

**MARA  
SAMSARA**



**Dark and  
Viscous**

**Dark and Viscous**  
by Mara Samsara

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## MARA SAMSARA

The author was born around 1990 into an insignificant spot on this earth. After detours to several corners of Europe she now lives at a place which claims for itself to be cosmopolitan and enlightened, and which, in some ways, may actually be.

The pseudonym of Mara Samsara makes it possible for the author to publish thoughts and stories (also outside of the Dunyazad Digital Library) whose attribution to her real name society would not meet with approval. The author deals with fears, desires, pains and passions, taboos and hopes, which few would admit in themselves, but from which nonetheless they can not escape. Like so many other works, a major part of Mara Samsara's texts have their sources in personal experiences, with which — next to an unhealthy amount of self-reflection — she tries to deal by writing.

To read means to wander within the minds of others. Even if Mara Samsara doesn't remember to whom this aphorism has to be attributed, she acknowledges its truth. Her texts she understands as an approximation to reality. True pain, genuine desire, exist only in the moment. And yet Mara Samsara devotes herself to the ideal of grasping with mere words what exclusively belongs to the mind.

Under the address [mara-samsara@gmx.ch](mailto:mara-samsara@gmx.ch) the author is willing to engage in exchanges of ideas. Particularly regarding those ideas which arise from the dark confusions of the mind.

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## • ONE

The hooves of the oxen sank deep. They had to struggle for the footing they needed to pull the heavy carts through the mud. Rain had soaked the lands and faded them into a gray waste. For many moons a fog, menacing and dense like smoke from a thousand signal fires, had held the sun captive. Without her warming glow, the fields, and with them the minds, had fallen cold.

Once more Brodin brought the heavy stick down upon his animals. He urged them on, to reach the walls that would offer safety. The place where hope still existed. At least this was what the people thought, who had found together to form this miserable trek. In the East, there still was hope. It just had to be so.

“You will strike the ox a wound.” Firssa cautioned.

She crouched on the cart in the middle of the few possessions which bore enough value to be taken with them on their journey. The hood of her coat could not keep the rain off anymore, she was as wet as a fish in a pond.

“We have to make haste.” Brodin said, “Our provisions are coming to an end. And the rain keeps getting worse.”

From further back dismayed shouts were heard. Maybe an axle had broken, maybe exhaustion had caused someone to sink into the mud. There was no looking back, only the path before them, which would bring them to their desired destination. Everyone had to struggle on their own. Undeterred, Brodin kept driving the oxen on.

They passed a cart. One of the wheels had sunk up to its hub into a water-filled hole. To no avail the donkeys strained to drag the cart on.

Not one glance did Brodin waste on his bogged down fellow countrymen. But Firssa's eyes, half hidden under the dripping hood, remained fixed on those people, until they could not be seen anymore. The trek trudged on. Relentlessly.

After a while the path became stonier. Here the rain was not able to soften up the ground as much, but now Firssa incessantly was thrown around on the cart. Hardly was she able to hold their loosely stowed belongings together. A pan fell from the cart. It landed on the grass at the side of the path. Firssa did nothing and let Brodin move on with the cart. Behind them, no one seemed to take any notice of the pan.

From time to time horsemen were to be seen. Some carried the proud coat of arms, that also flew on banners and standards within the walls whose protection they were all trying to reach. The insignia of Queen Lumissa, sovereign of these lands. A silent sigh lingered on Brodin's lips. What value might these lands still possess? Lumissa, a sovereign without a realm. Only Dalgur remained, that town in the East where Lumissa's gold-heavy throne stood guarded by massive walls.

The train of carts ploughed on towards a forest. The way into it seemed like a gate into the darkness. Mighty oaks and ash trees narrowed the track down to a gap into menacing depths. The wet canopy of leaves clouded the dim daylight to a gloomy semi-darkness. The rain died away, but heavy drops of water kept pounding on carts and heads. Brodin looked around and exchanged a short glance with Firssa. He drove the oxen harder than before. Firssa let him have his way, the forest made her uneasy. Here the darkness seemed to hold sway. That darkness, from which they had taken flight half a moon ago.

Suddenly a warm scent entered their nostrils. Through the moist forest fog permeated smoke. Soldiers of the royal army had lit a fire, over which roasted a bulky lump of meat. Spitted on a lance, slowly

turned by one of the soldiers, the meat roasted above the flames. It had to be an outpost of Dalgur, the capital could not be far anymore. But what would this outpost be able to hold off? Three small barracks had been meekly carpentered between thick boles. Through the roof over the camp fire dripped water. Like a rag the standard hung wrapped around a tree. It showed the coat of arms of the royal guard. Once commanding awe, now it had degenerated into a symbol of decay. With empty eyes the soldiers stared after the carts, as they moved on eastwards.

After many thousands of paces the wood opened onto a wide stretch of fields. Dolefully the corn's ears hung in the rain, wind whipped through the stalks. Brodin pulled the hood deep into his face, but there was no escape from the drumming of the raindrops. The distance to the cart in front of them was increasing, to a good two dozen paces it had now grown. Cursing, Brodin urged his oxen to move faster. They had to reach the walls before the darkness fell upon them. Not one more night with Firssa he was willing to spend out in the open.

The road ran in a straight line as if drawn on a map. One field looked like the next. Abandoned by their tillers, they were given up to the wilderness. A tree came into sight, the only landmark in a long while. Belike it had served the peasants as a boundary mark for their fields. An old tree. Its branches were gnarled, its bark was cracked, but its leaves were still lush. Or maybe they only seemed so in the rain. The wetness made everything look lusher, even faces. Suddenly Firssa saw Brodin as he hurried past the oxen and towards the tree. She leaned over the side of the cart and saw a figure underneath the tree. Brodin bent over it.

“Come, you can ride with us on our cart. We have warm blankets.” he said to the figure.

The oxen kept trudging along the track. As they got closer to the tree, Firssa saw Brodin pick up the figure and hurry back to the cart.

It was a young woman. Brodin lay her down in the back of the cart and pushed her a bit towards Firssa, so that she wouldn't be thrown off in the jolting ride.

“What are you doing, Brodin?” Firssa asked with sharpness in her voice, “We have ourselves to take care of.”

“She is almost still a child.” Brodin said, wiping the rain from his face, “She is half frozen to death. Cover her with the warm wolf pelt.”

“The devil I will. Maybe I am to give her from our meager provisions, too?”

“If we leave her here in the cold, she will die, Firssa.” he said, “I know that only two moons ago the darkness has taken our Dansala from us. But her we can still save. Do not let your heart grow cold, dearest!”

The cart was slowing down. The oxen needed his stick again, to go faster.

Firssa beheld the young woman in front of her, on the floor of the swaying cart. Her clothes were dirty and torn. Her trousers were sewn from a leather so dark as if it had been soaked in tar. The wet coat into which she was wrapped was that of a man, the shoulders too broad for a delicate woman's body.

“Where do you come from?” Firssa asked.

The woman's eyes were fixed at a point beyond the horizon. Her blue lips were shivering.

“Do you have a name?”

No response.

“Well, then.” Firssa sighed and turned away.

The wolf pelt was far too good for that woman. For Dansala it would have been right, gladly would she have wrapped her daughter in it to keep her warm and dry. But not this woman. If she survived until Dalgur, she would have to get by on her own. Brodin and Firssa had to take care of themselves.



