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Burning Sacrifices

Other Books in the Dark King Rising Series:

Dark King Rising

Shattered Fates

Searching Souls

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Burning Sacrifices

By
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CHAPTER ONE

Crosscurrents

The music was everything; a world within a world. The flute was the instrument, the music it created, the magic that tingled along every sense and carried the dream on its back. The dream was color; shadowy form that enticed and wrapped insistent fingers about the assembled crowd in the dinning hall. Lost in that world, the musician smiled languidly, unable and unwilling to stop playing and break the spell.

“He’s very good.”

"Hmm?" Jhan blinked, the spell broken for her at least. She turned to her dinning companion and smiled. “You wouldn’t know a good song, my tin ear love, if it slapped you in the face.”

Kile Helarion Dor grinned back at her, gentle, blue eyes unrepentant. “Guilty as charged. I suppose I’m bored. He’s been playing for an hour, it seems.”

Jhan swept a glance about the large stone hall and its row upon row of wooden tables filled with enraptured lords, ladies, and minor relatives of the Dor family. The old Duke himself sat on a raised chair heads above everyone else. His gray hair was cut military short and he was stuffed into a simple, blue robe, a circlet of silver askew over his furrowed brow. The short, burly man looked as bored as Kile had claimed to be.

“I don’t think anyone will notice if we slip away,” Jhan mused. “The dinner is over. They’re only picking their teeth with the bones.”

Kile’s grin went sour. A big, muscled man, his curly, golden hair, and bright gold brows, made him appear almost larger than life. He was not the type of man usually seen sitting with a goblet in his hand, admiring musicians. In that, he was a mirror of his father, and Jhan felt that both of them would have been more comfortable in a uniform, bivouacking on border patrols.

“The music might hold them for now,” Kile warned regretfully, “but, as soon as you stand up, everyone will be looking at you, my dear wife.”

“Gaping at Karana’s emasculated prince,” Jhan concluded, a sudden, dark expression marring her

beautiful face. It was an unwelcome memento of past pain and suffering that never quite went away.

“You’d think that, after a year, they would be bored with that scandal and move on to something else.”

“They didn’t all show up tonight just to hear the flute,” Kile agreed softly.

Even with the light from the chandeliers hanging in the rafters above, and the light of the roaring fireplaces, the great hall was still left in chasing shadows. Jhan’s face, heart shaped and white skinned, was almost ghostly in that dim illumination. Her great blue eyes, as deep as mountain lakes, and her lips, as pink as flower petals, were framed by her mass of black, curly hair. Falling in soft trails over her shoulders and far down her back, her hair was stark against the bright red dress she wore. She would have been stared at even without her reputation.

“Leaving wouldn’t be polite to the musician, anyway,” Jhan sighed, hating how their troubles had managed to spoil even this simple event. She attempted to return to light heartedness, but her words rang hollow. “You’ll just have to suffer through, Love.” As he always did, Jhan knew, and gladly, for her sake.

Kile grunted in agreement and settled back into his chair, hand idly poking through a platter of bread pastries as he turned and began speaking to the man on his opposite side. It was a serious effort to pass the time. The man was a vapid court dignitary that Kile had absolutely nothing in common with.

Jhan’s attention returned to the musician in a desperate attempt to alleviate her sudden depression. She had been enjoying the music up until then, and had only suggested leaving reluctantly. After two days of scandalized looks, and the cold rebuffs from everyone from Duchess Dor to the serving maids, Jhan had looked forward to this diversion.

The flute player was a tall boy, hardly sixteen, but well grown and better than fair looking. His hair was short and copper colored. His eyes were intelligent and as gray as washed stones. Those eyes, Jhan noticed with a flush of uncertainty, were on her as he played. They seemed full of calculation, with a look so intense, that Jhan momentarily forgot about the music and concentrated on the player. The boy was dressed in thick, woolen clothes with a foreign cut to them that Jhan didn’t recognize. He looked out of place among the casual fall fripperies of the nobility and even the servants were better dressed than he was. With such talent, it was strange that he could be so poor.

The music ended, much too soon for Jhan, and everyone sighed in appreciation. They clapped and threw coins to the boy. He picked them up and then turned to bow low to Duke Dor. The Duke was, for his part, trying hard not to show his relief that it was all over.

“Excellent playing, Ahlen Kantori!” Duke Dor applauded reflexively as he rose from his chair. He absently tossed a silver coin to the boy and the boy caught the coin eagerly, grasping it tightly in his free hand. His other hand was curled possessively about his ornately carved pipe. He bowed again to

the Duke, in thanks for the gift, before turning and leaving through a curtained door.

“Good.” Kile unconsciously echoed his father’s relief. He stood and held his hand out for Jhan’s. “The hour is late. Let’s leave, while we can, and go to bed.”

Jhan took Kile’s big hand and stood with a warm smile. “My Lord Kile, is that a proposition?”

Kile’s expression was almost wolfish, but he reddened a little around his ears. “I’m only attempting to do my husbandly duty,” he replied in an undertone, “as many times as I can.”

Jhan began to laugh, but then choked instead when an all too familiar face suddenly appeared at Kile’s elbow. From the tip of her perfectly styled blonde hair to the hem of her costly gown, Lady Caliya Mhar Frelen looked every inch a daughter of nobility. Her light green eyes swept Jhan contemptuously. In sharp contrast, the smile she turned on Kile was all sweetness as she slipped her arm through his.

Kile looked down at the woman uncomfortably, sensing trouble. His polite voice was strained at the edges. “Caliya?”

“I thought that you came to the House of Dor to see your children.” Caliya pouted prettily. “They’ve been waiting all day for their father to play with them.”

Kile became contrite instantly and Jhan felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. When he turned to her apologetically, she knew her role already and managed a more convincing smile than Caliya’s. “Go on, Kile. I’m still trying to work my way through that primer book Rehn gave me. I’m determined to learn to read and I don’t mind having some time alone to study.”

Kile kissed Jhan’s cheek lightly, all that was permissible in company, and allowed Lady Caliya to lead him away. Jhan watched them go angrily, knowing that Caliya was using the children deliberately to get close to Kile. The woman had long ago determined to have Kile as her husband and she wasn’t about to be denied her goal by Jhan. It was yet another battle, and another enemy, in the long succession of them that had been symptomatic of the entire year.

After their marriage, Jhan and Kile had lived quietly at Pekarín Fortress. Every five days, Kile had ridden to House Dor, on the outskirts of Sarvoy, to spend time with his twin daughter and son by Caliya. Jhan hadn’t minded, and had even encouraged it, knowing how much Kile loved his children. When Duke Dor had suggested that they stay for Harvest Festival, Jhan had happily agreed, eager to escape the wagging tongues and the outraged looks of the nobility of Pekarín. Unfortunately, she’d only exchanged them for another hotbed of scandalized nobility and this new war with Caliya.

