past the doors into complete darkness. Everyone that hadn't been knocked down or killed shuffled forward blindly. She screamed as the ground disappeared beneath and she dropped. Water closed over her head. Kvinna rose flailing in the darkness. More splashes followed as others dropped into the water. A hand grabbed the material at the back of her neck and she followed. Her feet touched solid, slippery stone and she made her way up and out of the pool. "What is this?"

"The way out," Befrielse answered. "Just a few more feet!"

Light flickered ahead. As they approached, Kvinna could make out figures. When she recognized them by their robes, she jerked out of Befrielse's grasp. "Jakel worshipers!"

The push of the crowd behind her threw her forward again into Befrielse. "It's alright. We can pass as long as we are unarmed." True to his word the figures parted letting the unarmed Manskliga pass without a glance. The figures were covered head to toe in a brown robe that disguised their figure and features. Their hands were clasped together within the folds of their sleeves.

"And what happens if you're armed?"

"We're not going to stick around to see."

They made their way through trenches, the middle sunk down two feet and was filled with water. They had to wade through because Jakel worshipers stood on the sides funneling them along. Faint screams followed them from behind.

It seemed like hours before the former citizens of Refuge came to a large staircase that wound it's way up. Two Jakel worshipers guarded the bottom. Kvinna started to climb. The staircase climbed higher and higher until Kvinna's thighs began to ache.

There were no more screams or sounds of killing, just the dull trod of footsteps upward.

When they reached the end of the stairs they found themselves in a cave. The survivors pushed forward until the Galen Trask opened up before them.

Trask was heavily wooded. The trees were massive with long strands of moss dripping down off it's branches. Many collapsed on the ground, crying and worn out from the ordeal.

"We can't stop here," Befrielse shouted. Others took up his rallying cry. A Manskliga removed a rod with a shield hammered to the front from the ground close to the exit and waved it at the front of the crowd. "Follow this!" he cried.

They continued on foot stopping often as some dropped from fatigue and had to be carried. Kvinna noticed others pointing out notches in trees, what she could only assume were markers leading to their destination. Refuge had always planned for the inevitable. She never guessed Befrielse had known all this time. He had been taken into the confidence of those in Refuge.

There was another hike through a cave and at the other end there was a large clearing. In the center stood a clear lake. "We're here," Befrielse said as he collapsed.

As soon as they were rested Kvinna plied him with questions. "How did you get a Jakel worshiper's robe?"

"I didn't kill one, that's for sure. There's no reason to know now, Refuge is gone."

"How did you know about the escape plan?"

Befrielse ignored the question. "What I want to know is how the Vakt found out Hem didn't know the way out." Befrielse asked between clenched teeth.

Kvinna looked down to gather her thoughts then said, "Do you think Furstinna told them? You saw them taking her away." Kvinna pointed to the fading bruises on her face. "They beat me who knows what they did to her." Kvinna rushed on. "I've been thinking. Kunskap disappeared right after Ganska invited

Furstinna into the group. When we were searching through Sanddyner she was never convinced we were doing the right thing."

Befrielse's jaw tightened. "I lost track of Ganska."

"She may have made it out. Lets look for her." Kvinna stood and looked around. High mountain walls surrounded the lake on all sides. "And where are we?"

"In the heart of Grampus territory."

Kvinna gasped. "What? Why?"

"I know some of the inner circle like Maja had dropped the priority of making contact with the Grampus but that was the main reason Refuge was started in the first place and there were those that didn't let that go." Befrielse grunted as he stood. "They did it. They deciphered their language. We can finally talk to them."

"But will they talk to us?"

"We'll find out. With Refuge gone we have no where else to turn."

**Brief Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in Crowning Fantasy Book 1, so far. . .** a more detailed background is found at the end of this book.

The Elyun, Manskliga, and Asistan Ti established a truce at the end of the Varlid War. For this reason a neutral city called Enade was built and maintained jointly by all three. The wild territories in between each of the nations called collectively - Galen - are areas of free range. Outposts are maintained in the two closest Galen to each nation. The nations alternate guarding the one at Sanddyner between Dohla and Rike. Only the roads leading in and out of Enade are maintained and safe.

**Country: Varlid, Nation: Joint Forces of Varlid,  
City: Enade**

*Negotiation is usually based on the capacity for power and the assessment of whether that power can be leveraged. - Refuge diary*

Enade had been built to impress. The archways, roads, walkways and buildings loomed over all who entered. Large enough for giants, the gleaming city of stone made the citizens of Varlid seem insignificant.

The city was laid out in a circle with ever smaller concentric circles culminating in a tower where joint dignitaries from Rike, Dohla, and Patri Peyi were housed and meetings took place. In the chaotic weeks after Patri Peyi fell to the Mikachiari, the Asistan Ti led by the new Prezidan Boni had taken up residence inside Enade.

