

TENEBRAK THE FOUNDING - CHAPTER 1: Karialla

One afternoon in late spring Karialla eased her tired body in the saddle, patting her riding nerid's neck absent-mindedly as she rode slowly along, looking forward to getting home. Behind her the pack nerid followed docilely, loaded with purchases from the town.

Soon it would be Karialla's thirtieth birthday. She couldn't believe how quickly the years had passed since she finished her studies and became a healer. After that she'd married and moved away from the city of Tenebrak with a group of her friends. They'd been living together now for nine years in Harmony, the settlement they'd founded far away from the troubles that had erupted in towns and cities. Wanting to live together in peace.

She was a day late returning from Setherak, having been delayed in town by a complicated birthing. Her husband, Pavlin, would be worrying about her safety in these troubled times, but she could never deny help to those who needed it. She felt sad, because once again she'd had to face another woman's joy in her new-born child and that always hurt when you longed for a child yourself.

The final stretch was the most dangerous part of her journey, where she had to use a well-beaten track for an hour or so before she could turn off it towards Harmony.

When she reached her turning, she tugged the second nerid's leading rein impatiently as the beast tried to stop and graze, then gasped in shock as she noticed a muddle of prints in the soft earth beneath her. Fear crawled through her. A large group of riders had turned off here recently. Why? The track led only to two settlements, her own and a larger one which was much further from the main track.

She listened intently before she started moving again. You could never be too careful in times like these, even though the Discord which had torn her world apart for years

was said to be dying down. She stopped to listen several times but heard nothing except birdsong and foliage rustling.

When she reached the turn that led only to Harmony, she was horrified to see that the group of riders had turned off here too. For a moment she couldn't breathe as fear turned into sheer terror and her heart began to pound. But there were still no sounds of other riders, only the wind in the trees, the humming of a myriad insects and the distant fluting calls of birds.

Taking a deep breath, she rode on. Perhaps it was mere coincidence that strangers had come this way. Perhaps it was just an exploration party looking for somewhere to settle.

Or perhaps it was raiders!

She shivered. No, why would anyone raid a small place like Harmony?

We should have tried to hide our turn-off, she thought, we really should. No one is safe from violence in these dreadful times. It stretches out its bloody fingers everywhere, clawing at people's lives.

After an hour's ride through the wildwoods, she came to the final bend and saw a blanket lying muddied on the ground, a child's toy tossed under a bush. Abandoning caution she beat her heels against her nered's sides. 'Go! Go!' she called and when the creature barely changed its pace, she kicked it harder and thwacked it with the palm of her hand until it snorted indignantly and started to jog, dragging the pack nered along behind it.

She smelled the smoke before she got to the settlement. 'Oh, no! Please, no!' she whispered again and again in an agonised litany, but she'd already guessed what she would find.

Looted goods lay scattered, dropped by the raiders. Bodies were sprawled here and there, covered in blood. Where were the others? Still hiding in the forest? Should she call out to them?

Some of the houses were scorched, as if the raiders had tried to set fire to them, but they'd failed in that at least, because jarulan wood didn't burn easily.

She'd seen the results of minor attacks once or twice while on her rounds as a healer, but she'd never seen such comprehensive destruction as there was here, never! It was like her worst nightmares. In a moment, surely, she would awake to find Pavlin holding her, murmuring words of comfort in her ear.

But this nightmare didn't go away, so she took a deep breath and guided the nerid towards her home.

Two more bodies lay outside the house next door, half-hidden by bushes: Dinna and her small daughter. They were hacked and bloody, with terror still showing on their battered faces. Karialla stopped moving to put her hand across her mouth, holding back the sobs, the desire to scream and flee. She looked quickly sideways at the other houses across the green and saw more bodies, but didn't go closer to examine them. They were so still and bloody, they must be beyond her help.

She turned towards her own home again. 'Pavlin!' she called, but it came out as a faint croak. She managed to call again, more loudly this time. 'Pavlin!' But no one replied and he didn't come out from hiding to greet her.

Shivering, she slid off her nerid's back and for a moment, she could only lean against its sturdy side, dreading what she would find. She had to summon up all her courage before she could force herself to move. The path was bordered by clumps of herbs she'd planted herself, but half of them had been trampled to pulp. She walked forward slowly, like an old woman.