“How well they look together!”

Jhan felt the chill at her back, like the breath of a reptile, and she didn’t need to turn to know that Duchess Khami Eleni Dor was behind her. The Duchess was speaking of Kile, Caliya, and the two

golden haired children who were laughing and talking as they walked under an archway of the hall and then were gone from sight.

“They seem a perfect family,” Khami continued pointedly, uncaring that her words were like a knife twisting into Jhan’s heart. “A family is a man, a woman, and *children*, after all. Have you and my son been so happily blessed yet, Princess Jhanian Kevelt?”

Feeling suddenly very weary of it all, Jhan was unable to even be angry. Her reply was simple and devoid of the pain she was certain Khami wanted and expected to hear. “Kile and I can’t have any children, Duchess Khami. Surely he’s told you that?”

Jhan turned at last, ignoring courtly courtesy by refusing to curtsy or even to nod acknowledgment of the woman’s status. Khami noticed the slight and drew herself up, arrogantly furious. She was a big woman and it was obvious that she was the source of Kile’s size. Gray haired, she still tried to make herself look young by wearing a dress too low cut and by applying far too much makeup to hide her wrinkles. Her brown eyes were leveled at Jhan as if she could cut Jhan to pieces with them.

“Everyone knows and everyone knows why,” Khami replied pointedly. “Your marriage is a sham. Among the nobility, even a man and a woman couldn’t stay legally married without children.”

Jhan had already heard that cant far too many times already and she was able to shrug it off easily. “Is this the place to talk about such things?”

Khami tossed her chin dismissively, unconcerned with the lords and ladies who were slowly leaving the hall for other pursuits. “You’ve refused to meet with me in private,” The Duchess accused with a sniff of indignation. “You’ve ignored all of my invitations-”

“What invitations?” Jhan raised eyebrows in confusion, but then realized and nodded. “I suppose that Kile didn’t want us to argue and sent your invitations astray.”

Khami’s face became congested with anger, visible even under her thick makeup, yet she kept it out of her tone, saying low and tight, “How like my son to avoid the matter.” She faced Jhan squarely. “I will issue my invitation personally then. I will receive you in my chambers, now, since your *husband* is otherwise occupied at the moment.”

Jhan looked about them, hoping for rescue, but the hall was filled with strangers. She decided to save herself by going on the defensive. “Why not talk here?” Jhan demanded. “I’ll even save you the trouble of speaking. You love your son and you don’t want him to be married to a man. You’d much rather prefer that he were married to Caliya. Though not as highborn as your family, she is rich and has proven that she can have healthy children. You’re even going to say, ‘If you truly love Kile, you’ll leave him and let him live a normal life.’ Does that about cover all of it, Duchess Khami?”

Khami drew herself up even more, if that were possible. “You are rude and impertinent, but since

you know my mind so well, have you also guessed that I'm going to dissolve your marriage in council before the season is out?"

Jhan was stung by Khami's harshness and cruelty, but her reply was quick and cutting. "I don't think that the council would bother itself about the marriage of a younger son of a landless duke. I'm also certain that King Tekhal wouldn't thank you for reminding him that I even exist!"

It was never good to make someone feel powerless. Khami jabbed a bejeweled finger at Jhan, eyes glittering. "You may have had all traces of your manhood taken from you, but that will never make you a woman! What you are doing with my son is shameless and disgusting! Caliya is everything that you are not! She will make Kile see that! He will turn from you in the end!"

Jhan was shaken by her vehemence, but not by her words. Jhan didn't have any doubts about Kile's love and she knew that nobody could turn him away from her; they'd been through too much during the long year. Jhan managed a pitying smile for Khami and, for once, her anger didn't rise to overwhelm her good sense.

"Khami, Kile loves me and I love him," Jhan replied steadily, knowing that it was useless to reason with the woman, but feeling that it needed to be said. "Please, learn to accept that. I'll never stand in his way when he wants to be with his children or his family. I'll even live here if Kile wishes it, but I can't keep on enduring your anger and your attempts to pull us apart. Believe me when I say, nothing you can do will separate us, least of all rescinding our marriage papers."

"If you think that I will continue to be the laughingstock of this land-" Khami began to shout, remembered herself, and didn't. "I will not have a thekling for a son. I will do what I must Kevelt!" Her sleeve hit Jhan in the face, deliberately, as she turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

Jhan's eyes watered as she put a hand to her slapped cheek ruefully. No, she would never call Khami *Mother*. The Duke had given grudging acceptance, even a rough friendship on his own terms, but his Duchess was another sort. Khami cared far more about her status and appearance at court than the happiness of her son. Jhan hadn't any doubt that she would attempt what she'd threatened.

Jhan left the hall, avoiding the small knots of nobility; the people who would only want her among them because she was a princess rather than out of any real desire for her company. All of her friends were in Pekarín. In the House of Dor, she had yet to make one.

Jhan supposed it was her own fault. Protective of Kile, and unwilling to be displayed like a freak, she'd kept mostly to herself and avoided the many invitations to attend functions and parties. Jhan had wrapped herself in her happiness, and her love of Kile, and had shut out everything else. Now, cut from her cocoon in Pekarín, and thrust into the glare of strangers, she was being forced to deal with the consequences of her self imposed seclusion. Nobody really knew her and most only knew the legend

that had quickly sprung up about her.

Why was it so hard for them to accept what she was? Even now, Jhan could see scandalized looks from guards and servants as she climbed marble steps and passed through ornate hallways lit by intermittent lanterns. She knew that she looked every inch a woman. Publicly, Kile had insisted that she was *complete* in every way. Evian Perazii, healer of the King's army, had attested to it after the marriage documents had been drawn up with the inevitable contesting.

It seemed that the ghost of Prince Jhanian would forever haunt Jhan. It was that man, who's body she wore like an altered suit of clothes, that no one could forget. A warrior, a prince, a traitor, and a general of armies, even at eighteen his reputation had been formidable. It was his heavy shadow that never left Jhan and the shadow that everyone saw when they looked at her.

To Khami, and an unfortunate majority of people, Kile had not married a beautiful young woman. He had married a man emasculated by a dark enemy and driven mad into thinking he was a woman. That Kile loved her, proved only that the Duke's son was either a thekling or a man enchanted into foolishness by Jhan's beauty. Khami was determined to prove the latter.