The Mikachiari sent Luru, Noki, and Gumus carrying Mina. Mina remained mute and barely responsive. Luru had sent Mikachiari to search for the High Priestess, they needed leadership and security in order to bring the five Hopes back. Luru hated to think all the Priestesses were gone which only left Tado who as yet had refused to leave Rasima.

Gumus pounded the ground with every step sending tremors Luru felt through the soles of her shoes. He was contained fury. Documents left behind by the Asistan Ti indicated the invasion of Buyuk Col by the Bocek was not a random event. The Elyun may not have planned it however they did nothing to intervene. Luru couldn't stop him from coming and dreaded to think what he might do in Enade. Her stomach lurched as they approached the gates.

The guards gave them a once over and asked them to state their business.

Luru cleared her throat. "We seek a council meeting to recognize the sovereignty of Nokashikatekiariku recently liberated from the Asistan Ti."

The guard drew his head back in surprise then raised a hand to his ear and spoke. After a brief pause he addressed Luru, "Wait here."

Gumus tensed and Luru stepped directly in front of him. "Gumus, I understand you are upset and want answers. Remember we were the ones who shared the information we found. We didn't have to do that. If you jeopardize this negotiation... ." Luru let her threat hang in the air.

Gumus's jaw muscle ticked. He gave a long, slow blink then nodded his head.

Five Vakt appeared and ordered the group to follow them. When it was clear they would not be taken to the dignitary's quarters at the top of the tower, Luru stopped. "I am asking for a council meeting. I expect to be lodged at the tower."

One of the Vakt, a tall, gaunt Manskliga turned. "You do realize the Asistan Ti have taken refuge here. They are a formal member of the council. In the interests of diplomacy, we have been ordered to offer you accommodation elsewhere. I'm sure you'll find it comfortable."

"The Asistan Ti are no longer members of the council since they occupy no territory. I'll be happy to take their quarters."

The Vakt gave a small bow. "I hold no authority. Let me see you to your quarters and then a council member can deal with you directly. I'm sure you can appreciate the delicacy of the matter."

Noki stroked Luru's back. Luru gave a curt nod and motioned for the Vakt to lead on.

The quarters were spacious and on the lower level. Food and drink were served. The Vakt who'd addressed them early said,

"You are to wait here for a council member. If you try to approach the tower before this time, you will be stopped." He drew close to Gumus. "If any violence ensues you can be sure it will receive a swift answer in kind."

After resting they lounged by one of the fountains in the marketplace also on the lower level. Goods from all over Varlid were available and the place was packed with sellers, buyers, and gossipers. The latest news in Varlid was discussed openly. Dong Tochi and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li had fallen without the Asistan Ti powered Suk Chae. The Aventyrare were now flooding the port towns and Galen across Varlid. Riots had broken out in areas and travelers were warned to stick to the roads and even then to travel in large groups and be prepared to fight.

"We were lucky we got here before all Jakel broke loose," Noki said.

"We're not lucky. Mikanokichikata is hardly secure much less the rest of our homeland. If an organized group of Aventyrare were to invade...," Luru let her voice trail off. "They have until tomorrow to formally recognize us. If not, teka torin to the lot of them, we head home and focus on rebuilding."

"The Mikachiari need this truce with the Manskliga and Elyun if not some guarantee the Asistan Ti will not return. You can't just give up without these assurances," Gumus said shifting the sling that held the still unresponsive Mina.

"The Faglar are our allies," Noki's tone made it more of a question than a statement.

Gumus and Luru shook their heads.

"They have been badly weakened. Don't misunderstand, they are willing, it will take time. It will take time for all of us to be fully functional."

Vakt surrounding a small group entered the marketplace. The gaunt one from earlier spotted Luru, Noki, and Gumus by the fountain and headed toward them. He did not look happy.

"How many more of your kind can we expect to receive in Enade?" he asked as if he'd eaten something particularly sour.

Before Luru could ask for clarification, he sighed and waved his hand. The Vakt separated and Luru squealed, "Batu!"

The gaunt Vakt dismissed the others and stood to the side hands clasped in front of him. Batu, Kazi and several others from Rasima hugged and stroked Luru and Noki.

"How did you escape Tado?" Luru asked.

"There has been a split within the group in Rasima for some time. When Mina was compromised it galvanized the others to join. It was almost an even split between the two."

"Where are they?"

"They're on their way to Nokashikatekiariku! We longed to join them to see for ourselves but branched off when we heard you were going to Enade."

The group squealed and hugged and stroked again. Gumus fidgeted in the background still unaccustomed to all the touching that went on between the Mikachiari.

"What happened to Mina?" Kazi whispered dreading the answer.

"She's alive!" Noki exclaimed. "Here." She pointed to the sling across Gumus.

Kazi practically sprang at Gumus who backed up on reflex. His legs hit the edge of the fountain and he sat down hard. "Settle, she's not well," he snapped.

