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From time to time there'd be a crossover of insects or birds or other such things, even rarely some plant spores, but nothing actually lived for long in the transition zone. There was nothing really to feed or nurture life, and nothing at all would grow there.

A small wire cutter was the only thing needed to breach the long fence that surrounded the hub. It wasn't really there to keep people in or out; those who were not of the Akhbreed were prevented from entering by the spells of the chief Akhbreed sorcerer. Crim and Kira could enter and leave the hubs only because they were truly two different people who were both Akhbreed. The spell might exclude a curse or change wind-induced departure from the norm, but when Crim entered he was just Crim to it.

The fence was basically there to bar wild animals who might wander across from getting in, and as a political statement. Colonial races who could not enter a hub could never attack, let alone overthrow, a seat of power.

Kira was as dubious about all this as Crim had been, but just a casual visit to the border station convinced the both of them that this was the only way.

Mashtopol was corrupt as hell; the guards had a picture of the Storm Princess herself hung in their entry station, and around and nearby were a number of shifty types apparently idling in the area for no particular reason. So it was that Sam, when it was just turning light enough to really see but before dawn broke, had received a kiss and hug for luck from Kira and slipped through the opening in the fence and down onto the mist-covered floor. It felt as wet and spongy as she remembered it, but it was firm enough. The far horizon was still dark, although you could occasionally see isolated lights here and there when one or another world would come up. Looking back from perhaps half a mile, Sam could see the lights of the entry station for the hub, and even farther out that glow always kept her oriented.

As the sun rose she conserved her pace and repressed the urge to sprint or hurry along. Forty leegs was about twenty miles, give or take.

Once she felt she was out of sight of any but someone looking directly at her through field glasses, she stopped and removed all her clothes and put them in the small backpack Kira had fashioned for her. Better not to have to deal with a skirt and top until you had to.

Crim had worried about her ability to cross in the needed time, but she was having no trouble and feeling very proud of herself for that. The big problem, which they'd also discussed, was the lack of a far reference point in the ever-shifting landscapes beyond. That meant, as soon as it was fully as lit as the cloud-shrouded nether-region ever got, picking an area on the fixed hub and checking back every once in a while to keep herself in line with it. She picked an odd-shaped bluff just beyond the entry station that was shaped kind of like the face of a fat guy doing a big pout. It was fairly easy for a while, but the farther across she got the harder it was to make out that feature or distinguish it from the other bluffs and crags of Mashtopol's end. She began to get a little worried and disoriented as now the far "shore" appeared closer, and she slowed to an easy walk.

Ahead of her now was the shore of a vast ocean, filling the horizon and making orientation even more difficult. There was no entry station in sight, either, which didn't mean much. If you were coming along here you'd better have a boat waiting or you'd be stuck anyway.

She took a drink and decided to walk diagonally to her right and wait for something better to use. She was walking for some time when the scene flipped, showing some barren, yellowed hills leading down to an ugly-looking lake. The air coming from it reached her, smelling foul, sort of rotten-egg type, and both hot and humid. She could hardly wait for that one to be out of the way.

Suddenly she heard noises of animals and equipment and shouts of people and stopped dead. For a moment she couldn't see them, but then, suddenly, they were there, coming almost right at her! One of the wagon trains, damn it! She was too far over, maybe right between the two stations!

There wasn't a whole hell of a lot of time, but she dashed back the way she came

at top speed and the sprint, after all the rest, finally got her winded and feeling a bit dizzy. She collapsed to her knees, breathing hard, and tried to let the mist cover her, peeking up just enough to see how close they'd come to her.

It was pretty damned close. The outriders on this side almost trampled her, and she could see the wagons clearly and the people in them. This was one of the passenger types like she'd started out with, and it contained a fair number of families and tough-looking men and women dressed in various garb. One man sat on a wagon seat holding a furry creature that seemed all eyes and teeth. The thing seemed to sense her presence and its cold eyes looked where she was, then as the wagon got closest it tried to leap from the man's grasp and come after her. Instinctively, she grabbed the spear and crouched down.

My god, it's all mouth! she thought nervously.

But the man held on, and the pet or watchdoglike thing or whatever it was finally gave up.