The hallways leading to Kile's rooms were empty and silent. Jhan's feet tread the soft carpets like the padding paws of a cat; soft and indistinct. The three men she suddenly came upon, didn't hear her approach. Recognizing the telltale blonde and blue eyed features of Kile's brothers, Jhan stopped indecisively. They had their heads together, talking, and she didn't like the frowns that they wore on their faces.

"I told you, the servant said that *it* was coming this way!" Khen, Duke Dor's eldest son, was the tallest of the brothers and very burly. He had a crease between his scowling gold brows and a tightness to his mouth that Jhan had always considered a mark of hidden cruelty.

"Patience." Jhaven was thinner and very handsome, despite his habitual cold and aloof expression. His hair, a little longer than was normal for a man, was a conceit. It was a mane of hot gold curls that women adored.

The third, and youngest brother, was Rhadel. Crouching and nervous, his hand kept straying to the hilt of a knife at his hip. He reminded Jhan of a weasel. Lean and smaller than his three brothers, he always looked like he was about to raid a hen house. "Mother will be disappointed if we don't meet with Jhan," he said anxiously.

"She'll be more than disappointed!" Jhaven agreed sourly. "I don't think I want to suffer through any more of her incessant carping! I don't see what the fuss is about anyway. If Kile wants to stick his-" he said something very foul and Jhan felt a flush run from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, "- in a cut man, that's his business. He isn't in line for the Dukedom or even a title! He's a palace

captain!”

“Kevelt *is* beautiful,” Rhadel agreed. “I wouldn’t mind a roll myself if *it’s* really, you know, as much a woman as Kile says.”

“Maybe we’ll all have a turn,” Khen suggested with an ugly chuckle, “if you like that kind of sport. We *are* supposed to frighten *it* away from Kile and drive *it* out of Pekarín and Sarvoy altogether.”

Jhaven spat. “I don’t like your strange ideas, Khen! A few punches, and a kick or two, will be most effective, I’m sure.”

Rhadel smiled and Jhan almost expected to see chicken feathers sticking out of his teeth. “Maybe it’s not too strange, Jhaven. Can’t tell me you haven’t felt a rise when-”

Jhan turned about as quietly as she could and hurried away, face flaming and tears stinging her eyes. It was hard to imagine that Kile was related to and had grown up with those men. Her gentle husband, always so careful and loving, made her bless every day that she awoke in the morning and found him lying beside her in their bed. It had been his gentleness, and stubborn patience, that had healed her after her long torture by Dagara Ku Ni. His love had made life worth living again. That his brothers imagined anything could force her away from Kile...! To leave him would have been like pulling out and casting away a part of her soul.

“Princess Jhanian?”

Startled, Jhan sank into a defensive crouch. She had been passing through an intersection and the dark shadow, separating itself from darker shadows, had seemed like something from the horrors of her memories. Breaking into a cold sweat, Jhan found it hard to relax and straighten, even when she discovered that it was Ahlen Kantori, the flute player, and not some nightmare sprung from the past.

“Forgive me, Highness, for frightening you.” Ahlen’s voice was as sweet as his flute and his smile was disarming. “Your husband, Lord Kile, has told me how much you enjoyed my playing. He requested that I play for you in a more private setting where you might enjoy the music without distraction.”

The unpleasantness behind Jhan evaporated all in an instant and she found herself smiling in return, loving Kile even more at the moment for his unfailing consideration. “I would like that very much,” Jhan told Ahlen eagerly. “It wouldn’t be proper,” or safe, Jhan added to herself silently, “for us to use my rooms. I’m not familiar with the house completely yet. Do you know of any place quiet?”

“I wouldn’t want to presume,” Ahlen demurred, but Jhan insisted. “Well,” he continued thoughtfully, “I practice in a small outbuilding they use for storing beast harnesses. It’s not a fit place for a princess, though. I’m reluctant to even mention it, but the quality of the walls makes the music swell wonderfully.”

Jhan considered the suggestion and the man offering it. He was young and not overly large. His open face reminded her of Rehn's honest and forthright personality and the boy's gray eyes were innocent of malice. Knowing the face of evil too well, Jhan felt certain that Ahlen Kantori was nothing more than what he seemed; a flute player eager to please a princess and maybe earn some extra coins. Jhan mentally shrugged off her doubts and demons and nodded.

"All right," Jhan agreed. "I don't have anything to do at the moment and I would really like to hear your playing. I suppose there will be enough stable hands and servants around to keep anyone from talking if we're seen." And to deal with Ahlen if he was planning anything more than a private recital, Jhan thought confidently.

"I am at your service, Princess." Ahlen bowed low and took the liberty of leading the way for Jhan.

Ahlen walked the long hallways and stairwells as if he'd been born at House Dor and Jhan felt a little foolish, knowing that he was as new to the place as she was. Jhan hadn't even bothered exploring the house, keeping to her stubborn seclusion in order to avoid any confrontations that might ruin Kile's holiday.

Jhan could hear the rise and fall of conversation from both the house and Sarvoy as they exited through an arched doorway and took the cobbled walkway to the stables. The night was unseasonably warm and a full moon sat low over the tops of the city. Every window was open to catch the breezes and the fragrant scent of late blooming flowers.

"In here, Your Highness." Ahlen motioned to a low doorway that led into a very small, box-like room with a vaulted plaster ceiling. It might have been a chapel to one of their house gods at one time, but it was sagging with disuse now and Jhan could make out the water stains on the walls from leaks in the roof. The rich smell of leather was thick on the air, and Jhan could see the tidy chests of beast harnesses on the floor. Ahlen lit a lantern and sat it atop one of them close by her.

"Closing the door will make the sound resonate better," Ahlen suggested.

Jhan almost hesitated, beginning to form a protest on her lips, but then she heard a man speaking with a stable hand nearby and a few other sounds that told her that several people were within shouting distance. Reassured, she closed the door, and went to sit on a wooden chest by the light.

Ahlen smiled and went to stand at the other end of the room near a window that was slightly ajar. Before Jhan could wonder why, he took up his flute and began to play. He chose a mournful tune at first, but then slowly let the notes rise and quicken. The music caught at Jhan's senses, whirling about her in a mesmerizing melody that totally enthralled her. By the time Jhan noticed that the air was growing difficult to breathe, it was too late. She stood, stumbled, and then fell into a darkness filled only with two staring gray eyes filled with triumph.

Consciousness was elusive. Jhan felt as if she were ineffectually clawing her way out of a deep, dark pit. It was too much like a coma or being buried alive. She wanted to scream, open her eyes, or move in some infinitesimal way, but her body was inert; detached from her desperate mind.