Kazi scrambled onto his lap and opened the sling to take a look. Mina lay serenely and Kazi smiled and reached in to grab her friend. When she saw the vacant look in Mina's eyes, her face crumpled. "What's wrong with her?"

Noki said, "She's been through a lot."

"Why is Mina with him?" Kazi jerked her thumb at Gumus.

"He takes care of her," Luru said.

"I can help take care of her," Kazi said as she climbed into the sling.

Gumus waved his hands in exasperation. "I can't be carting around two of you!"

Batu glanced at the gaunt Vakt still standing to the side. She grabbed Luru's arm her voice hushed. "I have good news. The High Priestess is traveling with our group as well." She widened her eyes slightly to keep Luru from saying more in front of the Vakt.

"That is good news," Luru said. To the Vakt she said, "I'm sorry we had no idea this group would be joining us from Rasima."

"So I see. The same arrangement applies. Please inform your sisters."

Luru gave a slight bow as he moved off then they gathered around and Luru and Batu brought everyone up to date on what had happened so far. Batu decided it was safer to tell them about the High Priestess out in the open than inside their room where they might be monitored.

The High Priestess had sought sanctuary in a place called Refuge. She had hid her true identity while living there. She happened to be in Free Port Sanddyner when the place was attacked by the Manskliga and nearly destroyed.

"She's dropped her official name and goes by Riki now," Batu added.

"Why?"

Batu shrugged. "She hasn't explained much except that she learned a great deal in Refuge and was changed."

After they were done catching up they retreated to their room to wait.

Mina had just started to respond a bit to Kazi when the gaunt Vakt came knocking. Several stewards followed him carrying freshly laundered clothes.

"A council meeting has been called for tomorrow right after lunch. Who may I say is representing the Mikachiari?"

"I am," Luru said. "But I will require Batu, Noki, Gumus and Mina to attend as well."

"There is only one dignitary and secretary allowed at the meeting."

"Batu, then. However Gumus will be attending with a matter that concerns the Elyun and the Kertenkele."

The Vakt shook his head. "Whatever that is will require a separate meeting—"

Gumus rose to his full height, his eyes and torso aflame. "I will speak tomorrow. There really isn't anything you can do to stop me."

The Vakt narrowed his eyes. "If they have time to hear you, make sure it is brief and to the point." He arched an eyebrow as his eyes looked Gumus up and down. "Do you require a change of clothes?"

"Yes."

The Vakt sniffed and motioned for the stewards to place the clothes on the table. "They will deliver them shortly."

The next day the group picked at their lunch. Kazi wandered around the market to see what she could hear and the news across Varlid was not good. An Aventyrare ship had tried to dock at the Enade port but was denied. Some of the crew had hurled rotted food at the Vakt while others had climbed up on the railing of the ship and relieved themselves in the harbor before they sailed away.

"There are reports of clashes in the Bred Hav between pirates, Aventyrare, and the nations. The trip back home will not be easy," Kazi worried.

"Pirates were bad before on the way to Dong Tochi. Now they'll be circling the nations and the ports," Gumus said.

"Why doesn't the Asistan Ti just make another Suk Chae?" Noki asked. No one knew the answer.

Luru threw open the door when the Vakt knocked. "I take it you are ready," he stated.

"More than ready," Luru said as the small group left. Gumus looked back at Kazi.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of her. She's almost ready to start talking again. I can feel it," Kazi said.

They walked to a heavily guarded door none in the group had seen before. Inside was a lift that was pulled upwards by several more Vakt. At first they were unable to move because of Gumus's weight. Gumus sent the Vakt to help with the other pulley while he maned one by himself. They rose upward until they reached the top.

The upper tier of Enade was made entirely of glossy white stone. In the center of the circular area was a fountain made out of black stone. When the sunlight hit it at a certain angle, rainbows reflected off it's surface. To the left was a market place. Unlike the rowdy ones on the lower levels this one was quiet. Well dressed citizens traveled between the stalls with servants carrying baskets.

The group walked around to the right until they came to a hallway on their right. There was a large staircase and further down the hallway they could see a garden. Beyond that were the living quarters for the dignitaries from the nations.

The gaunt Vakt led the way up the stairs and to a room. He threw open the double doors. Seated in the council room were a Manskliga, an Elyun with their secretaries. Prezidan Boni also sat at the table with Blan Chapo Yon Sel at his side.

Luru felt the skin around her mouth pull tight. She wanted to snarl. Instead she forced herself to relax. Batu's tail didn't stop twitching. Gumus's fists were clenched. Luru took in a deep breath and realized no place had been prepared for them at the table.

"Are we to stand during this meeting?"

"I'm afraid so. We'll make it brief."

Luru cocked her head to one side. "Brief? I think we'll need some time."

The Manskliga cleared his throat. No one introduced themselves.