Then the train stopped. The Navigator, she knew, was going to pull his magic trick, not tremendous as the sorcerer's went but one hell of a trick nonetheless. She turned and watched it, always fascinated.

The scene changed. First slowly, then more quickly, worlds flashed by, mountains rose and fell, seas stretched out and receded, trees grew and then shrunk, summer turned to snow and then to torrential rains. Suddenly it slowed again, settling on a peaceful-looking meadowland with lots of flowers and gum trees and plenty of green. It looked like a pretty nice place, and off in the distance the sky was even blue.

There was a series of shouts echoing up and down the train and then, slowly, it began to move once again, off the mist and onto a nicely maintained road, and within ten or fifteen minutes tops the whole train was out of transition and into the new world.

Almost immediately after the traditionally buckskin-clad Navigator made his final checks and rode in himself, the world was lost, but this time not to just another scene. Like a deck of playing cards bent partway at a cut point to expose a single card and then let go, the rest of the worlds held there now began to snap back as the vast worlds piled upon worlds of Akahlar sought equilibrium once again. Scenes, whole worlds, flashed by, dark, light, cold, hot, wet, dry—all the combinations, going by too fast for the eye to gain more than a general impression of the place before it was gone. She had never seen this end result of a Navigator's magic before and was fascinated by it.

Suddenly, all around her, was the sound of thunder very close, and lightning split the heavens again and again. She whirled and looked up to see ominous black clouds and a tremendous display of energy, and then something else before sheets of pouring rain hit her. There were things up there! Things with great, leathery wings and heads on long necks that looked like chisel-points, with glowing coals for eyes, atop which were strange, wraithlike giants in saddles riding them as if they were horses. The riders were transparent, outlined by pulsating borders of energy that seemed to form both body and some semblance of armor.

Stormriders! Made visible by the Navigator's work and all the turbulence it set up and now drawing on that tremendous energy.

The rain was still driving, but the lightning was no longer striking the ground but rather seeking out those great black things with their ethereal riders, who grew brighter and more horrible as they absorbed each bolt.

She dropped down below the mist, the rain so hard it was almost stinging her, afraid to look up, afraid that one of those things up there would instead look down and spot her with those cold, empty outlined eyes. Above, there came the noise of horrible screeching that pierced even the noise of the storm as the ghastly black mounts screamed their defiance of storm and all else in creation. And the strange thing was, she didn't have to see. In her mind, throughout her body, she felt the storm and its deadly occupants in ways she could never explain, almost as if she and the storms were one and the riders were tearing at her. Somehow, she and the storm were one, and she felt almost violated that they

were draining the energy from her even as she lay there, frightened. She wanted to lash out at them, order them to stop, or, at least, to divert some of that energy to herself, but she dared not. If they knew, if they so much as sensed, that she was there or anywhere about then the talons of the leathery-winged creatures would be upon her in an instant.

It seemed to rain for an eternity, although it probably wasn't more than a few minutes, but even after it tapered off suddenly, then stopped, she lay there, in what was now a couple of inches of water, listening for more of those screeches and afraid to stick her head up.

There was a slight but steady current to the water, and it began to recede quickly, going off towards the nearby land. Soon there was little left, save that the ground was kind of squishy, like a sponge, and oozed water wherever it was pressed.

After a while, she knew she had to risk looking, and fumbled in her now thoroughly soaked pack for the white hood that might give her a little extra camouflage. It was soaked through, but so was she, and she wrapped it around her head and then, very cautiously, peeked up.

She could still see them, but they were not close and seemed to be going away from her. She decided not to move, though, or do anything, so long as any of them were in sight, and the clouds, going back to their usual swirling gray, now seemed more menacing, as her mind feared a great black shape with an electrified neon warrior atop it hovering just above, waiting . . .

The "petals" of the worlds had stabilized once again, and she looked back in hopes of seeing a lone and familiar wagon. She could see nothing, hear nothing, but the world that now was locked in, at least for its time, contained an entry station not that far in and with a number of uniformed men and horses there.

It was impossible to see the sun through the cloud cover, but she had the impression that it was getting quite late in the afternoon. At least, as far as she could see inside the revealed world, the amount of light was more consistent with afternoon than any other time, and she began to worry. Was I too late? Did he have to go without me?