A warm hand, suddenly slapping softly at one of Jhan's cheeks, was a lifeline of sensation. It gave her the focus to bring body and mind together. As she regained consciousness, that joining was like an inaudible crash, a painful breath under water, or the unnerving feeling of being propelled at an uncontrollable rate of speed.

Stiff and cold, Jhan mumbled, "All right, I'm awake," but, the owner of the hand refused to believe her, the soft patting against her cheek continuing. Irritably, Jhan slowly opened her eyes to see who her tormentor was. The face of Ahlen, creased in concern as he crouched beside her, was Jhan's first sight.

"What- What's going on?" Jhan demanded shakily, entertaining the brief notion that she had somehow fainted and that Ahlen was helping her. Attempting to sit up, Jhan discovered that her hands and feet had been bound together just as her head began a sickly spin. Panic fought with nausea, but the nausea won, forcing Jhan to lie back down before she vomited.

"Lie still," Ahlen warned belatedly. "I must have used too much of the sleep smoke. It's made you ill."

Ahlen rose, moving out of Jhan's line of sight. Beyond him, she saw a dizzying forest of huge trees and the smoking remains of a campfire. Standing by the fire was three baku, saddled and loaded with supplies. They flicked long ears in interest, but displayed the calm patience of trail veterans.

"What's happening-," Jhan began to demand, but then had a split-second of instant clarity as she became aware of two things at once. Her surroundings were unfamiliar and her wine red dress, a gift from Kile, had been ripped. A large part of it was missing. The crudeness of Kile's brothers, still fresh in Jhan's mind, left her only one conclusion. Tears sprang to her eyes as she wailed in grief and shock, "You bastard!"

"I-I did not defile you!" Ahlen stammered in disgusted embarrassment. His words tumbled over one another in his haste to reassure her, "I'm not-not like that. I don't want that from you, I swear it! I pledged to you now, that I'll protect you as if I were your kinsman."

Ahlen's words lacked the power to calm the frenetic beating of Jhan's heart. She knew how much words were worth. "I've been drugged, tied up, and kidnapped!" Jhan cried out. "How is that protecting me?"

Ahlen's hands were twisting together in agitation, like a small, guilty boy, as he tried to explain. "There are many tales about you, Highness. So many, in fact, that it was difficult to know the truth from the tale. It was wisest to believe the worst of them until I could be certain that you were as harmless as you seemed."

"Now that you do see, untie me!" Jhan shouted, as if temper, alone, could make him obey her.

Ahlen was clearly affected, but he didn't move to comply. "I'm sorry, Highness, not yet."

Ahlen turned from Jhan, as if he couldn't face her fear any longer. He took a deep, shaky breath, as he crouched by a leather pack and began doing something she couldn't see. Jhan heard a liquid pour and something being stirred.

Jhan didn't waste the moment. She quickly began to twist the extra joints of her hands and feet, this way and that, to try and wriggle out of her bonds. She was confident that the leather couldn't hold her, but, as she strained to stretch it enough to slip out, something cold and metallic, wrapped inside of the leather, cut into her flesh. Jhan cried out incoherently, her whole body heaving in a sob of helplessness.

"Don't struggle!" Ahlen warned over his shoulder. "Those wires are sharp enough to slit your wrists."

"Khami paid you to do this, didn't she?" Jhan accused wildly. Her conclusion was the obvious one and Jhan began to curse the woman long and inventively, so much so that she grew hoarse.

Ahlen's reply cut through Jhan's tirade like a knife, sharp and unexpected. It brought her to a deafening silence. "I'm not under anyone's orders."

Turning to confront Jhan, Ahlen held a wooden cup in one hand. He wore a tight, unreadable expression on his face. "You are probably very thirsty after all of that," he continued uneasily. "If you'll drink, I'll explain everything."

Ahlen crouched and tipped the cup to Jhan's lips. Jhan wanted to refuse, but her mouth was bone dry and there was an awful taste at the back of her throat. She half sat up and took a cautious sip. Discovering that it was only water, Jhan drank it down while she glared through her tears at Ahlen's tense face.

"I am from Tabinya," Ahlen began, his voice maddening in its slowness, "a mountain village Southwest from here. Every year, my family struggles to grow a tuber called bhie. If you grind it up, it makes a red dye. If you cook it well enough, you can eat it. My family is poor, very large, and cursed with an inordinate amount of women. I and my elder brother, Krey, are the only sons."

Jhan jerked her lips back from the cup, sending it tumbling from Ahlen's hand as she exploded furiously, "You *will* be coming to the point?"

Ahlen's face set hard against her outburst and his lips went thin as he picked the cup up and meticulously brushed at the dirt on it. "My tale is important, Highness, and you have little choice but to listen."

Jhan lay back limply, closing her eyes in despair as Ahlen continued. "In my land, women are not allowed to till the fields. It is considered man's work. My father and my brother Krey, barely managed the work themselves, but they were successful up until last year. Winter came hard and early and they lost the entire crop. We lived a lean year until the fields were ready for planting again. Our lives depended on that harvest. If it hadn't been taken in and sold, we would have starved to death."

Ahlen straightened and paced close by, shoulders hunched and chin tucked down. "I was born simple minded. I wasn't able to help in the fields. The only skill I have ever learned was to play the flute. In desperation, my father took me and my sister, Ajha, to the temple of Scherial, the Earth Goddess, to beg that I be healed."

Jhan opened her eyes and watched Ahlen pace. The sickness in her stomach was settling with the water and she was beginning to think coherently again. Ahlen was a boy. He wasn't a match for her skill. She had to be still, she thought, and look weak and compliant. Sooner or later, she hoped, Ahlen might believe it and make a fatal mistake.

Ahlen was going pale now, jaw clenching with his angry indignation. "My father gave Ajha as a sacrifice; payment for my healing. The priests did something to her, drained everything out of Ajha while they chanted to the Goddess. I saw my sister shrivel and weaken before my eyes, even as I felt new life filling me! A veil seemed to lift from my mind and I suddenly came to understand everything around me. Seeing that I was cured, my father rejoiced and led me from the temple, leaving Ajha behind as if she were nothing to him!"

Ahlen stopped pacing and faced Jhan with a look of innocence lost. "I helped bring in the harvest and my family was saved, but I couldn't forget about Ajha. When I could, I went back to the temple. The priests wouldn't see me. Their servants told me that Ajha was to be sacrificed at the end of the harvest, next year, and that only the word of Tsarianna, the Sun God, or his priests, could free Ajha from my father's bargain."

"What has all of that to do with me?" Jhan kept her voice as weak as she felt, but the effort to keep from screaming at Ahlen made her head spin again. Her furious sarcasm was impossible to conceal. "You don't really think you can find a god, do you?"