"I'm Luru from Nokashikatekiariku—"

"We know very well who you are." Prezidan Boni said. Blan Chapo Yon Sel cringed at the sound of Luru's voice.

"We are here to be recognized as a nation once again in Varlid," Luru said.

"There are treaties in place between the Manskliga, Elyun and Asistan Ti. We have not received instructions to alter them from the heads of our nations. I'm sure you've heard of the fall of Dong Tochi. Our nations have more pressing matters to deal with across Varlid," The Manskliga said.

"We are prepared to take our place at the council and assume the cost and joint maintenance of Enade and the outposts," Luru replied.

"That is not necessary," The Elyun said. "Since the Asistan Ti have been ousted from Patri Peyi. They have asked and have been given Enade and the Trask and Falt Galen to manage. They are going to assume all costs of running these areas which relieves the burden from Rike and Dohla to focus on other issues."

"The Asistan Ti are still going to be recognized as a nation?" Luru asked.

"Yes," Prezidan Boni asked. "Or would you rather we be eradicated, left to wander Varlid?"

"For now I'll keep to myself what I would like to see happen to your kind. I only ask that if the Asistan Ti are allowed to stay on the council that the Mikachiari also have their status restored. We would also seek assurances that our borders will be respected."

The Manskliga motioned to his secretary. "Is that your formal request?"

Luru curled her lips back to reveal her teeth. "Yes. And that all Mikachiari be repatriated immediately."

"My secretary will make a note of it and pass this along to the heads of our nations."

"In the meantime we will leave a dignitary here—"

"That won't be necessary."

Before Luru could argue further, Gumus moved forward and threw a sheaf of papers in front of the Elyun. "The Asistan Ti left behind some things in their haste to get out of Nokashikatekiariku."

The Elyun sat motionless.

"It seems the Bocek carried out their attack on the Kertenkele with if not outright assistance from, encouragement by, the Elyun."

The Elyun swallowed and scooted back in his chair. "I don't know anything of this matter. I don't even know if these documents are legitimate."

Gumus shoved them across to Prezidan Boni. "Maybe you can help explain?"

"These records are from Prezidan Jules who has passed to the Deyes nan Magic. I have no knowledge of them nor do I care."

"Then I will inform my brothers and I'm sure they will be requesting a place at this council as well in the coming months."

The Elyun looked sideways at Gumus. "Onyx Ay has declared you dead and the Elyun will not permit your presence within Dohla."

"Stop me."

"You can't take on the whole Sudawa of Elyun."

"So stop me."

"That's enough," The Manskliga said. "This council is not open to threats from outsiders. Vakt!"

"What about our assurances?" Luru asked.

"Return to your homeland. I'm sure in due time a decision will be reached."

"We are at war then?"

"Nothing has been decided at this council. We've merely taken your requests and will present them to our respective nations. I realize this is new to you but there is a process."

The dignitaries and their secretaries stood up from the table and without another word left the room through a door in the back.

"This way," the gaunt Vakt said as he stood just outside of the double doors and directed Luru's group to exit.

"Teka! Teka torin!" Luru cursed as soon as they were outside. She marched past the Vakt and everyone but Gumus struggled to keep up.

"Excuse me!" The Vakt called out but Luru ignored him and instead of the lift made for the stairs that would eventually wind them down to the last level.

Noki and Kazi were quickly brought up to speed when they returned to their quarters.

"We're leaving now. Noki go get supplies at the market," Luru said.

"It's not safe to travel at night," Noki said.

"We have Gumus."

"I'm afraid not, Luru. I must go to Dohla. Kirmizi has walked in blind to the Elyun's plans and I have no idea what Onyx Ay will do. They may be in danger."

"What about Mina?"

"She is responding to Kazi more than she's responded to me in days. I'll build a litter so you can take her with you. I'm sorry. I wouldn't do this but it's important. Maybe you should stay here until I return?"

"I doubt they'll put us up for that long and we have to get back as well since the High Priest—Riki, has returned. She needs to know what has happened here as soon as possible. We need to figure out what to prepare for first."

"I have a favor to ask."

"Of course, if I can."

"Can I have assurances the Kertenkele would be welcome among the Mikachiari?"

Luru looked around the room. "I have no final authority but as far as I'm concerned, the Kertenkele will always be welcome."

"I'll leave tonight," Gumus said picking up his few belongings. "Rest and take off first thing in the morning. Travel only by day, stick to the road and stay with a caravan if you can."

"We'll be fine. We only have to clear the Falt Galen. After that we're in Aririnkatata and the Faglar are in charge. You have a much longer journey and if the Elyun council member was speaking the truth you will be in hostile territory much of the way."

"I know the mines. It's just a matter of staying clear of Padda."

"Be careful. I'm sure Mina will be waiting for you."

Gumus made no reply. He brushed Mina's cheek with a fingertip and then he was gone.