She rejected that almost immediately. If Crim had dialed in whatever that world was called there would have been the same kind of thing she'd just gone through almost surely. So where was he? Stopped at the border? In some kind of trouble? What?

She didn't want to spend a night out here, alone, particularly with those things around. Almost nobody crossed at night. Not even a Navigator could see all the landmarks and keep dead on at night, and it was generally only done when it was some kind of military or medical emergency or in the case of urgent diplomatic dispatches which would be aided and guided by sorcery. Night crossing wasn't a real option anyway. Kira couldn't navigate—it was a talent you had to be born with, or so they all said. You could only learn to control and develop it, not bestow it on someone else. Besides, while Kira was real smart in a lot of ways she'd been a female jock. Something called the Biathlon, she'd said. Crazy kind of thing that had to do with cross-country snow skiing and rifle shooting. That was why she was such a good shot, but the deserts of the Kudaan were a hell of a place for a snow skier to wind up!

But it was beginning to get darker, though, and not from any impending storm—she could tell that now—but because of the lateness of the day. Her hair and everything she had was still soaked through, and there was a chill wind blowing from whatever world was up right now.

She was still trying to figure out what to do when she heard the sounds of others approaching from the hub. Crim! Or—was it? Not one wagon there, but two! She moved off a bit so she wouldn't be right in line once again, but she wanted to stick close enough, risk or no risk, to make sure just who was in what.

The lead one was Crim! She felt some relief at that, but what the hell was the second, trailing wagon? Two tough, weathered men in front, on the seat, and probably two more in the wagon since four horses were trailing behind them. This didn't look good, and it was unlike Crim to take this long to get across. Hell, what if it was sundown before he could clear the entry point? What if it was sundown while he was at the entry point?

She shadowed them at a distance, taking a wide semicircular route around them. Wherever Crim was going, that's where she was going, and to hell with those other guys. If he was being shadowed by suspicious characters, maybe with too many guns, figuring on just what they were pulling and hoping to catch her when she caught up with the Navigator, then that was a problem, but not an insurmountable one. She was sick and tired of being hunted like an animal and kicked around by the fates and something within her had hardened her. If she was mortal then they were mortal, too. She'd rather take her chances with Crim and Kira, even if it meant taking these men on, than wander around another unknown land until she bumped into another Duke Pasedo or worse.

After you saw the Stormriders, four guys with guns didn't seem half as frightening as they might have.

Crim had gotten a bit ahead of her, but now he stopped, very close to the border region, as the trailing wagon crept up to him and then passed him, allowing her to draw roughly even but maybe a few hundred yards down. It was risky being this close, but this was a new circumstance. She was going in with Crim, no matter what Crim did.

The Navigator looked nervous, maybe even tense. There were two more guys looking out of the back of the wagon and they had guns of some kind, that was for sure. So why had they decided to pass him?

Suddenly she realized the reason. He was the Navigator—none of them were. He had to be behind to bring up the world and stabilize it for them to cross. It would also hold only a couple of minutes after he let it go at best, so she had to be really ready now. It was maybe a quarter of a mile to the border. She didn't feel much like more exercise, but she was prepared to float over if she had to. She took off the backpack and let it fall. The hell with that waterlogged dead weight. She had other clothes in the wagon. Besides, some cruel god or fate seemed to like her naked for some reason. At least this time she was armed.

The worlds began to flip, faster and faster, and, after a couple of minutes, they stopped on just what he had described—a great forest, in the first throes of dusk, with another good road leading up to an entry station carved out of the forest that already had some lights on.

She started to go in, for some reason, held herself, as she watched the men in the wagon proceed in and then up onto the road itself. Something, perhaps in Crim's manner or perhaps a sixth sense she hadn't suspected and which hadn't been very useful until now, warned her.

Suddenly the forests vanished and several worlds flipped past before slowly coming to a stop again. He'd gotten rid of them! He'd dumped them in that world and then let them go.' "Misa! If you're out there run like hell now!" Crim called at the top of his lungs, and she ran as if the Stormriders were right on her tail.

Crim slowly edged forward as she took off. He was buying her all the time he could, but it was still an ordeal for her after the rest of the day and no picnic at all. She was going on sheer determination, every muscle aching, not even seeing what kind of world had come up.