Ahlen surely hadn't expected sympathy? His face said otherwise. His fists clenched in anguish and his words were to the point. "I was healed and my sister lies wasted. She is going to die because of me. I can't let that happen! I must free her and you are going to help me."

Jhan laughed, short and sharp, but it was full of her tears and her rising hysteria. To sum up all that she was, and all that she wasn't, needed only one word. "How?"

"You have Power," Ahlen continued, unperturbed. "I must travel dangerous roads to reach the Tokhelan Desert to the West. There lies the temple of the Sun God, Tsarianna. Tsarianna is the father of our gods. His priests alone can order the priests of Scherial to release my sister! I have money as a gift-

"A bribe, you mean," Jhan cut in recklessly.

"Gift," Ahlen repeated forcefully. "In your land, my music was in great demand. I was able to put money by very swiftly."

Jhan was like a drowning person, wildly clutching at anything to stay afloat. She hardly knew what she was saying; desperate for anything that would make the boy let her go. "Why don't you take your money and *gift* your priests? They're probably just as willing to accept payment in exchange for your sister as any priest of the Sun God."

Ahlen shrugged that away impatiently, looking insulted. "The lives of my people depend on the warm season. They believe that sacrifice will allow Scherial to hold off the cold of the Winter goddess, Sehahl, a little longer. The priests of my land wouldn't jeopardize a good harvest for even gold! Only the word of the priests of Tsarianna will force them to release Ajha!"

Jhan tried, with all of her will, to lock up her terror and outrage long enough to try and reason with someone she hoped wasn't a madman. Her voice was thin and rough, her fear spiking through it so that it wavered on the verge of being a sob. "I do have Power, Ahlen, but it's locked up inside of me, and for good reason. It's not a weapon, like a knife or a sword. It's like... like the sun! No one can control that kind of Power, not even me if I try to use it. Please, believe me and let me go. People will be looking for me--"

"I'm sorry, Highness, but no, they won't." Ahlen was firm in that belief.

Jhan felt fear send adrenaline surging through her, making the blood behind her eyes pulse and turn her vision dark. She hardly heard her own whispered question over the drumming of her heart. "Why not?"

"I took a part of your dress and threw it on the skinned carcass of a bhetu," Ahlen explained haltingly, perhaps disgusted by what he had done.

Jhan felt horror mix with her fear as she tried to remember what a bhetu was. Ahlen didn't give her long to think, continuing, "I cut away all things that would identify it as an animal and then tossed it into a lake. By the time they find it, they will think it is you."

Jhan began to tremble uncontrollably. Neither Kile, nor anyone else, would be riding to her rescue;

imagining her dead. Images flooded Jhan's mind; Kile sunk in grief, Khami, glowing with triumph, and Caliya, all too willing to give comfort. How many would truly mourn her? Aside from Kile, Jhan could only think of a handful.

"Nobody seemed to care for you." Ahlen unknowingly echoed Jhan's thoughts, making them even bitterer. "They said things about you that were shocking. We don't have kings or queens where I come from, but it was strange to me that they gave you so little regard or respect. I was saving money for a guide or a guard to accompany me on my quest, but when I heard that you had Power, and saw that you were much alone, I decided to take you instead and keep my money for my offering."

"But that doesn't make any sense!" Jhan exclaimed incredulously. "I can't guide you anywhere! I don't even know my way around my husband's home. Without that, or the Power, I'm useless to you!"

Ahlen's face worked silently, weighing something, and then he shrugged and decided to tell Jhan the truth. "My people live by signs and portents from the gods. When I saw you, I doubted your worth as well, but I felt a shock, as if the Earth Goddess had put a hand on my shoulder. It's *Her* will that I take you. I'm certain of it."

"You *are* mad!" Jhan sobbed, her worst fear confirmed.

Ahlen bristled, offended. "No. I must take you, not out of madness, but out of a deeper understanding of destiny. I saw you and I knew that our fates were linked. I knew that I couldn't go on without you. I know that it's caused you grief, and that no one deserves it less than you, Highness, but I will try with all that is in me to bring you back to your home safely."

With deliberate motions, Ahlen picked up a stack of clothing and placed it at Jhan's feet. There was a thick brown coat, a rough woolen shirt, two black sweaters, a pair of brown boots, a scarf, a pair of gloves, thick socks, and a leather hat with a pointed top that drooped down and was decorated with tassels.

"I know this is shameful," Ahlen began, swallowing and looking aside as if he was deeply embarrassed, "but I must ask you to put aside your woman's garments and dress as a man. There might be trouble if men saw you traveling alone with only a boy for an escort."

"Do you think two boys, traveling alone, won't appear to be an easy target?" Jhan protested, and then found defiance almost burning away her fear with its fury. "You can keep your clothes, Ahlen Kantori! I refuse to cooperate in any way!"

"You will." Ahlen suddenly met Jhan's eyes with a look that let her know that he held all the power, albeit uncomfortably. "The drink I gave you..."

Jhan cut him off vehemently. "It was just water!"

"No," Ahlen corrected. He licked dry lips and explained slowly, "The water held the eggs of a

water parasite. It takes several weeks, but the eggs will eventually hatch and the infant worms will eat you from the inside out. You can imagine the pain. The parasite can be found in the Lowlands as well as the mountains, but it's rare here and only my people know the how to make the medicine to kill them."

Ahlen's next words were a clear warning. "Please don't consider trying to escape to get the cure yourself. It would be impossible for you to reach my mountain home before the eggs hatch. The snows fall deep and furious this time of year and my people don't like Lowlanders well enough to give you the cure if, by some miracle, you did manage to reach them."

Jhan went white, hand clutching her stomach in horror. "You're lying!"

"No, I'm not." Ahlen's eyes were steady. "You will travel with me and you will wear these clothes. I will give you a medicine that my people developed before we found the cure. It will keep the eggs from hatching, but not destroy them. I will make the medicine from scratch each time, so that you won't be able to overpower me and get it yourself."

It sounded like a lie, Jhan thought, but she couldn't be certain and Ahlen knew it. "Don't do this!" she moaned. "You'll destroy what little life I have."

"My sister means everything to me, Highness," Ahlen replied unwaveringly. "She's worth my life, and, perhaps, yours too."

Ahlen stepped forward. "I'm going to untie you now," he said. "Please don't fight me, Highness. I-I don't want to have to hurt you. Surely you can see that you must do as I say?" He was trying to sound firm, in control, but his voice was too nervous to be convincing. He untied Jhan warily, stepping back as if he feared that his threats might not mean much to someone with such a look of loss and despair.