## Country: Varlid, Nation: Dohla, City: Rasima

*Every game of skill teaches a lesson that must be learned about war: use your forces wisely with every bit of intelligence at your disposal, otherwise you will lose. - Manskliga scholar*

Gumus traveled back to Dohla a different route than how he'd left. If Mina hadn't been with him he would have taken this route to escape but thought it was too dangerous for Mina with Padda using the tunnels. Now he didn't care for anyone's safety. Not even his own. If he found Padda he would attack them and kill them.

The Elyun mining operations followed along the Great Nahara's underground tributaries that had carved out tunnels long ago and then been widened by Padda. In Slat, instead of heading southeast towards Zeroob sahaerat Gumus turned eastward to an abandoned mine shaft. Once there he was able to grab a southeast tributary ending up at the bottom of the Great Nahara. This way he bypassed the outpost between Zeroob sahaerat and Slat Galen and the other one at the Great Nahara.

Gumus sat down to rest and think about his next move. He could eventually find a tributary that would lead up to the surface. Dil Hill might be the safest place to get a feel for what was going on with the Kertenkele and how Kirmizi and Mavi had been received. The problem was he had no idea when the Kertenkele would gather at Dil. He couldn't recall any upcoming ceremonies. That would still leave him outside Rasima and he would have to return here to start over. Or he could make his way north into Shimel sahaerat and join in one of the mining camps returning to Rasima and with luck meet up with Buclu who might be sympathetic. The biggest hurdle in this plan would

be Padda. The last option was to follow the main tributary into Rasima but Gumus liked this option the least. If the gates were closed and he had no reason to think otherwise he would drown or be dumped out into the Bred Hav before he could find a way to enter Rasima.

The shadows grew long as mist from the river drenched his skin. Gumus drew his great axe and stashed it between two rocks. He fingered the axe handle reluctantly leaving it behind. He should have felt an over-powering hatred for Onyx after seeing his name in the records left behind by the Asistan Ti. Gumus was determined Onyx and the Elyun would finally pay for the downfall of the Kertenkele. Above him, ages ago, he had laid out under the stairs with Mina. Gumus had feared turning into a monster then. Now he was comfortable in his role by Mina's side for however long she needed him. He even dared to hope that his brothers could build a life with the Mikachiari and Faglar.

His mind made up, Gumus set off to enter Shimel sahaerat and intercept a mining group.

Unknown to all the brothers in his care, Onyx Ay never walked alone. The ghosts of his mate and his daughter followed him day and night. He had drug their bodies across the Buyuk Col until there was nothing left. Their bones lay scattered across the sand. Sometimes, especially during the ceremonies on Dil Hill, the ghosts of all the mates and daughters would hover close. Onyx knew why they haunted him and accepted his fate. He still had many years yet to live with what he had done.

Kirmizi and Mavi had returned to Dohla. At first Onyx was over-joyed. Then they began to speak of a way to control the madness brought on by the Cinsel Iliski. They mentioned Gumus and how he had recovered. Only Onyx's most trusted followers helped him drug and lock Kirmizi and Mavi in the

cages on Dil Hill. He told the rest they had moved on. Gumus had to stay dead. There was no cure for the Cinsel Iliski, even with Kirmizi's procedure the Kertenkele would become unstable and dangerous. Onyx had controlled many more through his teachings. Kirmizi and Mavi had also lost their mates and daughters. He had hoped given time they would see the error of their ways.

Things had not returned to normal. The news reached Dohla of the Mikachiari winning against the Asistan Ti and driving them out of their homeland. The Faglar were free once again. Not long after a full-blown riot erupted in the Ashiha Esarotarahis house. A small group of Mikachiari armed themselves and escaped to join the rest of their sisters. Onyx tried to approach Tado and offer some way to work together in the future. Tado had refused to even hear him out.

The Sudawa had payed him a visit and let it be known they would not accept him losing control over the Kertenkele as Tado had lost control over the Mikachiari under her care. Onyx was left with no choice, he had to get rid of Kirmizi and Mavi before anyone knew they were still alive or heard their heresy.

Onyx's mind was occupied with all of this as he plodded through the Kertenkele area of Rasima. The full-blown cries of Kertenkele from the mines brought him up short. A tremor of horror passed through him. *It can't be.*

Ahead, Gumus Ay marched out of the mines, his brothers fanning out behind him. Their chests were glowing, their eyes bright swirls of yellow, orange, and red flame. Gumus was spreading the Cinsel Iliski to the Kertenkele who had not mated. What Onyx had been trying to prevent all these years had come to pass.

The madness of the Ofkelenmek had begun.

Crowning Fantasy Book 2 and 3 will be coming soon in 2016. Contact the author at [coralrussellbooks @ gmail.com](mailto:coralrussellbooks@gmail.com)

## Areas of Varlid:

Nation of Dohla, capital Rasima on the Bred Hav:

Shimel sahaerat

Mining operations on the edge of the great desert, El Kebida.