Suddenly there were trees and leaves batting her face and she grabbed some limb and brought herself to a stop, then dropped on the ground, gasping for breath. It was several minutes before she could get hold of herself, and when she did she knew that Crim had crossed the border. There was lightning and the start of a storm out there in the void.

She took stock of her surroundings. It was getting pretty damned dingy, but they were going west, after all. This sure wasn't the world Crim had planned on, though, and she wondered if he had any more idea about this place than she did or had just picked it as the first decent-looking one that came up before he lost control of the "deck." Probably the latter, but the odds were he'd spotted a road or something, so her best bet was to head back over towards that road—if the land allowed her.

The humidity was tremendous, and the vegetation was incredibly thick and seemed to reach almost into the mist itself. She worked herself around as best she

could, using the spear as a probe and walking stick. It was getting very dark very fast, and she wanted that road. If it was dark and nobody crossed late, then the odds were it was a pretty safe area so long as she avoided any entry station.

It wasn't easy. Several times she almost slipped off the slick floor into the mist, and while she had no fear of the transition zone as such she had no desire to lose Crim now that she'd kept up with him. Or maybe Kira by now. She hoped that after all there hadn't been some kind of awkward embarrassment ahead. Finally she made it to a cleared area that was most certainly the main road. It was more than a little muddy, although none of the rain that she could see had escaped from the transition zone, but she wasn't going to be on it, anyway, but rather walking along it.

About ten feet inside there was a strong and very high fence with a kind of barbed wire on top, and she realized that when she'd dropped the pack she'd also dropped the wire cutters. Smart. If she had tried to press in, she wouldn't have been able to get through. The road was open, though, and the gate there was a simple wooden slab on a hinge.

Just beyond was the entry station, a pretty small affair by its look, with just room for a couple of people. There was a small cottage made of bamboo or the like nearby with a thatched straw roof, kind of looking like a fairytale house, and a couple of horses grazing in a nearby clearing.

Crim's wagon wasn't there—he had to have cleared the place and gone farther up, maybe to wait for her. By now it was sure to be Kira, and Sam didn't want Kira out in a strange place alone right now. Kira was skilled, but this wasn't her kind of element, and against a gang or perhaps animals of who knew what variety she was just one woman alone.

The lights for the entry station and outside the hut weren't electric but plain old torches, but they gave off a good amount of light and definitely lit up the entire gate area. Suddenly a dog started barking over the hut and Sam didn't like that at all. It was definitely a dog, and maybe a big one. She tightened the grip on her spear.

Funny, she thought. Like a half hour ago I was ready to kill four human beings, but I'm not sure I can kill a dog.

A woman came out of the hut and said something sharply to the unseen dog, who quieted down but only a little. She went on over to the guard shack and called in. A man came out, then reached back in and turned off his inside light. Sam couldn't tell too much about them from this distance, but they both looked kind of average. Thin, though. They looked like the kind who could eat a chocolate cake apiece and still lose weight. They were also kind of romantic, as if they hadn't been married long—if they were married now. He said something, she laughed, said something back, they kissed, and then walked hand in hand back to the hut. Sam thought it was kind of sweet.

But that damned dog better be on a chain or something. She suddenly sensed an odd building of energy, and almost immediately after there was a crack of thunder and it started to rain. It wasn't the kind of very hard, driving rain like out in the mist, but it was a steady rain with pretty good volume, the kind that soaked everything through and turned the mud to worse. She risked at least a bit of a bond with the storm, trying to sense if it were normal and natural or if some ghostly airborne riders were within it, trying to use it. There was nothing but the storm, though, and she relaxed. If it was a normal thing, then it could be used. She doubted the dog liked it any more than anybody else, and it was noisy enough to mask most sounds. She went to the fence, then to the gate, and squeezed through. The horses made irritated sounds, not at her particularly but at being left out in this crap, and she walked back into the shadows sinking in mud to her ankles now.