Dusk crawled over the lands. Steadily it moved towards the train of carts, a rising black veil, towering higher and higher. But they would not fall victim to the night, fires were shining not too far in the distance. They must have reached Dalgur, the life-saving walls. It just had to be so.

Brodin turned back to look at Firssa.

“Look! We’ve made it!” he shouted.

Firssa only nodded. She felt close to exhaustion, even though she had sat on the cart for almost the whole trip.

The young woman on the floor behind her did not stir.

A wave of joy galvanized the entire train. A good two dozen carts had made it. Wielding sticks and whips, the fugitives forgot the freezing moisture and strove towards the walls. The guard had already spotted the carts and ordered the the heavy iron gate opened and the drawbridge lowered.

“Soon, dearest, soon we will be safe!” Brodin exclaimed.

But immediately a call rang out and made the train freeze.

“Hold!” commanded a voice that would not tolerate disobedience, “One cart after the other will be searched and permitted entry. One after the other! These are the walls of Dalgur, august seat of our queen

Lumissa. Weapons will not be allowed within these walls. Who defies the guard will taste the guard's steel!"

Brodin brought his oxen to a halt. He pondered whether they carried anything with them which might be considered a weapon. He possessed neither sword or dagger, nor an ax. Only a few knives, but they served for work and in the kitchen. To these, the guard could not object.

Night washed over their heads. They were not inside the walls yet, but already they were under their protection. Here, so close to the drawbridge, they were safe.

The guard examined each cart and interrogated each one of the fugitives. They took their time. No one who was of the darkness must be allowed to enter.

Only one cart was now in front of them. Uneasily Brodin shifted his weight from one leg to the other. Firssa rigidly crouched on the cart. Here the guard was still proud and mighty. Their armor shone in the light of the torches, the standard flew loftily at the gate. Guards had drawn their swords, from behind their visor's slits grim eyes kept the waiting fugitives in their view.

"Next one! Move on!" shouted the captain.

Brodin pulled his oxen forward. The gate was wide enough for two carts to pass side by side. A phalanx of guard soldiers blocked the way with lowered lances. Behind the cart sword-bearers took up position.

The captain walked once around the cart. The red-dyed horsehair crest on his helmet waved with every step.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

Brodin cleared his throat.

"From Gar Ontona." he answered.

"Did your route lead you here directly?"

“Yes, Captain.”

Upon the captain’s sign two soldiers climbed onto the cart and began to search the few belongings.

“Do you bring weapons?” the captain asked, standing so close that Brodin involuntarily took half a step back.

“N ... No. We ha–”

“What do you want here in Dalgur?”

“Well, we are looking for safety. We fled from the darkn–”

“Why of all the people should we let you in? The town is already full with fugitives.”

Brodin swallowed and searched for words. Would they really deny them the shelter, for which they had fled here? Had the strenuous trek been all in vain? But they had let the other carts in, had they not?

“My husband can fight and I can tend to the troops.” Firssa answered in Brodin’s stead, “If you send us away, then we will find death. One more night out there we will not survive.”

The captain heard it, without even a glance at Firssa. Instead, he walked to the back of the cart and addressed the two soldiers who were searching it.

“Found anything, guardsmen?” he asked.

“No, Captain. No arms, nothing suspicious. Only a pouch of bronze coins.”

“The coins are confiscated.” the captain said, “What about her?” He pointed at the shivering young woman, who still lay on the floor of the cart.

Brodin walked over with quick, but not too hurried, steps.

“She is exhausted. The journey has taken its toll on her.” he said.

“Does she belong to you?”

“Yes.” said Brodin, “She is our daughter.”

Firssa looked to the ground, to hide her surprise and her anger. And the danger, to which Brodin had just exposed them.

The men stepped from the cart and took up their positions. The captain walked up and down, inspecting the motionless woman. She lay with her back towards him, so he could not notice her quivering lips. Only now it struck Brodin that Firssa had not covered the woman with the wolf pelt, as he had asked her to do. In her soaked coat she lay there like a bundle of rags. He searched her gaze, but she had averted her face.

“All right, then. Drive in. The guard will assign you a space for your cart.” the captain finally said, “Move on! Keep going! The next!”

The lance-bearers cleared the way. Brodin led the oxen into Dalgur, into the safety of the walls. From the square behind the gate only a single narrow street led into the town. A guardsman awaited them and guided Brodin halfway across Dalgur. The streets were paved with cobblestones, most of the houses had windows with glass in them, not just covered with rags. Most of the streets were illuminated by torches. Despite the late hour, the streets were full of people. Town air does make you free, after all, Brodin smiled to himself. Here they did not need to be afraid anymore.

They came to a less tidy part of the town. A foul smell got into Brodin’s and Firssa’s nostrils. Here people wore simple clothes, often dirty or torn. Some dwelled in small wooden huts huddling to corners of houses, some had sewn rags together into something like roofs over their heads.

Finally they reached the stables. Not only the horses of the military were kept here, but also livestock for feeding the population.

“Over there, next to the cow shed, you can leave your cart.” the guardsman said and turned to walk back.

“And ... And where are we meant to sleep?” Brodin asked.

The guardsman walked off without a reply.

“Underneath the cart, as we’ve done on the road.” Firssa answered for him. She jumped from the cart and stretched.

Brodin made an unhappy face, not knowing what he should do now.

“Had you thought the queen would invite us to her table?” Firssa said, “Unhitch the oxen and give them to drink and feed. I’ll take care of our bedding.”

“The girl!” Brodin suddenly exclaimed.

He ran to the back of the cart, wanted to climb up, then stopped.

“Where has she gone?” he shouted, “Firssa! Where has she gone?”

Firssa sighed and unhitched the oxen herself.

Brodin ran up to her and shook her shoulders.

“Why have you let her go?” The reproach in his voice was unmistakable.

“I haven’t done anything. I don’t know where she’s gone. When I jumped off the cart she was still there.”

“Oh!”

Brodin looked around. He hurried around the corner and peered down the street. No trace of the young woman in the wet coat.

“Go at last and fetch fodder for the animals!” Firssa shouted, “If she can run, the hussy can take care of herself!”

Brodin threw his arms in the air and disappeared into the stables, to ask for water and fodder.

## • Two

Aife took the key from her horse leather bag, spat on the road, and opened the massive lock of the door to her tavern. It only had two rooms, connected by a wide opening, with a few tables and some two dozen stools on a crude stone floor. Surrounding the hearth was a narrow counter which, with some fantasy, could be called a kitchen. Aife liked her tavern, even if that was a grand name for this shabby joint.

The whole day she had washed laundry, scrubbed floors, and chopped vegetables at the palace. Now, shortly before nightfall, she returned to her tavern to serve wine and bread to exhausted women and men. The nameless tavern was well known far beyond Smiths' Alley. Aife was always good for some snappy sayings and dished up the most whacky tales. How she had once strangled a wild boar with her bare hands — nay, with only her left hand, for in the right hand she had carried a jug of wine she didn't want to drop, and having just thrown the butcher's knife at a rat that had been larger than a donkey and a horse together.

The streets and alleys of Dalgur did not carry names. Not official ones, at least, for those who lived here, sooner or later got their bearings just the same. Some streets were commonly called after people who lived there, after certain structures, or after trades that were carried out there. So for instance there was Fountain Alley (even a dozen of them), or Smiths' Alley, where smiths forged their irons. When Aife opened her tavern, fires still flared in the forges, and hammers busily pounded on red-hot blades.