Minor strongholds of Padda.

Zeroob sahaerat

Dil Hill

Northwest Slat Galen

West Waha

Slat Galen:

Southeast Zeroob sahaerat

Northwest Sanddyner

Northeast Trask Galen

Sanddyner, city Free Port Sanddyner on the Bred Hav:

Northeast Hojder Galen

Southeast Slat Galen

South Portal to Refuge

Hojder Galen

North Rike

South Sanddyner

Nation Rike, capital Fond on the Bred Hav:

South Hojder Galen

Numerous caves that lead to Grampus strongholds and other areas of Varlid.

Trask Galen

Southeast Hojder

Northeast Enade

Enade, Jointly held capital of Varlid on the Bred Hav

East Falt Galen

Falt Galen  
West Enade  
East Aririnkatata  
Aririnkatata  
Faglar stronghold  
Port Nomoshichi (Port Plaj) on the Bred Hav  
East Nokahikatekiariku (Patri Peyi)  
Nokashikatekiariku (Patri Peyi), capital Mikanokichikata (Vil  
Peyi) on the Bred Hav  
West Aririnkatata  
East El Kebida

## Detailed Background of the races and main characters of Varlid in Crowning Fantasy Book 1, so far. . . \*\*\*Warning, contains spoilers.\*\*\*

### THE ELYUN

During the Varlid War the Elyun invaded and captured the area of Dohla bordered by the Bred Hav and El Kebida. Their capital is Rasima. Their language is Loha. Their nation has taken in two different races: Kertenkele and Mikachiari. The Kertenkele immigrated to Dohla after the Bocek invasion of Buyuk Col. They mine the minerals, precious metals and stones for the Elyun. The Mikachiari immigrated after their homeland was invaded by the Asistan Ti during the Varlid War. Sudawa are the military of Dohla.

The nation Dohla consists of three areas - Shimel Sahaerat, Zeroob Sahaerat, Waha. A river with underground tributaries runs through Dohla - The Great Nahara. They accept the Varlid Goddess Gudina but also worship their God Gala.

Elyun in Rasima:

Emperor Rehis Abja

Sayid Esarotarahis

Ashiha Esarotarahis

Lurazat Esarotarahis

Phrases in Loha:

Curse you - Loana

Bless you - Miralikalafike

Beseha Gala - Enjoy your meal

### THE KERTENKELE

Kertenkele lived in vast underground caverns and tunnels in the great desert, El Kebida, called Buyuk Col. An insect-like

species, Bocek, infested the tunnels and laid their eggs in the wombs of the female Kertenkele, eventually wiping out the female race. The Kertenkele made the 'Sabah Yuruyusu' 'March of Morning' to Rasima and laid their lives before the Elyun to be used as they saw fit. Kertenkele live hundreds of years but they will eventually die out since. Their dead language is Dil since they no longer speak it except for ceremonial purposes. The Kertenkele like the Mikachiari live hundreds of years.

Kertenkele in Dohla:

Onyx Ay - leader of Kertenkele in Dohla

Gumus Ay

Buclu Okuz

Kertenkele in Dong Tochi:

Mavi Ay

Kirmizi Gunes

General Tomutan Okuz

Golo was the first Kertenkele to suffer the Cinsel Iliski which led to the rampage in Rasima called Ofkelenmek.

The young Kertenkele were trained by Onyx Ay to become monks and curb all desire. Since they are massive and as big as Bocek and Padda there are no others that can mate with them. Rarely this training does not take and when a Kertenkele reaches puberty they enter the Cinsel Iliski. Before the Sabah Yuruyusu a female Kertenkele would chose a mate during Cinsel Iliski. After the Sabah Yuruyusu one male in Rasima, Golo, went mad. His brutal rampage killed many citizens in Rasima. This became known as the Ofkelenmek. In order for the Kertenkele to stay the Elyun ordered that any Kertenkele male who entered Cinsel Iliski be killed immediately to prevent further Ofkelenmek.

This is the official history as set by Onxy Ay for the Kertenkele inside Dohla. Outside Dohla Kirmizi Gunes has designed a way to offset the Cinsel Iliski through a surgical procedure. Traditionally if the Kertenkele entered Ofkelenmek they were considered warriors needed in a time of great need.

The ceremony for control and to channel this aggression was presided over by females inside the sacred site, Kutsal Magara. This ritual after the Sabah Yuruyusu was lost.

Phrases in Dil:

Curse you - Lanet

Curse you there and back - Lanet tanri

Bless you - Sok yasa

### THE MIKACHIARI

Mikachiari lived in the lush, tropical paradise of Nokashikatekiariku in the capital Mikanokichikata. The Tiny Wizards, Chikitofu Meikizikashiteari (Asistan Ti) invaded during the Varlid War. Supreme magic users they killed the males and enslaved the females.