Jhan sat with her face in her hands, ignoring Ahlen. She was free. She knew she could kill him before he could draw another breath. Did she dare? The story he told was outrageous, yet, maybe outrageous enough to be true. The thought of dying while parasites ate her insides made her sickness return. She would have risked anything to return home to Kile, done anything, but this was something she couldn't defeat. Her hands shook as she began pulling off her ruined dress.

Ahlen was obviously relieved. He turned his eyes away, but he wasn't foolish enough to turn completely, refusing to give Jhan privacy as she dressed in the clothes he had given her.

"I'll go along for now," Jhan warned as she coiled up her long, curly hair and tucked it into the cap she placed on her head with jerking motions, "but the moment I think that I'm not going to make it back to the man I love, Ahlen Kantori, I swear, I will kill you!"

Ahlen flinched as if her words were the leaded balls for the whip of his guilt, but his chin was set determinedly. An angry, impotent, princess wasn't going to dissuade him from his course. He grabbed

the reins of the baku and brought them forward. "The black one is yours. It has a mild manner."

"You've tied them wrong," Jhan noticed, hating that she was being forced to help her kidnapper in even that small way. Sniffing as she slowly stood up, she wiped at her nose and shakily stepped forward to reposition the leads that tied the animals together. "Parasites will be the least of my problems if I end up dead under the hooves of a tangled and panicking baku."

Ahlen flushed, but he gave grudging thanks. "I might have wondered how a princess could know such a skill, if I hadn't heard all the tales."

Jhan felt a chill cool her anger, but trepidation didn't quite replace it as she mounted her baku. Ahlen knew what she was, she realized. What he thought of it would become clearer later, but he seemed disposed to treat her as a woman and a princess for now. That was something, at least, though it didn't make Jhan feel any better. She was too busy fighting to keep her sanity as her world cracked and crumbled all about her.

Ahlen stuffed the ruined red dress into a pack and then went about erasing any sign that they had ever been there. When he mounted his sand colored baku, tied in the lead ahead of Jhan's, he didn't tell Jhan where they were or where they were going. Jhan didn't bother asking. Without knowing anything about the countryside, such information was useless to her and, at that moment of utter despair, she hardly cared if they were riding into the pit of Hell.

The trees stayed thick. After a few, painful scratches, Jhan roused enough from her traumatized state to bend almost double to escape low branches. Ahlen was following what was little more than a small animal trail, perhaps still trying to throw off any potential pursuers. When Jhan realized that, she was inclined to thwart him. She reached out and broke branches whenever she could and touched bushes, tree trunks, or whatever might hold her scent long enough to lead a tracking animal to them.

And if they found her, and Ahlen had been telling the truth about the parasites? Jhan paused in her efforts, torn. If he was the only one who knew the cure, would he give up the secret if he were captured? Jhan stared at Ahlen's determined back. He was so young and so obviously not willing to hurt her, yet what was she next to the life of his sister? Ahlen had made it very clear what price he was willing to pay to save that life. Denying Jhan the cure might seem like fitting revenge if she thwarted him.

Jhan let her hands fall helplessly into her lap. Her jaw tightened and her eyes went very dark as every step of her baku took her further and further from the only people who had made life bearable for her.

During the past year, Jaross had been there to lift Jhan's spirits, forever lighthearted and joking; a soft-hearted ex-noble who wore his exile and Pekarín uniform well. Rehn and Bheni, married and

expecting their first child, had made a home within their home for Jhan, always welcoming her with open arms. When her altered body had faltered, Master Healer Evian, had been there to heal her and to help her overcome the difficulties of a body made into a woman, yet not a woman entirely. Even gruff General Vek had contributed to her well being, teaching her to fight without killing and lending her a surprisingly patient ear whenever she had problems.

Jhan knew she couldn't have born the ridicule, and the almost total rejection of her by the people of Pekarín, without the help of her friends. They had been her strength and her barrier, insulating her enough to find happiness with Kile.

Jhan fought the tears again, lips trembling despite her. How could she live without Kile? He was the other part of her soul, the one who kept the nightmares at bay and the dark memories silent with his love. Without him, she could already feel her inner strength shattering and the fear replacing her hard won confidence. Captive, alone, and traveling she knew not where, it was all too easy to let the darkness of despair bloom and overwhelm her. It waited, that darkness; a ravening beast ready to devour her hard won sanity.

"How long?" Jhan asked, too soft for Ahlen to hear. She raised her voice and asked again. "How long will this journey be?"

Ahlen cocked his head, but didn't turn. "I don't know," came his shocking reply. "I've heard that it takes a year and, for my sister's sake, that must prove true. I've explained to you that I was only a half-wit only a handful of months ago. Though I know some things well enough, I still find most things as new and as strange as a baby would. I hope to find a guide before too long. Perhaps, we will find one in Owell."

Jhan felt chilled to the bone. A year? A year there and a year back? Two years away from Kile and everything she knew! Jhan couldn't stop the tears now and she turned her head away to hide them, her shoulders shaking with her muffled sobs. She would find a way to escape, Jhan promised herself. She would find out whether Ahlen was telling the truth about the parasites, and, if she discovered that it was a lie, even Ahlen's sister might not recognize what she left of him.

CHAPTER TWO

(Fire and Water)

“You don’t look like a boy,” Ahlen complained around a mouthful of salted meat. “You look more like a younger sister that I dressed up in my clothes.”

Jhan huddled miserably on the opposite side of the campfire. It was cold and wet from an earlier drizzle of rain. The fire choked on the wet, and seemed determined to suffocate Jhan with stinking gouts of smoke despite her constant moves to escape it. Pulling the edges of her hood down to protect her ears from the chill air, Jhan buried her gloved hands under her arms in a vain attempt to keep them warm.

The light of the fire seemed to dance with the shadows of night across Ahlen’s face, leaving Jhan unable to read his expression. His tone of voice gave nothing away. “Perhaps, some dirt...”

“What?” Jhan growled warningly, but Ahlen thought that she hadn’t heard him.

“Never mind.” Ahlen stared frankly at her. “Are you very frightened?”

“Frightened of you, you mean?” Jhan lied scathingly. “No.”

“Sad, then,” Ahlen persisted, when Jhan wished with all of her heart that he would just shut- up. “I want to apologize, but I know that would be foolish. There’s nothing I can say that will make you feel better about this. Without my family, I feel very alone and lost; a baby in this wide world with only a handful of knowledge to see me through. For you, being much younger than I, it must be nearly as bad.”

Jhan refused to respond, staring at the uneaten meal in her lap. Ahlen was unperturbed by her silence, continuing doggedly, “I know that I *must* frighten you. I assure you, that I don’t have any taste for a woman so strange. Despite your beauty and your title, I find it amazing that you ever found a husband.”