Aife let the door stand open, waiting for her guests to arrive. The first ones would be here soon, the working people of Dalgur were thirsty and hungry. As she always did, Aife walked over to the counter to pick up the buckets with which she had to fetch water from the fountain. For washing the dishes, cleaning, cooking, and drinking. Aife herself, at least, only drank water, never alcohol. As she rounded the counter she saw a figure lying on the floor. A young woman, wrapped up in a far too large and dirty coat. On the floor, next to the woman, lay breadcrumbs and half a slice of bacon.

“The bitch has helped herself to my supplies.” Aife grumbled.

She prodded the woman’s ankle with the tip of her foot.

“Hey, wake up!” she shouted, and immediately jerked back.

The young woman not only woke up, her eyes flew open, she emitted a scream, crawled across the floor, and promptly hit the counter. There she curled up and stared at Aife, as if the woman might plan to eat her alive.

“Calm down, kid!” Aife reassuringly raised her hands, “Calm down. I won’t harm you.”

The young woman looked around. Slowly she seemed to realize where she was. She sat up and wrapped her arms around her legs.

“You had quite an appetite, hadn’t you? Almost eaten a full loaf of bread. And a royal piece of bacon. Do you know how much that costs me?”

The woman stared at Aife without a word.

“How did you even get in? The door had been locked, when I just came. Who are you, a thief?”

The woman noticed the undertone of threat in Aife’s voice and rose up. Slowly, as if she were facing a dangerous animal.

“All right. I won’t harm you. I’ve told you, haven’t I?” Aife said,

“Don’t let yourself get caught again. They usually deal out rough justice to thieves. What’s your name, kid?”

Aife stepped closer, to pick up the buckets. The young woman dashed to the side and tried to leap over the counter. She was swift as a cat, but Aife was quicker. She grabbed the woman’s arm and held her back. Aife might not have strangled a wild boar, but from her grip even many a strong warrior might not easily extricate himself.

“You stay here, kid!” Aife called, “When you take my bacon and bread, you have to do something for it.”

The woman tried to break free, but soon gave up.

“You take these buckets now and fetch water from the fountain. All right? Then you will help me out here in the tavern a bit, and at midnight, when I close, you can clean yourself at my house. You are as filthy as four sows. But before you go, you’ll tell me your name. I am Aife.”

The woman rubbed her arm where Aife had held her. Her lips opened a little, but no words came over them.

“You can tell it to me afterwards, if you prefer. For now, fetch water.”

Aife thrust the buckets into the woman’s hands and pushed her out of the door. Of course she might just disappear with the buckets. Or break in again the next night and pilfer bread and bacon. Since the darkness had come over the lands, there were many like this nameless girl. They lived on the streets and survived from one day to the next. What good would it do to hand the girl over to the guard, or to give her a good thrashing? People had to stick together. Or else the light would be extinguished forever.

Aife adjusted the chairs and sliced the rest of the bread.

A man entered the tavern.

“I was told that I would get water and bread here.” he said.

“Wine as well.” Aife said, “Take a seat.”

“I do not have much money. Will this be enough?”

The man showed Aife his palm with three copper coins on them.

“Of bread and bacon you won’t get much for this. And of wine only one mug.”

“This is enough for me.”

Aife filled wine into a wooden mug and laid a slice of bacon on a piece of bread.

“Where do you come from? I haven’t seen you here before.” she asked.

“From Gar Ontona. I’ve arrived here yesterday, with my wife.”

Aife handed him bread and wine.

“Gar Ontona, yes? Every day here people arrive from all the corners of the realm. Most of them from the West.”

The man devoured the bread in a few large bites. In one gulp he downed half of the wine.

“Have you found work?” Aife asked.

“I help in the stables. I know my way around animals. We had cows, sheep and goats. And a few fields.”

Wordlessly, Aife nodded. She had heard too many stories from fugitives to still feel compassion.

She looked towards the door and smiled.

“Ah, you’re back.” Aife said, “Thank you, leave the buckets here, please.”

The man almost choked on his wine.

“So here is where you’ve ended up!” he exclaimed, “I had worried about you, when you simply disappeared yesterday.”

Aife looked back and forth between the man and the young woman.

“You know her?” Aife asked.

“Yes.” Brodin said, “Well, not really. We picked her up yesterday on our way to Dalgur, from the side of the road. She had lain underneath a tree, half frozen to death.”

The young woman set down the buckets behind the counter next to Aife, still not speaking a word.

“I’m glad you are all right.” Brodin said, “Are you helping out here?”

Again the young woman opened her lips. She seemed to want to say something, but at the same time to be scared of her own voice.

“She doesn’t talk much.” Aife said, “She has taken from my bread and my bacon, and I have sentenced her to help me out here tonight in return.”

“I understand. Don’t be too harsh with her, she probably hadn’t eaten for days. I am Brodin. What’s your name, kid?”

The young woman gazed into the other room, as if her name might enter through the door and drape itself around her lips.

“It’s all right.” Brodin remarked, “You probab–”

“I ... I ...” the young woman started, “I ... They used to call me Erinya ... I think.”

Aife frowned. Many of the fugitives spoke in an empty voice about the horrors that had driven them to Dalgur. Yet in this young woman’s voice lay nothing but coldness. And an indifference, as if she were talking about events long past.

Brodin put down his mug.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

Erinya seemed as if she had to try to remember. A long moment of silence stretched out between them, before she answered.

“From Chamran.” she finally said.

“From Chamran?” Brodin blurted out, “That ... No one had been able to escape from Chamran. It was first to fall, and ...”

Aifes stern gaze silenced him.

“I come from Chamran.” Erinya repeated, her eyes fixed on an undefined spot on the wall.

“Come. Sit down and drink some water, this will do you good.” Aife said.

“No.” Erinya said.

“No talking back.” Aife said amicably, “I can cope here on my own, you do not need to help. And at midnight you come with me to my place. There you can wash and have a warm place to sleep.”

Aife took Erinya’s arm and wanted to lead her to one of the stools, but this time Erinya broke free, almost knocking the water jug out of Aife’s hand.

“No.” she said tonelessly, “I have to go.”

In bewilderment Aife and Brodin gazed after her as she left the tavern.

Brodin emptied his mug and ran after her.

“Wait a moment! Where do you want to go? You do not know anyone here!” he shouted.

Wordlessly Erinya passed the alley’s smithies. She paid no heed to Brodin, who trotted along next to her, talking tirelessly.

“Why don’t you come home with us? We’ll take care of you.” he said.

“Dalgur is far too dangerous for a young woman like you.” he warned.

“You cannot live on the streets! Who knows what can happen to you here.” he fretted.

Finally he gripped her arm.

“Erinya!” he exclaimed, “You have to come with me! I cannot abandon you!”

Their eyes met. Erinya’s eyes were like wells, from whose depths something emerged that Brodin wasn’t able to place. He only knew that it wouldn’t be tears.

“Let go of me.” she said.

Brodin noticed the trace of fear in her voice. But not for herself.

“You should not have brought me here.” Erinya said and left him standing in the middle of the alley. His hand gently released her arm, as she walked off. He let her go, watching her until she disappeared around the corner.



Without knowing her way, Erinya wandered through Dalgur. The town was many times larger than Chamran had been. About the royal palace administration and wealth had established themselves. Nobility and burghers thrived here on the backs of the workers and peasants. But they, too, would fall. All of them. Like all the many others, who had already fallen to the darkness.