After the fall of Nokashikatekiariku, the High priestess, Rikijiri Noshikikuarichiari ordered all females mutilated or killed so their race could not be used by the Asistan Ti. The priestesses have forbidden reproduction of any kind and mutilate females when they reach puberty in the ritual, Nodoshiku.

Surviving Mikachiari were taken in by the Elyun in Dohla but are scattered throughout Varlid. Few if any babies have been born of mixed heritage. If they are caught by Mikachiari they are killed. Their race lives hundreds of years.

Their language is still spoken, Takatojidokajiku. This language consists of two letter syllables that transmit the shared history of all the Mikachiari. New pieces are added to words when new collective history has been accepted and needs to be passed on. Special scholars called, Arimirimotakashari, record the language and are also in charge of updating the language. Since the scattering of Mikachiari across Varlid some of this collective history has been lost. The Mikachiari still use their own language and only learn enough of the language wherever they are to perform their duties.

Their Goddess is Jimotekuari. They do not recognize any others.

The ritual mutilation ceremony at puberty is Nodoshiku. After Mina is taken by Blan Chapo Yon Sel, mite is added to the word, Nodoshikumite, the end of the ritual.

Mikachiari in Dohla:

Mina - after she joins Teke her name is changed to Mina Rinkishikamitaku

Kazi - best friend to Mina

Tado - priestess for Dohla

Mikachiari in Saddyner:

Cita - betrayed Mina in Sanddyner

Mikachiari in Dong Tochi and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li:

Teke heads the faction of Mikachiari from Dong Tochi who are trying to destroy the Asistan Ti by planting a virus that will kill or weaken them enough to take back their homeland.

Luru

Noki

Mikachiari in Refuge:

The High priestess, Rikijiri Noshikikuarichiari. After leaving Refuge she changes her name to Riki.

The 5 Hopes, males, born from Mina:

Riari, Rito, Riku, Rimei, and Rika

Phrases in Takatojidokajiku:

Curse you - Teka

Curse you there and back - Teka Torin

Bless you - Zutakuari

THE ASISTAN TI

Asistan Ti are magic users. They have diminutive forms because of their reliance on magic for all their needs and purposes. Their experimentation with magic caused them to destroy their homeland of Peyi across the Bred Hav. During the Varlid War they joined with the Elyun to invade Varlid. They renamed the nation Patri Peyi and the main city Vil Peyi. Port Plaj is the renamed Mikachiari port in Aririnkatata. They speak the language Lang.

There are three types of Asistan Ti:

Nwa Chapo (black hat - attack magic) They staged the Black hat Rebellion against Prezidan Jules when they learned of the extent of the experiments on the Mikachiari.

Blan Chapo (white hat - defensive/curative magic) Fiercely loyal to Prezidan Jules and his objectives.

Gri Chapo (grey hat - weak defensive/weak attack magic) They were created by Prezidan Jules to replace the Nwa Chapo after the Black hat Rebellion.

They worship the Goddess of Magic, Deyes nan Magic and have Priests, Pret nan Magic that establish the rules for their society.

Prezidan Jules is the ruler over the Asistan Ti. There can only be one ruler and if anything should happen to him the next strongest Magic user (black or white) takes over.

Asistan Ti names reflect their magic types. There are only three supreme masters of magic at any one time. When one falls another rises in rank and strength to take its place. Once they attain their position their name changes to one of the following:

Nwa Chapo Yon Sel

Blan Chapo Yon Sel

Gri Chapo Yon Sel

Strength of magic user:

Fo - strong

Feb - weak

Mulayen - average

Black Magic:

Dife - fire magic

Glas - ice magic

Dlo - water magic

Le - air magic

Elcleraj - lightning

White Magic:

Gerizon - restores health

Pwoteje - protect magic

En Dife - protects against fire

En Glas - protects against ice

En Dlo - protects against water

En Le - protects against air

En Elcleraj - protects against lightning

Only a Blan Chapo Yon Sel can raise someone from the dead, called Ogmante.

Phrases in Lang:

Curse you - Modi

Bless you - Beni ou

Goodbye - Orevwa

Asistan Ti magic is used to power different objects in Varlid. The Asistan Ti magic is written in their bodies. When Teke finds out how this works she leads a group to create a virus to 'undo' their bodies.

### THE MANSKLIGA

Original rulers of Varlid. During the Varlid War the Asistan Ti and Elyun invaded taking large territories. They retained Rike with Fond as their capital. Leadership through military forces called Vakt is their legacy. They accepted a truce with the Asistan Ti and Elyun and jointly built the central city in the neutral area called Enade. Their language is Sprak. It is the most widely used language in Varlid. They worship the Goddess Gudina, and celebrate Gudina Dag. They believe in a devil named, Jakel. There are two schools, religious (Prast) and scholar (Forskare).