Within a few hundred yards of the entry station it turned pitch dark; so dark it was impossible to see a thing, only feel the rain and mud. She slipped a couple of times, but it meant little, since the rain was giving her a rinse. She was, however, beginning to long for very short hair again, and mulling over the virtues of shaving her head. Hell, considering how she looked now what difference would it make? Boday would still love her, and Charley would still be

her friend, and Boolean would still need her. Still, she had the uneasy feeling that maybe looking like some freaked-out Hunchback of Notre Dame might not be something she could live with.

Odd to be thinking of Boday and Charley at a time like this, but she really missed them. They were the only two people she really cared about in this godforsaken place, the only two who cared anything about her. Oddly, and particularly these past few days, she missed Boday more than Charley. Charley had changed so much Sam wasn't sure she knew or understood her old friend anymore. Jeez—she didn't have any more to do with working as a hooker than Sam had with getting fat, but Charley liked it.

Boday—Boday was security. Hell, it was more than that. She'd lived with the crazy artist for a real long time now, and she knew her better than she knew anybody. Oh, not that you could understand Boday—that was probably impossible—but you got to know her real well. She admired Boday's egocentric confidence, her real genius at almost any art form she wanted to tackle, her inner strength and toughness in a world that was far more of a man's world than anything Sam had known before.

That was something. It was starting to come back after all. She was starting to remember "home," or at least the Earth she'd come from. There were lots of gaps, mostly personal ones, but she remembered the music and TV and cars and all that. She could remember Boston, and Albuquerque a little, but she couldn't remember any faces. Not even her Mom and Dad. No faces.

It bothered her, but only that. She hadn't ever been happy there, and God knew where she'd have wound up if she hadn't gotten pulled here. If only they would just leave her alone here. If only she had some time and some peace to find out about herself once and for all ...

Where the hell was Kira with the wagon? She couldn't have kept going far in this weather. She knew Sam would be along, and it wasn't out of friendship that the strange two-in-one couple was helping her, but for profit. She was sure that Crim or whichever had made it to this particular world, and equally sure that customs or whatever had been cleared because there was no sign of the wagon or any problems back there.

Clearly something had gone wrong after clearing the gate, and that something was almost certainly not related to the entry gate itself—that couple hadn't looked like they'd had anything unusual happen back there.

So now there was just the rain and mud and darkness of a strange world, and she began to feel miserable and alone.

I'm sick of this! she thought sourly. Sick of running and hiding and being chased and abused, sick of having everybody crap on me in this world and having everything go wrong to boot! Damn it, I've been nothing but somebody's Ping-Pong ball since we got here! This has just gotta end! There's just gotta be an end to all this!

The storm rumbled, and there was now thunder and lightning. She had been conditioned to fear such storms, first by the dreams, then by the reality of being hunted by ones who used them, but suddenly she began to think things out. She was a clone or something of the Storm Princess, or the Storm Princess was a clone of her. Who cared? And the Storm Princess was being conned or was going along with this Klittichorn clown who wanted to kill her; right? But why did this big-shot sorcerer who had enough power to find her back home and chase her here need the damned Storm Princess at all? It wasn't just a big plot, it was something that Boolean guy had said long ago.

Klittichorn didn't have any power over the storms! That's why he needed this Storm Princess! Sure, he used those ugly creatures of storms, but they were dangerous when they were around, maybe, not him. And she'd actually called a storm once, here, to save them. It hadn't turned out so right, but it saved their personal asses anyway. But it hadn't worked out so right not because of Klittichorn or those monsters. Why was he trying to kill her, anyway? Because for some reason he was scared of her. She was a wildcard he had to kill because he couldn't control her and her power was dangerous to him! That wasn't putting down the real threat from killers and sky creatures and changeling

witches and all that, but she was running into them anyway. And—why were they all chasing her?

'Cause he's just as scared of me as I am of him!

She stopped dead in the middle of the muddy road, closed her eyes, and took a number of deep breaths. There, in the dark, in the rain, she let her mind go, let it rise up to the clouds and turbulence above.

And she felt power.

She was one with the storm, and the storm was hers. She was where she stood but she was also everywhere touched by this great tropical storm. The winds were hers to command, to bend branches or whip through the treetops; the lightning was a plaything, a toy, a weapon if she wanted it to be.

She was aware, suddenly, of a presence in the storm, a thing not of it that hid within it and took from the storm's center a bit of its power to give it form.