Like Chamran.

Even though they wouldn’t believe her, this was where she had come from. She had seen the horror. She had felt it. All the pain and suffering. The darkness was not the absence of light. It held things, that were not meant for mortal eyes.

A loaded cart came towards Erinya. Chests, chairs, a rug, and a few bags. More fugitives, obviously, who had reached the protecting walls. Erinya was on the right track.

She was passing more and more soldiers. Many of them wore splendid armor with embellished helmets and shields. These must be

Queen Lumissa's guard. Did they not know that steel could not cut the darkness?

Finally Erinya came to the square in front of Dalgur's main gate. The massive wings of the gate, higher than five men, were closed and secured with a wooden beam, thick as a tree trunk. Erinya looked around. Here were only soldiers, common folk had no business here. And what would there have been for them to do around here? With the fall of the lands, trade had come to a standstill. Only the few fugitives, who still had managed to escape the darkness, arrived here and sought entry. Here they felt safe. Those fools. Did they really think that wood and stone might keep the horror out?

A soldier scooped water from a barrel with a ladle, to refresh himself. Others sat at a wall and broke bread together. Only up there, amid the battlements atop the mighty wall, the soldiers stood in readiness and strained their eyes peering across the lands.

Erinya approached the soldiers who kept watch at the gate. Only when she had come as close as a few paces, they took notice of her.

“What do you want, girl?”

“Out.”

The soldiers exchanged baffled glances.

“You cannot go out. Go back to your parents.”

“I must leave the town. Please open the gate.”

Now the soldier laughed.

“You must be out of your mind! Do you not know what lies in wait for you out there? Get lost, girl!”

“But I *must* get out. Please do understand, I –”

The flat of the soldier's hand on Erinya's face prompted her to silence.

“For the last time. Get lost, girl! No one is leaving the town. And least of all you.”

Erinya could not help the tears that came to her eyes. The left side of her face was burning, the soldier had struck with force.

Why did he not let her go? If he hit her, he could as well let her go, what did he care?

“Please!” Erinya begged, “Please let me go. I must leave the town to –”

This time Erinya was prepared for the blow. Still, it almost knocked her down. Her hair was flying wildly, for a moment she lost her breath.

The soldier pushed Erinya back.

“Get lost! Hurry! Or else I’ll give you such a beating that you won’t know whether you’re coming or going!” he shouted, “Why do you want to get out? Maybe because you are a thief and they are on the lookout for you? From whom have you stolen this coat? It will be best if I hand you over to the town guard. On, comrades! Take her away!”

The soldier rushed forward and tried to grab her. Swiftly she dodged him, and he only got hold of a sleeve of the coat that she had thrown around her shoulders. Three soldiers came running.

“No! Let go of me!” Erinya screamed.

The only thing left for her to do was to run. They must not seize her. That would be the end.

She squirmed free of the coat and left it in the soldier’s grip. She ran back the alley into the town. The shouts of the soldiers sounded after her. Erinya bumped into passers-by and squeezed past a wagon carrying wine barrels. The first corner had to do. The sooner she escaped her pursuers’ sight, the better her chances were.

Erinya almost slipped on the wet pavement. She turned corner after corner. In a zigzag course she ran through Dalgur, until her lungs

wheezed. She stopped for a short rest. Anxiously she looked around, no soldiers to be seen. But yet she was not safe. A young woman alone in the alleys at this late hour was easy to spot. Erinya had to come up with something. She noticed two barrels in the corner of a house. Next to them was a half rotten bale of hay.

Suddenly Erinya heard footsteps. Rapid footsteps. At any moment they would come around the corner.

Erinya darted towards the barrels. She was lucky, the space between them and the house was wide enough for her to squeeze in. She crouched behind the barrels and peeked out onto the street from between them. Had there not been those rapid footsteps, all would have been so quiet and peaceful. From a few windows spread the soft flickering of candlelight. A torch at one of the doorways illuminated the street, which was sinking into an early evening dusk.

Closer and closer came the footsteps. Soon it would turn out whether Erinya had chosen her hiding place well.

That was when she noticed how the street began to change.

The windows began to dim. The candles in the houses were not extinguished, but a dark veil seemed to capture their light, the way fireflies are caught in a net. The light from the torch, too, got weaker. The torch did not burn down, it seemed as if tar was raining down on it. Moment by moment, darkness closed in on her.

“Oh, no!” Erinya whispered.

The sound of the footsteps was now interspersed with the rattle of armor. Three soldiers ran into the street, briefly looked around, and continued their search in the direction where Erinya was hiding behind the barrels.

Suddenly she felt something on her back. Her back was pressed against the cold wall of the house, but something warm was spreading

across it. She also felt it on her hand, with which she was propping herself up on the stone pavement. Her fingers were enclosed by something that felt like warm slime from a snail. A stench came forth as if next to Erinya a dead donkey were rotting in the scorching sun.

“No! Please, no!” she pleaded almost inaudibly, “Please, no!”

Through the gap between the barrels she could see the soldiers. They were running no more, but strode through the street at a fast pace, pondering which way to go. They passed the torch at the doorway. The flame was as large as it had been, but gave almost no light anymore. Something dripped to the ground from it, and let a vapor rise from the cobblestones.

“Keep walking! Please just keep walking!” Erinya pleaded with closed eyes.

Her back was almost soaked. Her hand almost completely immersed in the slime. The stench unbearable.

Then finally she heard the footsteps pick up pace again. The soldiers ran on. Soon they had disappeared around the next corner.

Erinya squeezed out from behind the barrels and shook the slime from her hand. The bale of hay was now covered in a thick layer of mold. The two barrels so rotten, that they would never hold water anymore.

Away! Just away from here!

Erinya ran as fast as her tired legs were able to carry her. When she was gone, only slowly did the torch regain its previous strength.

### • THREE

The evening had gone well. All the bacon had been consumed, and of the bread not much was left either. Tomorrow, after the drudgery at the palace, Aife would have to get fresh supplies. The only question was how long the butchers and bakers would still be able to offer them. The fields around Dalgur did not yield much anymore, and the livestock perished day by day. Maybe the Al'Ankh Than would be able to achieve something. Those holy women and men, who had taken up the battle against the darkness.

Aife shook her head. Why rack her brains over things that were beyond her control anyway. She covered the remaining bread with a piece of cloth, stowed the buckets underneath the counter, and searched for her key. More wasn't to do after closing time. Mopping and cleaning would be pointless, nobody in this part of town cared about clean floors. Aife left her tavern and quickly looked up and down the street. The smiths had closed their shops, no more sounds from their hammers were heard anymore. Without the light from the forges the street was almost fully promised to the blackness of the night, only a few torches illuminated the way. No one was to be seen. Aife locked up and stored the key in her leather bag. As she turned around, she gave a start.

The dark figure of a woman, the same height as herself, only much thinner, was standing in front of her. She was filthy and stank. And shivered with cold.

“Erinya?” Aife said.

The figure nodded silently.

“What has happened to you? Come, we go to my place. There you can eat and wash.”

A few streets away they reached a small house, built with wood on a stone foundation. The doorway led into a large room. Near the fireplace stood a small pot, two chairs were arranged beside a round table, in an open cupboard were a few books and tools.

“Sit down. I’ll make fire and put on some tea. What has become of your coat?” Aife said.

Erinya crouched down on the floor next to the fireplace, while Aife disappeared into one of the other two rooms.