They are ruled by the family Stark Harskare. There is an elite military group behind the government called Dold. They are undertaking the task of bringing Varlid back under Manskliga control.

Manskliga in Rike:

Rektor Alfchild

Fina

Furstinna

Ganska  
 Befrielse  
 Hem  
 Kvinna Speja  
 Radgivare Ledare  
 Kunskap Forskare  
 Otrolig Ledare  
 Stor  
 Mitt  
 Ringa  
 Vakt - military

The Manskliga have made a deal with the Asistan Ti to trade any Mikachiari found for magical devices.

Skal - communication device

Vapen - weapon of power never before seen in Varlid.

They also used knowledge gained from the Asistan Ti to transform themselves creating deformed offspring called Grampus. This procedure is pursued in the belief that it will enable them to recapture all of Varlid.

Phrases in Sprak:

Jakel Forbanelse - curse

Gudina Prise - blessing

REFUGE

Island only accessible through a portal in Sanddyner. They are a collective from all over Varlid but are mostly made up of Manskliga. They originally formed as a response to Manskliga creating Grampus and the idea of retaking Varlid. They are an agrarian society based on simple principles and leading simple lives. There is an arduous quest before one can gain entry into Refuge. Refuge comes under attack and is blown up by the weapon Vapen created by the elite military group - the Dold.

Refuge citizens:

Maja  
 Albin

Nova

Alma

Tuva

Olle

Nils

Caj

After Refuge is attacked chunks of the island are blown into the sky. Vapen was made to turn the island to ash but because of the portal used to enter Refuge the force has scattered the pieces and a new entity and power has been unleashed within Varlid. Most flee Refuge after the attack but some vow to return and rebuild.

#### GREATER VARLID

The Elyun, Manskliga, and Asistan Ti established a truce at the end of the Varlid War. For this reason a neutral city called Enade was built and maintained jointly by all three. The wild territories in between each of the nations called collectively - Galen - are areas of free range. Outposts are maintained in the two closest Galen to each nation. The nations alternate guarding the one at Sanddyner between Dohla and Rike. Only the roads leading in and out of Enade are maintained and safe.

There are four powerful races native to Varlid that live in the Galen besides numerous animals - Vartalf, Grampus, Padda and Faglar.

Vartalf - wandering fishers, hunters, tradesmen. They'll steal anything to sell and will kill unsuspecting travelers. They will stage raids on outposts and caravans. Their main homeland is an area off of Dohla called Musten Ka but they are travelers and can be found anywhere in Varlid.

Grampus - Hemlig grotta stronghold. They are the dark secret of the Manskliga. They are deformed offspring that were thrown away and lived apart until they became their own separate race. They live in the hill areas of Rike and other Galen. Manskliga are killed on sight and are considered devils - Jakla Sak.

Padda are cave dwellers that inhabit the mines the Elyun are plundering. They are gorilla fighters and consider Kertenkele their mortal enemies.

Faglar were allies of the Mikachiari but were driven back to the far corners of their homeland by the Asistan Ti. They occasionally make raids when desperate but are rarely successful because of the powerful magic the Asistan Ti wield.

Aventyrare is any Elyun or Manskliga that have left their nation and wander the world by any means. They are sometimes joined by Mikachiari and Kertenkele. The Black Hat rebellion caused many Asistan Ti to join their ranks. They usually settle outside of port towns and have established two colonies in the Far West: Dong Tochi and Seo Jog Mo Seo Li. The Black Hat Asistan Ti developed the Suk Chae to help them power these settlements.

#### FAR WEST

The city-state of Dong Tochi. Rumors are that it is filled with Aventyrare and is in constant turmoil with Chim Sung Saram (three different types of beasts). The second port goes to a remote camp - Seo Jog Mo Seo Li

Suk Chae - the power source for Dong Tochi created by the Nwa Chapo (Black Hat Asistan Ti). The beasts of Chim Sung Saram attack the city in hopes to capture it and drive out the Aventyrare. Du Beon Jae Dosi is the walled staging area to protect Dong Tochi during battles. Seo Jog Mo Seo Li have wandering traders called Kyun Ha Da

Four generals organize the guard for Dong Tochi: Elyun - Ahm Rahis, Kertenkele - Tomutan Okuz, Asistan Ti - Nwa Chapo Le Sel, Mikachiari - Jikutokushikazu

Goddess of Chim Sung Saram - Yu Shi

#### FAR SOUTH

The Great Desert, El Kebida. The inner desert, Buyuk Col. Former home of the Kertenkele now home of the Bocek. Nothing is known of the Bocek since the Kertenkele left.

## FARNORTH

Stor Sno - if Aventyrare have gone there, they have not returned.

## FAREAST

Stora Havet. If Aventyrare have gone there, they have not returned.

## The 99 Ways encoded for your protection

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On a more professional note, I have a Masters in Teaching  
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