It used clouds to form a skull face, a demon face, and electrical energy to feed it and give it strength and solidity. She did not know what it was, but she knew immediately, somehow, that it was looking for her. Looking, but not seeing, because the rest of the storm was hers and she would not permit it to see.

The Sudog felt resistance, felt its will being blocked, but the force against it was too strong. It looked anxiously in all directions for the source, but the source didn't seem to have a center, a locus. The storm itself was somehow alive in the same way as the Sudog was alive, and the storm was much larger and greater than it could ever be.

Winds whipped around it, creating an upper-air twirling, a tornado within the clouds, and with it came the force and power of a vacuum, tugging and pulling at the Sudog as it strove fruitlessly to break free. Sucking it up, tearing it apart ... It gave a mournful, anguished moaning scream as it came apart, on a level few could hear, and then it was gone, leaving the storm to her alone once more.

My God! she thought, feeling both exultation and disgust at herself. Boolean should have told me! All this time I been runnin' from storms, cowering in lonely rooms, scrunched up in dark corners. All this time I've been afraid of the thunder, and it was my greatest ally, my one true friend!

She felt the soaking rain on her body and found its touch no longer terrible but instead a friend, a lover's caress.

She shifted her mental focus again to the storm, using it now, directing it. Lightning within the storm could be used as well, could illuminate the very road ahead, if only briefly . . . There! Off to the side and not too far ahead, partly hidden by the tall trees! Horses!

Just whose horses she couldn't be sure, but so long as she had the storm, and she knew now that she could have it if she needed it, it wasn't as important. She started walking again, this time using the illuminations as a guide in the rain and mud and darkness.

Yes! There! It was Crim's wagon and the familiar team, still all hitched up as if waiting for the rain to pass. The wagon wheels were sunk deep in mud, and even she was now struggling in the mud of the road, sinking down well past her ankles and going on only because of her hard-won great strength. Clearly, though, that wagon was going to have lots of trouble unless things dried out. She approached the rear of the wagon cautiously, unable to figure out why she had been forced to walk so long a distance. Satisfied as well as she could be that there was no one lurking under it or in the nearby trees, she stood there and shouted, "Kira! It's me! Is there anything wrong?"

There was no answer, and so she climbed up and started to look inside.

Something lashed out from the dark interior of the wagon, catching her on the head and knocking her back, stunned, into the rain and mud. Confused, she made her way painfully to her feet, slipping a couple of times before she made it, and looked up.

A dark figure stood there just beyond the tailgate, a figure that wasn't of anyone she had ever seen. The occasional lightning illuminated it slightly, showing a mean, scarred face with deep-set, wild eyes and a frizzled gray beard, and he had a pistol in his hand like he knew how to use it. He reached down and came up with something—they looked like chains or maybe manacles.

"Ye just stay right there, Fat One," he shouted menacingly at her. "Ye ain't worth nothin' dead, but I'm a dead enough shot even in the dark at this distance to hit one of them fat drumsticks of your'n with a high-powered slug that'll keep you there. No funny moves, now. I'm comin' out in this crap but there ain't no way ye can move or take me without me gettin' ye bad, and if it's my life or your'n I'll drill a hole right through ye."

His accent was strange and low-class but she had no trouble understanding his words. Her head throbbed, but this was no time to worry about a headache.

"What have you done with Kira, you pig?" she shouted back at him.

He laughed as he reached down, let down the back board, then sat on it, all the time his eyes and pistol never wavering from her. He was definitely a pro, all right, for all the rest he might be.

"Yer pretty friend's inside, all trussed up like a stuffed goose. She tried to give me some trouble when I popped up and ordered her to pull over, so's I had to whack her one good. She won't pull her changeling trick again, neither. I seen the big guy turn, but it won't do her no good if she tries it. Got a wire noose on her pretty neck. She turns now and that little neck gets big, well, she's gone and hung herself is all. Now ye turn 'round, back to me, hands behind ye, so's I can stick these things on ye. No tricks, now. I know 'em all and by the gods you'll feel a bullet rip through ye like ye never dreamed."

Think! Concentrate! Got to get him farther away from the wagon! Move back a little. Make him come to you!