“And I’ll also put on hot water for a bath. I had wanted to take one myself, but you need it more than I.” Aife said.

Erinya heard her being busy with pots and dishes.

A little later water was boiling in a pot above the open fire. Comforting warmth spread through the room. Aife handed Erinya a bread with bacon, greedily she wolfed it down. The previous night had been the last time she’d had anything to eat. When she had plundered the supplies in Aife’s tavern.

“Where have you been all the time?” Aife wanted to know.

Erinya swallowed down the last bite of the bread.

“Around town.” she said.

“Well.” Aife shrugged, “It’s all right, if you don’t want to tell me. Just don’t do anything stupid.”

She took the pot from the fire, put in a handful of herbs, and covered it with a lid.

“Good, tea will be ready soon. And now we will heat the water for the bath.”

With empty eyes Erinya looked into the fireplace, where the flames licked around the bucket hanging from a hook. Like nimble snakes

they crawled up its sides. And as soon as they died away, fresh ones crawled after them. Fire was alive. It consumed, and was always in search of fresh nourishment. But it could be extinguished. Not only with water.

Soon three buckets had been heated. One after the other Aife poured them into the small wooden tub, which stood in the other room. It was washing room and storage room at the same time. A few smoked sausages hung from cords, grain was stowed in bags, flour in a wooden box.

“Here is a towel for you.” Aife said, “Take your time and wash yourself thoroughly. I’ll be waiting by the fireplace.”

Aife wanted to leave, but she paused.

“And give me your clothes. I’ll give you some of mine, until we’ve washed yours at the river.”

“I have sewn them myself.” Erinya said.

Aife let her gaze drift over the young woman.

“As you wish. If you want to put them on again, this is up to you.”

“I will wash them here in the tub.” Erinya declared, “And tomorrow I will fetch you fresh water from the fountain.”

Aife nodded and left her. Erinya undressed and stepped into the tub. The hot water felt good. She could not remember when she had last enjoyed a hot bath. For some time she just sat in the tub and let the heat caress her. With closed eyes she listened to what Aife was doing over there at the fireplace.

The water softened her skin. Slowly the dirt came off. Only the caked black slime resisted. Erinya had to scrub so hard that she almost tore her skin.

When she stepped out of the tub the water was so dark that one

could scarcely see to the bottom. Just as Erinya was about to grab the towel, Aife came through the door.

“Look, I’ve found some scented water. If you want to, you can ...”

When she saw Erinya’s bare body, Aife’s voice failed her. Quickly Erinya wrapped herself in the towel. It covered her upper body, her legs it left free. And on those legs Aife’s gaze became fixed. There, too, the skin was marked by a myriad of scars. As Erinya’s whole body was, only neck and head seemed to have been spared.

“O my god.” Aife said, “O my god, girl. Who has done this to you?”

Erinya shook her head.

“It isn’t important.” she said, “Not anymore.”

Aife stood in the door, not knowing what she should do.

“I am so sorry.” she finally said.

“You do not need to be.”

Erinya began to dry herself. Now that Aife had seen her naked, her looks no longer mattered.

Her back was covered in welts. Back and forth they ran from shoulder to shoulder, down to her hips and buttocks. They were ancient scars. Aife asked herself how young Erinya must have been, when her ordeal had begun.

“Please leave me alone.” Erinya said, “And bring me a blanket. When I’ll have washed my clothes, I will need something to wrap myself in, to sleep.”

Aife just stared at her, as she dried her scarred legs. Even between her thighs there were scars.

Erinya stopped.

“Leave me alone!” she hissed, “I do not need your pity.”

One of the candles in the room went out, but no smoke rose from its wick.

Aife left. When she soon returned to bring the blanket, she opened the door just a crack and laid the blanket on the floor.

## • FOUR

Erinya spent the night wrapped into the blanket in front of the open fire. Aife had withdrawn into the third room of the little house, which held her sleeping place. After the bath she and Erinya had exchanged only a few more words. Too deeply had the image of the innumerable scars ingrained itself into Aife's mind.

The next morning Aife let Erinya go only reluctantly. The offer to spend the day here in the house Erinya had rejected. Aife had extracted the promise from her, though, that she would be back at midnight. Then Aife would come home from her tavern and prepare a meal for Erinya and herself.

Now Erinya wandered through Dalgur's maze of alleys. They did not follow any pattern, at least she was not able to detect one. Their paths looked as if a drunkard had drawn them in the sand with a stick and then announced his work to be the blueprint of the capital.

Without the coat, Erinya shivered. A freezing wind came up from the West. It seemed to be a portent of something more than mere cold, which was to fall upon the town.

As the bells struck eleven, Erinya reached a large market square. Here everything could be bought that Dalgur's merchants had to offer. Fruits, vegetables, meat, knives, axes, candles, simply everything one needed to live. A few stalls also had clothes for sale. For women there wasn't much that she liked. Most of it were either charming dresses or dull frocks. The clothes for men were all too large for her.

Then she came upon a stall that offered pans and wooden spoons. For these Erinya didn't care, but from a cord hung three capes, roughly

sewn together from sheepskin. The smallest of the capes should fit her. She strolled past the stand, looking for a suitable victim. The woman, who was just purchasing a bag of potatoes? Or the woman a little further off, who was just bending over to pick a candle from a basket? No, Erinya saw someone better.

A man just pressed a few coins into the hand of a dealer. In return he was given a pair of shod boots. The man put his pouch of coins back into his jacket pocket, tucked the boots under his arm and made off. Erinya followed him. No rushing it, the moment had to be right.

They passed stall after stall. Erinya knew she must not wait too long, it had to happen here at the market. Here, where there were lots of people and where it wouldn't be noticed.

Now.

The passage got congested. A woman with a child at her hand came towards the man, a few steps in front of Erinya. On the opposite side a tethered donkey narrowed the path. Now it had to happen. Erinya accelerated her steps and caught up with the man. Just as he squeezed through between the donkey and the woman, Erinya bumped into him. His new boots fell onto the cobblestones.

"Forgive me, kind sir. I wasn't paying attention." Erinya said and hastily wanted to pick up the boots.

The man pushed her away.

"Keep your hands off my boots! Get lost!" he growled.

Erinya profusely apologized once again and hurried away. Careful that no one saw the small pouch, which just a moment ago had been in the man's pocket and now was hidden in her hand. In a quiet corner she inspected her booty. Eleven silver coins. That would be enough for the leather cape and three months of food and drink. Quite a haul, Erinya smiled.

Back at the stall with the pots and wooden spoons Erinya bought the cape and immediately threw it around her shoulders. It even had a hood, but she did not want to pull it over her face here at the market. Of course she haggled with the dealer about the price, anything else would have been suspicious.

Satisfied, Erinya left the market. From one of the stalls she pilfered two apples and a few grapes on her way out. True, she now possessed more than enough coins, but why spend them, when you can get the things for free.

Enjoying her apple, Erinya aimlessly strolled through the town. She came to a small square, at the center of which a tall tree rose from the pavement. There were hardly any people around, obviously this was a quiet residential area for the higher echelons of society. Erinya was about to sit down underneath the tree to eat the other apple and the grapes, when she heard a voice behind her.

“The churches give food and drink to the poor. You do not need to steal.”

Erinya whirled around and almost dropped the apple. A woman in white clothes stood before her. She wore a circlet with an almost transparent gemstone. Collar, sleeves and pockets of her gown were braided in gold. She looked sublime like a queen, but it could not possibly be Queen Lumissa. If only because the woman was carrying two crossed swords on her back.