Pavlin was waiting for her, lying across the doorstep with an expression of surprise on his gentle face. His eyes stared blindly up at the trees he'd loved so much. His hands were outstretched in what looked like a gesture of pleading and his throat - she gulped back the nausea - his throat was a bloody, gaping mess. She fell to her knees beside him, closing his staring eyes with her fingertips and binding the wound with her scarf. Then she bowed her head and let her tears flow.

At no time did it occur to her that the attackers might still be there or that she herself might be in danger. Indeed, at that moment she would have welcomed the oblivion of death. She wept for a while over his body, then stood up and forced herself to think.

First, she decided, she would take Pavlin's body inside their house, because she couldn't bear to leave him lying out there like some slaughtered beast. With difficulty she dragged the dead weight inside, then fetched their best blanket to cover him with.

The raiders had spilled her stores all over the floor as they made themselves a meal, yet had taken very little else except for that food. But they'd smashed things, wantonly, for no reason. When discord madness filled people they rejoiced in destruction.

She gathered her courage again and walked back outside. She had to find out whether anyone had survived. But somehow, the settlement felt empty of life, even before she started searching. Was it possible to sense such a thing? She walked slowly round the rest of the green, passing her friends' bodies, accounting for them one by one, feeling dizzy and distant. 'I must check,' she muttered. 'Check everywhere. Surely they can't all be dead?'

But they were. She counted them, every last one, some obviously dragged from hiding places to be cut down.

She entered each building with stomach-churning reluctance. Eight dwellings, a crafthouse and a meeting place, clustered together in the grove of huge trees. Each

building told the same tale of horror: men, women, children, all killed violently. Like Pavlin, they lay with the terror of sudden death showing on their faces.

She was a healer, she'd seen death many times, but never like this.

She only found the body of one raider, a lean man with a badly scarred arm. Even in death, his face still showed the madness and anger typical of those infected by Discord. What was this sickness which turned some people into vicious monsters who enjoyed killing and pain and violence?

The workshop was empty, every bit of silver gone. That must have been what the raiders came for. How had they known about Harmony and the silver which Pavlin and the others worked into such beautiful objects? As she stood among the tools scattered across the floor, she felt fiercely glad she'd taken most of the finished silver pieces with her to sell. How disappointed the raiders must have been to find so little to steal!

Then more pain seared through her as she realized their disappointment at the poor pickings might be the reason why they'd killed everyone.

Realising suddenly that she'd forgotten to tend the nerids, she made her way to the meadow. Her riding nerid was browsing the lush grass by the river, the saddle still on his back. She leaned against his side for a moment, glad to touch a warm, living creature, then straightened up, slapped his rump and led him back into the village. The pack nerid followed them meekly to the green, as pack nerids were bred to do.

After she'd unsaddled them, she led them back to the empty pen, which had housed twenty other beasts a few days ago. Although they were taller than she was, the two nerids looked small and lonely in the grassy corner where they went to huddle together, as if they knew something was wrong.

It took the rest of the day and well into the night to bury her husband and friends, using the compost pits as a mass grave. Luckily for her, it was a three-moon night and she could see almost as clearly as in daytime.

She hesitated over the stranger then buried him, too, though apart from the others.

By the time she'd shovelled enough rich black earth to cover the bodies, her hands were raw and blistered, and every bit of her ached. That seemed right, somehow, the pain a necessary penance for her own escape.

She forced herself to eat something, then sat on at the kitchen table, her thoughts heavy with sorrow.

In the morning she awoke still sitting there with her head on her arms. She was stiff and soul-sick, but there was nothing to keep her here now. She decided to leave Harmony that very day, leave it and never come back.

After forcing down some more food, she set about collecting those of her possessions which might be of use in her future life, piling them on the table in a careless heap. There were fewer than she'd expected. 'Well, I won't need much,' she said aloud. 'My life is going to be very different from now on . . . And people will think I'm mad if I don't stop talking to myself.' But even the sound of her own voice helped to break the heaviness of the silence in a place which had always buzzed with voices and happy, busy sounds.

When she went out to harness the nerids, she discovered they'd escaped through the broken fence during the night and although she called and followed their tracks for some distance, she didn't find them. They were faster than she was when they weren't loaded with goods and riders. Perhaps they'd live wild from now on.

Returning to the house, she hunted out a travel-pack, placing in it only what she could carry with ease, abandoning most of her selected possessions with no more than a sigh. She had the money she'd brought back from market, some spare clothes and three books, two which had belonged to her father and mother, and the healers' book her mentor had given her when she finished her studies for Second Cadre. She would never abandon those.

