

Book Three of *The Arcadian Chronicles***Faith Aloud****CHAPTER ONE**

The heat was ferocious. When a child, I used to imagine the noonblast was a Hellhound's breath. Standing in Cnicus village square under the full force of the sun, I recalled my fantasy as the hot, sulphurous wind raised small dust devils. I blinked – partly to ease my sand-scurfed eyes; and partly to shift the giddy sense that I was actually here. In Cnicus village square. When crossing the square, someone generally used to set the dogs on me – or children would give chase, throwing stones. I gazed at the newly dug beds and wilting plants edging the dusty plascrete paths – before Eris Harvester's bony elbow hauled my attention back to the business in hand.

Being invited to this service is an honour. Please, Lord, don't let me crip it up...

'Plants spread happi-ness around our lives, just like the glin-ting No-de, With their green gift of growth and air that bran-ches like a sup-er co-de...'

Her followers were singing another of Mai Brarian's songs. Humming along, I watched the women's rapt faces. Were Mai's beliefs really nonsense? Maybe the Node did need plants and Red's eye-rolling dismissal was merely a stench son's attitude. After all, he always reckoned that she preferred her plants to him. Whatever the truth of it, her ideas had zipped around Acinos Province at warp speed. And her funeral was going to be the biggest occasion this rural community had ever seen. Especially now that Red had become the Overlord Brarian. Every time I thought about *that*, my head swam with the sheer implausibility of it.

'Giving your info-packs the breath of each tiny poll-en grain, Leaf bud, stamen tip and colour-ful petal to help you maintain...'

Ermina's voice soared in descant as she flung her head back, eyes closed. These women had been Mai's most devoted disciples. They'd have to be. Most sensible people were indoors, out of the scorching heat. It was hard to believe that I used to wander around Cnicus during noonblast without even thinking about it.

But that was because I was focused on where my next drink was coming from. Someone shouted. Leodan Washer burst out of the laundry and was sprinting across the village square towards us, closely followed by-

Suffering jaspers, it's Felina Keeper!

Her short legs were a blur - she was actually gaining on Leodan.

All singing ended as everyone scattered, trying to avoid him. But he slewed to a stop a few yards away - the despair on his face so bleaking I started to approach him.

Felina also halted and – between gasps - pleaded with him, “...point in running, boy. There's just the Arids out there.”

Leodan slashed the space between them with a knife, “I'm not going to be <Collared>. I'd rather die!”