“I have watched you.” the woman said, “Give me the coins, then we two together will return them to the man from whom you have stolen them.”

Erinya shook her head. From the corner of her eye she spotted a side street, into which in a moment she would flee. But something

about the woman told Erinya that she wouldn't be as easily shaken off as the soldiers had been.

"The apple and the grapes you can keep. But the cape we have to return." the woman said, and slowly came closer.

"Right now you are asking yourself whether you can accomplish to escape me." the woman continued, "Be assured, you can not. We priestesses of the Al'Ankh Than know to wield the sword as adeptly as the word. Body and mind form a unit. When you take two steps, I take eight. Refrain from the attempt, my child, and receive my benevolence. For the Al'Ankh Than aid the weak and combat evil."

Erinya pondered her options. The woman was lithe and strong. And although her clothes were exquisitely noble, they yet appeared to be highly functional. Never before had Erinya seen such elaborately crafted clothes. But what would the priestess, whoever the Al'Ankh Than might be, do with her?

As the priestess took another step closer, Erinya again backed away.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"After we'll have given back what you have taken, I will bring you to my brothers and sisters. They will give you to eat and to drink. And we will also find a cloak for you."

And no punishment for the thefts? She wouldn't hand Erinya over to the town guard? If they really gave the man back his coins, certainly the first thing he would do would be to call for the guard.

Briefly Erinya peered into the alley that led away to the left. But only in pretence, instantly she would run into the opposite direction. She still held the apple in her hand. With a swift motion she threw it in the priestess's face and rushed towards the alley to her right. She didn't get to run five paces into it. With ease the priestess caught the apple and caught up with Erinya. She grabbed her at the chest and

pressed her against the wall of a house. Erinya groaned. The tight grip took her breath away and the back of her head hit the wall.

“We know mercy just as we know relentlessness. It is your choice, which path you want to take.” the priestess said.

“Let me go!” Erinya shouted. Her efforts to break free were in vain.

“Ask for mercy, and I will show you mercy. Else, I must hand you over to the guard, who will deal out earthly justice to you.” the woman said.

“Let me go!” Erinya screamed.

She tried to hit the priestess in the face, but failed. More and more furiously she wriggled and kicked with her legs, but to no avail.

“Well then, so be it.” the priestess said.

She grabbed Erinya by the throat, cutting off her air. With her other hand she fished the pouch of coins from Erinya’s pocket. Then she hurled Erinya to the ground.

“Do I have to take the cape from you by force, too, or are you willing to give it to me?” Not much benevolence still lingered in the priestess’s voice.

Erinya spat a curse towards the priestess and backwards crawled away from her.

“Words will not help you. Not even words as black as you just used,” the priestess said undeterred.

Behind her on the small square rose the tree. As Erinya crawled away over the cobblestones, in the background, half hidden by the priestess, she could see it. Its leaves were melting to tar and dripped onto the pavement. Its bole began to crack, the bark rotted and crumbled away. From the square a shadow spread over the walls of the houses. Like tar it oozed through the gaps between the cobblestones, seeped through underneath the priestess’s feet and underneath Erinya.

The priestess turned towards the square. The tree now stood in a puddle of reeking tar. Mold peeled from the walls of the surrounding houses. A dark haze veiled the daylight deeper and deeper. The priestess drew her twin swords, skillfully swirled them around, and took up a fighting stance. To this she spoke a holy mantra in a language that Erinya had never heard before.

“Your swords are not able to cut anything here!” Erinya shouted, “Run, if you want to live!”

With one leap Erinya was on her feet and ran away. Just away from this place, where the darkness was growing and growing. As she took the first corner, she heard the priestess scream. It was a sound of pure terror. It did not last long and it ended abruptly.

• FIVE

The news caught Firssa in the laundry room. She was scrubbing a bed sheet in a trough. Initials were sewn into one of its corners, obviously it belonged to a wealthy person. Suddenly a man came running through the door. It was one of the launderers, who worked during the night. At no hour the laundry stood still.

“It has begun!” he kept shouting, “It has begun! Dalgur, too, is lost!”

The laundresses and launderers quitted their work and gathered around their colleague. He told of the priestess who, less than an hour ago, had been taken by the darkness not far from the market. He told of the small square that had melted to tar and was cankered with mold. He told of the tree from whose remains a stinking, steaming brew kept flowing.

“Here, too, we are not safe. What are we to do?” he lamented.

Firssa went back to her trough and let herself fall onto the stool next to it. So, the arduous journey to Dalgur had been for nothing. The darkness would close in on them now. Accursed be the light. Why had it deserted them? Feebly she seized the linnen and scrubbed it. But what purpose did that still serve? No bed would be made with it anymore. And even if so, Dalgur was forfeited to doom. Maybe they could flee further to the East. Buy a few more days. Firssa threw the linen into the trough.

No.

No more flight.

They would remain here and face the end. Soon she would be

reunited with Dansala, her beloved daughter, whom the darkness had robbed from her. Yes, soon now.

Firssa left the laundry and headed for their cart, underneath of which they still slept next to the stable. In the streets she encountered many agitated people. Vendors dismantled their stalls, windows were barricaded, doors locked. More soldiers than usual patrolled the streets, and a few priests could be seen, too.

Arrived at the cart, she sat down on a chair and waited.

The hours passed. Here at the stables the world still seemed to be in order. The animals did not show any signs of agitation, and only people who had business here were around. Brodin too would be in one of the stables, mucking out. Maybe he hadn't even heard about the incident with the priestess. Evening would be soon enough to tell him.

After a while a woman approached her, her face hidden underneath a hood. Her cape was sewn together from several scraps of leather. The woman stopped in front of the cart and looked around.

"Where is your man?" she finally asked.

"What do you want of Brodin? Who are you?" Firssa said.

The woman pulled back the hood. Firssa squinted her eyes, then she recognized her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked with unconcealed animosity.

"Brodin must help me." Erinya said.

"He has already done enough for you. Leave us in peace."

"I have not asked to be brought here by you." Erinya returned angrily, "I must leave the town. Brodin must get me through the gate."

Firssa laughed out loud.

Fate seemed to have been struck with a malicious sense of humor. First it had taken their daughter from them, then it had presented them with this ungrateful brat, who showed no appreciation of her rescue.

“Do you want to run away from the end?” Firssa asked mockingly.

“No ... I ... It’s not that. Where is Brodin?”

“You got scared, when this priestess got swallowed by the darkness, didn’t you, my dear?”

“Do not call me your dear! My name is Erinya!” Angrily she paced up and down in front of the cart. Firssa watched her from the platform of the cart, where she squatted on her chair.

“Brodin has said that you come from Chamran. How did you manage to escape from there? Did you run at the first signs of danger from there, too?” Firssa’s lips curled into an ugly smile.

Erinya stopped.

“Shut your mouth!” she shouted, “What do you know about me? You do not have the slightest idea of what I had to go through.”

“You don’t say.” Firssa scoffed. The vision of her daughter Dansala’s face appeared before her. What did that stupid brat know, what she and Brodin had been through.

Erinya clenched her hands into fists. She had enough. Of this woman, of this town, of everything. She pulled the hood deep into her face and turned to go. After two paces, though, she halted.

“You still believe in your heavens, don’t you?” she said over her shoulder.

“What?” said Firssa.