Almost as an afterthought, she made a roll of the rarer herbs and unguents she'd purchased in Setherak. It weighed very little and she could attach it to the pack. She could use these in her work as a healer, which was the only thing she had left now. Holding the last package of dried yezra-root in her hand, she stared at it, motionless, as an idea struck her with the force of midsummer lightning.

'That's it!' she breathed. 'Oh yes, that's what I'll do with the rest of my life! I'll return to Tenebrak, complete my studies and become a Healer of the First Cadre.' Doing this would give her life meaning again.

Tenebrak, she mused, as she checked the house one last time. Apart from the fact that the city was the only place where you could learn to be a healer, what better place could there be for a fresh start? Legend said their Forebears had crossed the heavens in a flying ship - how could that be possible? - which had fallen to the ground and broken apart in the wildwoods south of Tenebrak. The survivors had found a land empty of people, so had settled in the fertile vale and there they'd prospered.

Who knew the truth about what had happened hundreds of years ago? She'd always loved that particular story, though, and had sometimes tried to imagine what it must be like to fly across the sky. Others had believed the tale and many had gone searching, but no one had ever discovered the remains of their ancestors' flying ship. Presumably it would have crumbled to dust by now. If it had ever existed. Well, it was a nice tale, all the same. And why she was thinking about that now, she didn't know.

'So,' she said aloud, 'I'll go back to Tenebrak.'

She frowned as she remembered that the One Circle was also situated in Tenebrak. Well, she definitely wouldn't be going to their meetings again. Probably Rojan, if he was still living in the city, would be First Elect by now, managing the lives of his congregation as he had once tried to manage her and Pavlin's lives. He'd been one of her main reasons for agreeing to give up her studies after she achieved Second Cadre and

leave the city. Since her husband wasn't alive to be hurt by it, she'd no longer have to hide her dislike and distrust of his cousin Rojan.

The thought of Pavlin took her off-balance and brought more tears to her swollen eyes. She brushed back a tangle of hair with a hand that would tremble. 'It's all gone,' she whispered. 'Everything I loved. And for the second time. First my parents, now Pavlin. I can't believe in anything any more. No loving gods would allow a man like Pavlin to be killed.'

She raised her voice to shout, 'There are no gods!' lifting her face and addressing the sky. Her words echoed strangely in her ears, as if others were listening, as if the sounds were bouncing off distant walls, and she shook her head in a vain effort to clear it. She didn't know why she must make a vow in this way, but something was driving her to it, something beyond her comprehension.

'From now on, I will believe only in what can be proven. Since I am no longer a wife and have proved that I can't become a mother, I will devote my whole life to becoming a healer of the First Cadre, embarking on a quest for wisdom and understanding.' She paused for a moment and added sadly, 'And I shall seek peace, too, if that's ever possible.'

She realised she was standing with arms upraised in a shaft of sunlight that had angled down through the trees, addressing the empty sky. Suddenly she felt foolish and self-conscious, but stubbornly she finished her vows aloud, using the traditional words of affirmation. 'So do I swear. Let the sun by day and the three moons by night bear witness to my oath.'

When everything was ready, she tucked a root of riala blossom into the top of Pavlin's grave, his favourite flower, and shed a tear or two over it. Then she picked up her pack and set off with a steady stride. She stopped only once, at the first turning, to take a last look back down the forest track that led to Harmony.

After that, she set her face firmly towards the future.

CHAPTER 2 KARIALLA'S TREK

Day 4

On this day Karialla turned from a little-used track on to a road that clearly bore plenty of other traffic. She'd welcomed the time alone, pushing herself physically each day until she was too tired to do more than eat her journey bread and the fruit and nuts she'd been able to gather, then roll herself into her blanket and fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Day 5

On this day she met another group of travellers and stopped, pleased to see someone else. 'Give you greeting! What's the news ahead?'

'We mind our own business in these parts,' said the man, hustling his family past her. He was armed with a stout cudgel and his eyes were flickering to and fro as if he expected an ambush at any moment. His wife held the youngest child protectively against her and she, too, had a cudgel, as well as a dagger sheath on her belt.

'I'm on my own, no danger to you,' Karialla called to them as they hurried away down the road.

'The more fool you, then!' the woman shouted back.

That night Karialla made camp in a clearing near the road, one of the places travellers used regularly. She slept fitfully, disturbed by the encounter with the family. Awaking suddenly, she saw a figure fumbling with her pack.