"Gad it's awful in this miserable hole," he grumbled, easing himself down into the mud. A sudden gust of wind whipped the rain right into him, and he was momentarily off-balance. Not enough to jump him, but when he recovered she was several steps back.

"Oh, no ye don't! Ye don't move a muscle 'cept I tell ye," he said menacingly.

"Ye been warned. Do anything but what I say just 'xactly as I say it and I'll plug ye through and do it myself while ye writhes in pain in the mud! Now—turn around, hands behind your back! Now!"

It wasn't far enough, but it had to be. She reached out to the storm, surprised at her lack of fear. Fear was irrelevant now. She was too damned angry to be afraid.

"Go fuck yourself, Deadeye!" she shot back defiantly. "Don't you know who I am, what I am, to be so valuable to them?"

He hesitated, not expecting such defiance and, frankly, pretty curious about the answer to those questions.

"Ye look like a fat peasant pig t'me," he growled.

She felt a sudden, total coldness within her, a cold and calculating dangerous part of her she had never known or suspected was there.

"You know the Storm Princess? That she knows how to bend even storms like this one to her will?"

He frowned, now thoroughly soaked himself. "Yeah? What of her?"

"Well, so do I," she responded.

The lightning bolt was strong and powerful; it came in an instant from the great clouds above and struck him dead on and went on through him to ground. The displaced air caused a loud thunderclap and went off with such force she was momentarily thrown backwards, landing again in the muck, but there was no shot. The moment it struck him it so heated the powder in the bullet that the gun had gone off, but she wasn't aware of anything except an ass full of mud.

It took her a moment to collect herself and get up again, and when she did she looked at where the man had been. He was man no longer, but instead a charred and gruesome-looking corpse, still smoldering, the manacles and pistol still sizzling as the rain struck them where they lay.

She felt momentarily grossed out at the sight, but ran quickly to the wagon and hauled herself in. "Kira!"

She looked around, fumbled with the lantern, found the flint and, removing the glass, struck it at the wick until it lit. Replacing the glass, she waited for the flame to stabilize and then looked around.

Kira was bundled up really good. Since the man had seen the change but hadn't

realized it was involuntary, he didn't want Crim suddenly popping in, breaking bonds, and coming after him. He'd tied her hands and feet with wire, then stuffed her into a sleeping bag and tied that off as well. He'd also stuffed rags in her mouth to gag her. Finally, he'd rigged the wire noose he'd spoken of and nailed it to the wagon floorboard.

She was awake now, but she didn't look any too good, and there was a nasty welt on her forehead and a small cut that had bled a little before drying. Kira's beauty was going to be tempered, at least for a few days.

Sam pulled the rags from Kira's mouth and she started to cough and gag.

"Stay still!" Sam told her. "I've gotta find something that'll cut you out of that thing. I sure as hell can't undo that stuff. Never seen nobody who could do that with wire."

She went and got the trail shears. "This'll probably screw these things up, but I think I can get through that stuff with 'em." She knelt down and first tried to cut where the noose was fixed to the floor but that seemed to strangle Kira and she stopped, first cutting the bonds around the sleeping bag and then getting it off her as gently as she could. She got the tight bonds off Kira's legs, but the woman was face up, arms beneath, and that noose just had to go first.

Sam looked at the hammer but it had a back kind of like a pick instead of a pry groove. Another invention to file away for future profit. She sighed. "Turn your head a little to the side and hold on," she warned Kira. "I'm gonna have to get in there around the neck and cut. There's no other way."

It was tricky, nervous work, but she was careful, and with her powerful arms she managed to apply enough pressure to eventually snap the cord, although Kira was also going to have a bruise around her neck and particularly on one side for a while as well.

Kira sat up, coughing and gasping, and Sam quickly freed her hands and then got her some water. Kira felt her throat and gagged a few times, but seemed at last to recover enough to try talking.

"Sloppy on Crim's part," she managed. "But I wouldn't have thought of it, either. They--suspected--somehow, or--at least--this one did."

"Take it easy," Sam cautioned her. "No rush now."

"He--you--got him? How?"

"Tell you later."