Jhan sprang to her feet, flinging her food across the fire and into Ahlen’s face. He ducked reflexively, wide eyed as Jhan shouted furiously, “So, there it is! I’ve been waiting for you to start in! Go on, say it! I’m a man pretending to be a woman and I’m the most disgusting creature you’ve ever beheld! The thought of my having been emasculated sickens you and you can barely stand to think of it! Go on! Take your best shot! I’ve heard them all!”

Ahlen was standing as well, face stark white in the firelight and eyes astonished. His mouth had dropped open and he stammered like a fool until, finally, he regained his wits enough to form a sentence. “What are you saying?”

Jhan went numb and straightened, fisted hands falling limply to her sides. “You didn’t know?”

Ahlen was bewildered, a child trying to understand why up and down were suddenly not up and down. “How did this happen? You are- were a boy? I would never have guessed! How could anyone

have done such a horrible thing to you? What monster-” Ahlen suddenly ceased to speak, something occurring to him that caused him to, strangely, let out a long sigh of relief.

It was Jhan’s turn to be confused, having expected outrage, disgust, even violence, but never relief! It appeared to be a callous dismissal of everything that Jhan had suffered, yet something in Ahlen’s innocent face warned her that it was unintentional.

Ahlen spoke at last, haltingly trying to explain. “What happened to you is beyond what I can comprehend, knowing nothing of men or the world, and yet I can only feel glad to know that you are not the woman you seemed. Understand, I thought that I would have to protect you every step of the way and make concessions and accommodations for you. Now that I know of your tragedy, and your true sex, we’re free to travel as hard and as fast as two men might.”

Jhan recovered quickly, anxiously contradicting him. She held out her arms, displaying herself to him. “It’s true that this body wasn’t born a woman, Ahlen, but you can see for yourself how fragile it is. I’ve had three bad fevers over the last year, and several infections from-,” Jhan faltered and felt her face grow hot, but she stumbled on despite her embarrassment, knowing she had to for her own sake, “from trying to live as a woman and a wife. I *will* slow you down and you *will* have to make many concessions for me. You’re going to learn, very quickly, that you’ve made a mistake by taking me.”

Ahlen wasn’t convinced, inexperience and blind determination making him immune to sense. “I expected to travel carefully with you. That will take time. It’s the deference, honor, and arrangements expected for a woman, and a princess, that I chafed at the most. Now that I know none of that is necessary, it will make things much easier.”

“Will it?” Jhan was bitterly skeptical. She slowly sat down again, watching Ahlen warily. “I think you are very naive.”

“I am,” Ahlen agreed readily enough.

“Or you would know,” Jhan continued relentlessly, “that riding with someone who used to be a man, and now considers himself enough of a woman to marry, might be more difficult to bear than a haughty princess. Don’t you have any thoughts on that at all?”

Jhan wanted to make Ahlen either angry or sickened, perhaps enough to goad him into letting her go. She hadn’t counted on his naiveté being so complete. He only shrugged, frowning at his own lack of knowledge. “My family never bothered teaching me our laws or customs,” Ahlen replied. “I would have to piece together what my half- wit mind remembers to find out whether what you are, or what you are doing because of it, is right or wrong.”

Jhan tried to form his opinion herself, knowing how easily it could backfire and make her captivity even more miserable. The small chance that he might release her made her reckless. “I’ll save you the

trouble,” she said bluntly. “There isn’t anyone I’ve met who thinks that what I am, or what I’m doing, is normal. I’ve been hounded, ridiculed, and threatened with violence. Thekling, they call me, and maybe, if you look hard enough, it might be true.”

“Thekling.” Ahlen’s face tightened, mind latching onto something that disturbed him. “I remember that word. My Father once told me about such men, after they burned one on the Earth Goddess’s alter. He told me that it was an abomination against her creation.”

Ahlen came around the fire slowly and looked Jhan over as if she were an unfamiliar animal; openly curious and as wide eyed as any child. Jhan stared up at him, bracing for ugliness.

“I never looked closely. I was too embarrassed; afraid of shaming you. Under your clothes, are you-?” Ahlen attempted, faltering at the last moment to speak his mind clearly.

Jhan licked dry lips nervously. “I was shaped, by Power, to look as close to a woman as possible. Inside, I’ve ALWAYS been a woman, Ahlen. Together, mind and body, make a woman entire. I hope you’re not going to ask me to show you-”

“No!” Ahlen cut her off, trembling a little and revealing his immaturity. “I can see that you aren’t a man any longer. There isn’t any hint of it. What choice do you have, being as you are, but to live as a woman now? That you found a man to be your husband seems incredible to me, but not abomination. My Father spoke of men and men, not someone in your circumstances. I’m certain it isn’t the same at all.” He was struggling with the concept and Jhan wondered if he really knew what he was saying.

“Yet, if that’s true,” Ahlen continued as he paced, rubbing his forehead as if it hurt him, “I don’t know how to treat you; as a woman or as a man?”

Jhan followed him with her eyes, another hope of escape shriveling. “Any way you wish,” she replied wearily. “Just not cruelly, please. I’ve had enough of that, Ahlen.”

Ahlen came to a decision. “I will treat you as a man, then, as equal to equal.” He turned abruptly, her last words registering all at once. His face creased in concern. “I’m not intentionally cruel, Princess, or should I call you Prince? I’m becoming very confused.”

“Neither,” Jhan insisted. “It’s meaningless to me. Jhan will do.”

“Jhan, it is, then.” Ahlen nodded approvingly, but then scowled, angrily. “I have heard the tales about your torture, and your battle with an evil man, but I thought, when they called you *prince* and said you were a freak, that they only spoke out of spite.”

“When you said that you couldn’t understand why someone would marry me, I thought you were insulting me because of what I am,” Jhan explained.

Ahlen looked contrite. “I was, forgive me, but I was speaking of your size and your poor weight. If a woman had been made like you, she wouldn’t have been able to bear many children, if any at all.

Such a consideration is important in my land.”

Jhan suddenly turned away from him, ducking her head and closing her eyes. What was she doing? Why was she even speaking to him? This boy had ruined her life! If he wouldn’t free her, what did it matter what he thought of her?

“I’ve insulted you again,” Ahlen realized. “Forgive me. I can’t seem to stop my tongue from speaking my thoughts.”

That’s always been my problem too, Jhan thought, but kept silent as she lay down where she was and pillowed her head on one arm.

Ahlen banked the coals of the fire so that it ceased to smoke, and then unpacked blankets and an oiled leather canopy. He strung the canopy over Jhan and then lay down under it as well. He offered Jhan one of the blankets and Jhan took it silently, uncomfortable with the boy’s closeness. Only when she heard Ahlen begin to breathe heavily in sleep, did she allow herself to fall asleep as well.