“The heavens. You still believe in them. You do, do you not? But your heavens are empty. So long have I beseeched them. I have pleaded and I have begged. For aid, freedom, redemption. Nothing. Not a single word. The heavens are empty. But the abysses are not.”

Then Erinya left. Perturbed, Firssa followed her with her eyes. Out of the cowshed a foul odor wafted across the alley.

## • SIX

Peacefully the Yunna flowed between the houses. A wooden bridge, elaborately decorated with engraved symbols of peace, spanned it. From a large stone, half protruding out of the water, the soft purling of the current could be heard. Every now and then a fish darted by. But Erinya had no eyes for the beauty of the river. She gazed at the iron grate that barricaded its bed. Almost as thick as a man's arms were its bars.

The Yunna flowed into Dalgur in the south and left the town in the north-east. Mighty walls surrounded Dalgur. To prevent intruders from invading the town through the Yunna, its bed was gated with iron grates at both ends, where the river was flowing through openings in these walls. Fish could pass, humans could not. So this way out of the town was barred to Erinya, too.

She could not leave through the gate. The soldiers had already turned her away before, and now, after the incident with the priestess, the gate would probably remain permanently closed. Even if that was futile, the darkness did not need gateways. But what did the fools know.

Erinya sat down on the river bank and buried her face in her hands. Just why had this dupe Brodin picked her up and brought her here? From Dalgur there was no escape. Had it gone according to his wife, Erinya would still be outside and rove the lands. Or she would have frozen to death. Each would have been better than to be locked up in here. And yet Erinya did not want to escape. She wanted to get away because of all the people here. Did they not see? No, how could they.

A tear seeped through between Erinyas fingers. She had escaped from Chamran, but at what price? At what accursed price?

Noiselessly she wept. Her chest was shaking.

But for Chamran she felt no regret. The town had gotten what it had deserved.

Erinya pulled up the left sleeve of her shirt until it reached her shoulder. Damned be they all. Each single one of them. Those who had inflicted all those blows and cuts on her, all the suffering and agonies, they all would perish forever in the darkness. Erinya clenched her fist and pressed her jaws together. None of them would ever see the light again. Damned be the heavens.

“Damned you are! All of you!” Erinya screamed at the top of her lungs.

No one had come to her aid. No one had cared for her. No one had paid any attention.

No, no one.

But then her pleading had been heard.

“Damned are you all.” Erinya whispered.

It sounded like a statement.

One last attempt she would make. One last attempt to get out of the town.

As she walked away, she did not notice that the grass along the banks of the Yunna had turned into black slime. The water had become turbid, and gave off a pungent stench.



Artek was on his way to the temple. The priestesses and priests of the Al’Ankh Than were getting together, to consult over the calamity that had befallen Dalgur. As it had all the lands of the realm. They had

to pray and meditate. The light would show them the way. If not the sword, then the word must be able to break the darkness.

His white coat billowed, as he hastened around the corner. For the first time in many long years the Ankh G'arbhat, the holy council of the priesthood, would convene again. The powers of light had to be rallied, to crush the darkness. It was their last hope. Soon he would be at the temple. Artek could already see the golden roofs.

"Priest." a voice suddenly addressed him from the side.

Artek spun around. In the alley stood a solitary young woman with a hooded cape. Here, in the holy precinct, few people were usually seen. Particularly during dark times like these, when everybody was hiding in their abodes, was it rare to encounter anyone.

"What is the matter, girl?"

"My name is Erinya."

"I do not have much time. What is it that you want?"

Erinya got closer.

"I need your help, priest. I must leave the town. But they will not let me."

"For a good reason. Outside the walls the darkness prevails. You would run into your doom. What do you want outside of Dalgur?"

"I have good reasons to leave the town. You have to trust me, priest."

Artek gently laid his hand upon Erinya's shoulder.

"Have no fear. The Al'Ankh Than are gathering right now, to close our ranks against the darkness. All will be well."

Erinya laughed.

"I have no fear. Not for me." she said.

"What are you talking there? Go to your home."

"So you do not want to help me either. You priests have better

things to do than to care about a woman who asks for help ... Well then. I understand. Go and pray to your light, then. Do not blame me for not having tried. Do just not blame me for not having tried.”

Slowly Erinya backed away from the priest.

“Your words make no sense, girl. What drives you out, away from Dalgur?”

Erinya’s lips twisted into a ghastly smile.

“Go and pray, priest. Pray to your heavens. Your sister they haven’t aided, either. On that square, next to the market.”

Erinya’s face sunk deeper and deeper into the darkness of the hood, until it could no longer be seen. All around her, black hazes clouded the street. Alarmed, the priest retreated and drew his scimitar.

“Can you hear it? The silence?” chillingly it came out of Erinya’s hood, “It comes with the darkness. Be afraid, for you can not hold it off.”

Where Erinya had stood, was only blackness. A hole had opened up in the alley, in which nothing but a void seemed to exist. Like a dark cloud of smoke the void gradually dissolved, leaving pavement and walls transformed into reeking tar.

As fast as his legs would carry him, Artek, the sword still in his hand, ran towards the temple, to his brothers and sisters.

## • SEVEN

“Do hurry up now! We have to get away!”

Brodin pulled Firssa along behind him. Yesterday evening already, when she had told him about the priestess who had fallen to the darkness on that square, a strange indifference had taken hold of his wife. Today, after this night, which had not given way to a morning, Firssa seemed to have abandoned herself to fate. No strength was left in her to confront the darkness. Unremittingly Brodin dragged her through the streets by the sleeve of her gown, towards the gate that would release them from Dalgur into freedom. Outside the gates, too, the darkness might be waiting, but the town was no longer safe. Shadows ate through the walls, stench polluted the air, and putrescence infested the wells. The sun was caught in a blood red veil, everything gleamed in a horrific twilight.

From the house they just hurried by sounded a scream. Brodin could not say if it had come from the throat of a man or a woman. A figure, black as tar, staggered towards them. Its flesh had rotted into a steaming, viscid mass and was dripping onto the moldy pavement.

Perdition had descended upon Dalgur. Maybe they might not be able to escape it, but they had to venture the attempt.

“Come! Come, my beloved Firssa! I implore you!” Brodin called.

With an impassive face Firssa trudged behind him. What was there to safe? Their flesh was doomed to decay. And where could they flee to? Dalgur had been the last bulwark against the darkness. Here was the seat of the Al’Ankh Than. Here was the royal guard. Where, if not here, should they find safety? No, there was no salvation.

They reached Peace Square, so called because here the peace of Kral Sabrant had been signed, two dozen generations before. This peace had ended the thirteen years war of succession and had secured the throne for the Lorrakin dynasty. Even if Brodin and Firssa had known about this history, it would have meant nothing to them now. Unremittingly Brodin dragged his wife across the square. Past the magnificent fountain at its center, from which a bestial vapor now rose. Rotting creatures squirmed on the pavement or stumbled around. Brodin gave them a wide berth.

Suddenly he heard a voice behind him. He winced and spun around.

“You cannot flee.” the voice said.

It came from the fountain.

At the edge of the fountain, underneath sculptures as magnificent as they were monumental, sat a dark figure. The face was covered by a hood. Instead of a face there seemed to be a black hole.

“You cannot flee.” the figure repeated, “The darkness has defeated the day.”

“What are you talking about?” Brodin stammered. Listlessly Firssa hung in his grip.

“The darkness. Do you not see it? All the shadows? How they gorge and annihilate?”