"He crawled--into the wagon--must've--during the long wait. Just lay there--quietly--in the back. Probably got in when Crim took a crap. The border guard either--didn't look--or didn't care." She kept stroking her neck, but she had to talk. "Caught me--by surprise. Tried to--take him--but he had--something. Long weight on a chain, I think. Got me good." She suddenly stared at Sam. "You, too?"

Sam was so muddy and cruddy in general she hardly realized it, but when she touched her forehead it hurt like hell. "Ow!" Suddenly she felt a stinging in her left thigh and looked down. There was a gash there, and blood not fully clotted. "The son of a bitch still shot me!"

"Sit down! I'm all right, now--honest. Better than you," Kira told her firmly.

"Let's get that cleaned out and some salve put in there. Then I'm going to put a tub and the cistern on the wagon sides. If it's going to rain like this, the least we can get out of it is drinking water and a bath."

The pain was starting to rise up with a vengeance, but Sam managed a satisfied smile. "Don't step on the mess outside," she warned. "And don't worry about the rain. It'll rain just as long as you want ..."

Klittichorn, the Horned Demon of the Snows, fumed, and those around him quaked in awe and fear.

"Who are these girls who survive every torment?" he thundered. "One burns our agents with fire and strangles the Sudog in its cloudy lair, and the other--the other--manages to destroy a Prince of the Inner Hells, a Stormrider! They avoid our armies, exile the Blue Witch to the netherhells, and we seem powerless to lay hands on them! Well, this will have to stop! They cannot both be magic, yet they do things even I had not dreamed to do! No, my lords and ladies, this must not be permitted to continue!"

Suddenly his fury seemed to vanish, replaced with cold calculation. "We can never hope to snare them both and we have lost them as well. Let the mercenaries keep trying, but otherwise pull back. We have failed at stopping them so far, so let them through. Ease their way. But marshal local allied forces off Masalur hub. I want them ready to act when we are ready."

"I see, My Lord Klittichorn," said one of the generals. "Let them grow confident and then grab them where we know they must go."

The sorcerer whirled. "No, idiot! I care little now if they reach the place or not. Too much time and energy and expense has already gone to that goal without result. It would be convenient to know their location, of course, and even more convenient if they both made it to Boolean within a few weeks' time, but it will not matter in the end. Without him they are not relevant."

They all looked shocked. "You mean, after all this, you intend to let them reach Boolean?"

"Let us just say I no longer care to prevent it. But double our spells upon Masalur, concentrate our magic, poll and deploy our demons and allies so that the bastard remains where he is. Lose him and we might as well be lost. No, my friends, let us not combat fate any longer. The mathematics, of destiny appears to protect them. Let it. But whether they meet or not, we shall cheat destiny and alter their heads by the one means that neither destiny nor Boolean can fight. We must have one final test. We must know if our calculations are correct, our dreams realizable."

"My Lord, you don't mean—"

"And why not? We must know if it works. What better target is offered, that rids us of the only enemy that might defeat us? If they get together in time all the better—we shall eliminate all threats at once. But no matter, the time will be set and fixed and the one most dangerous will most certainly be there."

"But the girl—she might ..."

"Might what? Without Boolean she is helpless, without training, without direction. A wild talent, no more, soon without anyone who knows how to use her properly. Remove the canny Boolean and they will fall victim to the fates they have so narrowly chested up to now. No Storm Princess, but merely a girl who can play tricks with the weather."

"But, My Lord—a hub! We are the strongest single force it is true, but to attack a single hub and eliminate a single powerful sorcerer is to confirm all he says! The other kings and sorcerers will band against us! It is tipping our hand too soon!"

"Ridiculous! They are mad fools. One they will put down to the same chance as they put down all the others through history, not only because it is most logical but because they want to believe it is mere chance! A few might suspect, but out of fear they will tip our way. The rest will cry a few tears and make sacrifices to their gods in thanks that it did not happen to them. Come, my friends, this is not boldness but caution! If we cannot murder Masalur and Boolean with it, what chance do we have of ever accomplishing our wider, grander dreams?" He turned on them, eyes blazing. "Now the changewind shall come to Mashtopol! And soon, my friends, upon that disaster and with that blood to feed us, the Akhbreed empire will cease to exist!"

The Changewinds saga continues with War of the Maelstrom.