'Leave that alone!' She sprang to her feet, picking up the dagger she'd left within easy reach. As the moonlight glinted off its sharp blade, the figure melted away into the wildwoods. She stood there, shaking. 'I should have moved further from the road,' she muttered. But even the sound of her own voice made her feel uneasy.

After a moment's hesitation she packed her things and moved back on to the road. Only one half-moon remained in the sky now and she felt menaced by the dimly lit shadows to either side. When she found a huge tree with spreading roots, she decided to stop for a while. But she couldn't sleep, couldn't even persuade herself to lie down, and soon gave up trying.

She sat with her back against the tree trunk, so that no one could creep up behind her. After listening to the small noises of the night and worrying if she didn't recognise a sound, she sighed in relief as a sleepy chorus of birdsong heralded the dawn and light began to gild the forest.

Day 6

The next day she moved more cautiously, and when two men on foot accosted her at a bend in the road, she was ready. As their eyes roamed over her body in a way that sickened her, she grew too angry to be afraid.

She pulled out the dagger before they had time to speak and they flinched backwards. 'I'm very dearly bought!' she said fiercely, her hand steady, her eyes continuing to challenge theirs.

After a fraught minute or two, one of them made a feint towards her and when she hefted the knife easily from one hand to the other, and sliced the air close to his face, he shrugged and stepped back, slapping his companion on the shoulder. 'Ah, leave this one be. I prefer younger meat, anyway. She's too scrawny for my taste.'

The other said nothing, but his eyes burned across the space between them and as he

turned away, Karialla shivered involuntarily at the discord madness flickering within their depths. It was alive, this madness, malevolent, like a creature in its own right. Yet again, the healer in her wondered what caused it. Was it some sort of illness that spread by touch? Or was it something else? Was there really something evil lurking in their world?

She watched the two men stride away down the road. They looked back a couple of times and once, one of them made a lewd, threatening gesture, but she just slapped the dagger blade against her palm and stared back at him.

Not until they were out of sight did she grab her pack and run down the road in the opposite direction. Spying a track that led off to the right, she turned on to it, keeping to the edge among the straggly grasses so that her footprints wouldn't be too obvious. She felt so uneasy, she started moving faster, then panic set in and she fled, pounding along with the pack thumping against her back. She ran until she was gasping for breath and her muscles were too heavy to move, then crawled under some bushes, shivering with reaction.

How was she to get to Tenebrak, if people were waiting round every corner to attack her? For a moment, she longed for Harmony and wondered if she should go back there, but the thought of the empty houses and the mass grave in the compost pit, made her shake her head, sadness welling within her. No, there was no going back.

Feeling exhausted, she dozed for a while beneath the bushes, but when dusk fell, she stood up and started walking. Since it was a two-moon night, with one of the moons nearing full, there was plenty of light, so she spent most of it tramping along. Every now and then she stopped to listen, but to her great relief she met no one else.

Days 7-19

From then onwards, she wore the dagger openly and drew blood with it, too. The first

time she used it in earnest, she vomited helplessly into the undergrowth once she was far enough away from her wounded attacker. To injure someone deliberately was contrary to her oath as a healer, contrary to everything she and Pavlin had lived for. But she knew she would fight back again if she was attacked. You had to defend yourself. Pavlin had been wrong about that. You couldn't reason with madness.

Occasionally she passed through villages, but found people surly and unwelcoming. She bargained fiercely over the price of food and took her money from a belt purse she kept nearly empty, behaving as if to part with even a single coin hurt her. She would have liked to purchase a riding nerid, but was afraid that to do so would make her conspicuous and label her as someone with money. It was a pity though. Riding nerids didn't move quickly, but they could trot along tirelessly for hours.

As she napped through several broken nights when she kept waking up with her heart pounding, thinking she heard something moving nearby, she wondered whether she had been right in her decision to return to Tenebrak. Any settlement would take her in gladly, for the sake of her healing skills. You could do a lot of good in the world as a Healer of the Second Cadre.

Was it really worth facing the perils of the more populous areas, the perils that Discord kept throwing in her path, just for the sake of further training so that she could join the First Cadre? Would she even get to Tenebrak alive? She didn't know, no longer felt as if she knew anything for certain. But something kept her moving stubbornly on.

She fell into a routine, keeping away from the well-travelled roads, using the sun to guide her roughly in a south-westerly direction. After all, didn't they say all roads led to Tenebrak? But the further south she got, the more dangerous the roads became and with all her care, she had several narrow escapes.

She had almost decided now to abandon the roads completely and head back north through the wildwoods. Almost, but not quite. She'd always been stubborn.