The figure laughed silently. Even though it had turned its face towards Brodin now, he could discern nothing underneath the hood. But it seemed to him that he had heard that voice before. Yes, he knew that voice. But whose had it been?

“Who are you?” he asked, “How can you be so sure that there is no hope left?”

The figure slid down from the edge of the fountain and came two paces closer to Brodin and Firssa.

“From where I take my certitude?” it said, “Well, with my own senses I have witnessed as the darkness has engulfed an entire town. Then and there, in Chamran. And not only there. Nothing can stop it.”

“Erinya.” it came out of Firssa’s throat like a curse.

Brodin sensed how she gained strength, no longer did she hang limply in his grip. She straightened up and stared at the figure in front of the fountain with hate-filled eyes. The figure who could not be Erinya. Not the helpless girl whom Brodin had picked up from the roadside. But yet she knew that it had to be Erinya.

“ERINYA!” Firssa screamed, “I knew you were of the devil! You, YOU, YOU HAVE DONE THIS TO US!”

Erinya just snickered.

Firssa rushed at her. What Brodin had begun she would end now, and deliver Erinya to the fate to which she had been pledged at the side of that road.

Dark smoke swirled around the fountain. An icy cold descended upon Peace Square. The slime in the cracks of the pavement bubbled up, spat sticky threads, and finally entangled Firssa’s feet. Almost she fell over, Brodin held her from behind.

In the darkness of Erinya’s hood two rubies lit up, as if glowing in a smith’s forge. The slime crept up Firssa’s legs, invaded her sex and her bowels, wound itself around her body. Firssa screamed and tried with all her force to scrape the slime from her body. Horrified, Brodin stepped back.

“I have not wanted all this. None of it.” Little of what was human was left in Erinya’s voice, “I had only wanted to punish those who had caused me all this suffering. Take revenge on those, who had made my

life a living hell. I have prayed! Pleaded! I have summoned the heavens and promised them everything, for only a little bit of help! I HAVE PLEADED! DAY BY DAY, NIGHT BY NIGHT!”

The vapor rising from the fountain turned blood red. Firssa was now completely enclosed by the slime, only her face was still free.

“I have pleaded and pleaded. For many long years. And do you know what the heavens have answered me? Do you know it, Firssa? DO YOU KNOW IT?”

Erinya’s eyes blazed up.

“I will tell you.” she said, “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. No answer. No sign. Not a trace of hope. Absolutely nothing. Your heavens, Firssa, your oh so holy heavens, have abandoned me to my world of pain and suffering. And I have cursed them for this. My pleas turned into hatred. I curse your heavens, Firssa. But in the end this does not matter, for the heavens are empty. Up there is nothing, and never will be. But you know what, Firssa? Do you want me to tell you? Finally, my pleading was heard. Yes, indeed. Something heard my pleas. Something, deep down in the abysses, hidden in the darkness.”

“Erinya! Please desist! Please let Firssa go!” Brodin was finding words again.

“Go? Where to? Out there, outside the gates of Dalgur, now nothing but darkness prevails. And here, too, it will soon have infested everything ... Oh, you fool. Why did you have to take care of me and bring me here?”

“Please stop it, Erinya!” he pleaded, “Please stop it! Do not take my Firssa away from me, too!”

“But I am not doing it. It’s the shadows that do it. They devour everything and everyone. I cannot stop them. I never could. I only have called them.” Erinya laughed, “And how I have called them! All this

worthless flesh in Chamran, all that scum, will forever decay in the darkness. Oh yes, I had my revenge. Its taste is as sweet as they say. But I have learned something, my dear Brodin. One should not call upon the darkness, when one does not know what is lurking in the shade.”

All over Erinya’s cape, her trousers and her shirt smoldering fissures began to crack open. Everywhere where her body was marked by scars. Soon they burned to finger-thick gaps, a fire seemed to blaze underneath them.

“What ... What do you mean by that?” Brodin said.

“I am not able to undo it. I cannot command the darkness. And I do not even want to any longer. I have run and have tried to flee, to save the people from it. All in vain. This world will perish. And then there will only be silence. And it will be well.”

Brodin tried to tear the slime off Firssa. With all his force he clawed his fingers into it, but it did not yield to his efforts. Before his eyes she was torn to pieces, as slowly as leaves fell to the ground in the autumn. Her screams only subsided when her body had almost disintegrated. Brodin sank to the ground, his hands and knees caught in the reeking sludge.

Suddenly a slimy beam shot up from the ground a few steps behind Erinya. She turned around and saw an arrow stuck in the slime. Then she saw the priestesses and priests rush towards her. A smile played around her lips. Again the archer took aim and at once let loose. Once more, a black tentacle of slime caught the arrow.

Erinya recognized the priest Artek, whom she had asked for help. He gave his brothers and sisters the sign to draw their arms of steel, when the wooden arrows would not reach their target.

“It protects me. You cannot stop it.” Erinya said, “And neither can I.”

As if on cue a slimy tentacle impaled the archer, who had just drawn a fresh arrow from his quiver.

Erinya's clothes were now almost completely burned. Her scars were glowing as if the flesh beneath them were on fire. The Al'Ankh Than formed a circle around her. Erinya threw back her head, stretched out her arms, and began to spin around. Two Al'Ankh Than charged, to pierce her with their swords. Instantly their dead bodies lay on the putrid ground, torn to shreds by the darkness. One after the other perished in the attempt to even get close to Erinya. Only Artek was still left. Continuously repeating his holy mantra, he held his sword ready to strike.

Erinya sat down on the edge of the fountain again. All of a sudden, she looked tired. Artek saw his chance and rushed forward. One tentacle after the other shot out of the slime. They pierced his legs, the torso, the arms, and clawed at him. As close as the length of his sword he had gotten towards Erinya. With his last strength he swung his arm and let the steel strike down. Before it touched Erinya it melted into a stinking broth that dripped to the ground.

"Now, priest, where are your heavens?" Erinya said, as if nothing had occurred, "Where is the light, that is so sacred to you? I can tell you, priest. It has been swallowed by the darkness. Why do you even pray to the light, when it combats the darkness in vain? The darkness rests in itself, while the light keeps consuming power, to shine."

Just barely did Artek's body still hang on to its life. Erinya looked into his tormented face.

"The darkness, priest, the silence within, it will be my hell." Erinya said, "For it will not let go of me. It protects me, but not for my sake. I am doomed to be in it, for ever."

Erinya slid down from the fountain's edge. The last charred shreds

of her garments crumbled to ashes. Naked she left the square, to walk the streets of Dalgur, which had now become her own dark realm.

Suddenly she halted. Her moth opened, as if she were going to scream. Her legs were unable to take another step. Her arms had turned into gnarled boughs. She looked down at herself and could not believe it. A blade had pierced her. From behind it had penetrated her chest, and now protruded from it by the length of a foot.

How the blade was shining. And how pure it was. Stumbling, Erinya managed to turn around. Brodin stood before her. He must have taken the sword of one of the fallen priests. Tears ran down his face. They too were shining like jewels and left blinding traces along his cheeks. His eyes were so full of sadness. But yet there lay something in them, which Erinya had not seen for so long that she almost failed to recognize it. Brodin's gaze was warm, almost tender.

Erinya stumbled back and collapsed to her knees. Was that a ray of sunlight, that descended upon the square?

Ere the final strength leaked from Erinya's body, a boundless despair came over her. No, the heavens were not empty. They only had no place for her.