The world was silver, flickering and shimmering like the highly polished side of a fine goblet. The sound of dice rolling and clicking together drew Jhan’s attention. A game board, with a star pattern drawn on it, was floating in the silver world. The dice were rolling back and forth across it, seemingly of their own volition. Jhan watched, fascinated.

“I’ve always liked the game,” a male voice said in Jhan’s ear. She turned, and then turned completely about, until she was facing the dice and the game board once more. The voice didn’t have an owner. “It’s so unpredictable. Calculate the odds all you want to, it all comes down to chance.”

“And that means something?” Jhan wondered boldly.

“Blame whom ever you like,” the voice admonished sternly, “but your circumstances were all governed by chance.”

Jhan shook her head. It was a dream, of course, and she wasn’t about to let a dream voice tell her a lie. “Wrong. Choices govern our fate. I chose to let Ahlen Kantori take me down to the stables. I knew better, but I didn’t listen to my better sense. Ahlen chose to take advantage of my foolishness by kidnapping me. Chance had nothing to do with it.”

The voice chuckled. “You posses such wisdom! Remember it when we meet at last.”

The dice rolled towards Jhan and hit her on her breast. Jhan caught them before they could fall into the silver void. She realized then that her dream body wasn’t Tammy, or Jhan, but her new one. She had learned to accept it even in dreams.

“Who are you?” Jhan asked and then wondered if she were speaking to the voice or herself.

Nothing answered and Jhan opened her hand, letting the dice fall. The game board spun downwards after them, caught them, and then held steady while the dice began rolling across it once more.

“I don’t understand,” Jhan muttered, suddenly waking up to dappled morning sunlight and piercing bird calls.

Jhan stiffly unwound from her clenched, fetal position under her blanket and crawled to the dying heat of the fire. With a hand numb with cold, even in its glove, she threw more wood onto the fire. Poking it with a long stick, Jhan stirred the coals until they began licking flames over the new wood. Only when the heat had begun to penetrate her clothing to her skin, did she look up and around to see what the new day would bring.

A figure was crouching on the opposite side of the fire from Jhan. She started backwards in surprise, strangling on a cry, but the figure was unmoving, regarding her with eyes that were as clear and as pale as the silver void she had dreamed of. He was slight, skin as white as snow, bare upper torso flat chested and obviously boyish. Even in the biting cold, he wore only a pair of leather sandals and a colorful scarf bound about his hips. His hair was translucent, like spun glass mimicking hair. The dappled sunlight caught in it and it sparkled in a long trail down his back.

“Ahlen!” Jhan shouted, not really knowing why she was calling to her kidnapper for help, but choosing the known against the unknown of the stranger.

Ahlen flung off his blankets and surged to his feet, blinking stupidly with sleep and rubbing at his eyes. “What? What is it? Has something-” then Ahlen saw the intruder as well. He didn’t reach for a weapon and Jhan felt shocked and angry, knowing then, at the worst possible time, that Ahlen didn’t have one.

The strange boy was still unmoving, but he spoke now, his voice light and sexless. “I do not intend any harm. I am called Ixien. I am a Caefu from the Deep Caves.”

“You’re one of the Fire People!” Ahlen exclaimed in wonder. “You are a long way from home!” He became instantly deferential. “How may we serve you?”

“I am in need of companionship,” the boy replied, but Jhan didn’t like the flat, emotionless quality of his stare. She couldn’t imagine eyes like that belonging to anyone who desired companionship.

“The Caefu worship the Ahnali, the spirits of fire,” Ahlen explained to Jhan, almost breathless with his awe. “My Mother used to tell me tales of them. The Caefu live by the volcanoes and are immune to their heat and flame by the grace of the Ahnali.”

Jhan wouldn't accept that, dismissing it as more of Ahlen's superstition. She felt forced to ask her own questions, needing desperately to know if her situation had just grown worse. "You aren't Human," she said to Ixien with her anxiety plain on her face. "What are you?"

"As much a half being as you are yourself," was Ixien's cryptic reply.

Ahlen broke in excitedly, like a lost child suddenly finding a parent. "By *companionship* were you asking to travel with us, Ixien? I am also in dire need of companionship on this journey."

Ahlen seemed all too willing to accept the Caefu at face value and Jhan found herself stepping in quickly. She hated that it was up to her to be suspicious for her captor, yet she was well aware that if Ixien meant harm, then it would affect her as well as Ahlen. "How do you know where we're going?" she asked.

"I listened at your last camp," Ixien admitted. "I followed until I decided that it was safe to approach you."

"Then you know that he kidnapped me," Jhan pointed out, perplexed. "Didn't that make it seem unsafe?"

When Ixien shrugged dismissively, Jhan felt herself go hot with anger and helplessness. "Your people are always taking and giving their females as if they were property," Ixien replied coolly. "I didn't see anything out of the ordinary that he should treat a half-man in the same manner."

Jhan pointed a shaking finger at Ixien, voice unsteady, but seething. "Don't ever call me that again! If you think that what Ahlen's done to me is perfectly normal, then it says a great deal about you, Caefu! Don't trust him, Ahlen!"

"I- I revere your people, Ixien of the Caefu," Ahlen admonished, halting and uncertain, "but I ask that you refrain from speaking so roughly to my- to Jhan. Our circumstances are not the best and I don't wish things any harder on...", he stumbled for gender and Jhan grew even angrier, "him," Ahlen finished lamely.

"As you wish," Ixien conceded easily enough. When he straightened, he was barely four feet tall. He bowed and put hands together in an odd gesture. Jhan could see that his fingers had small claws. He was purely alien and he frightened her even more than Ahlen. At least Ahlen was Human and understandable. This creature was a mystery.

"I am also traveling to the Tokhelan desert," Ixien announced in a formal tone. "I was sent by my elders to speak with the Sun God. I have never been outside of the Deep Caves and the world is strange to me. I am in need of your-"

"Terrific!" Jhan cut in wildly, throwing up her hands. Her words were punctuated by choking sobs of despair. "Now I'm traveling with two idiots! At this rate, we'll be traveling around in circles

forever!”

Ahlen winced at Jhan’s outburst, but he chose to be deaf to her suspicions and criticisms, too obviously relieved to have found someone to help him. “I gladly accept your company, Ixien. Even though you are not familiar with these lands, I’m certain that your wisdom must far surpass my own. I am in dire need of your help.”

“As much as I am able to give you,” Ixien offered.

Ahlen nodded in thanks, pleased, and then began pulling supplies out of a pack. “Join us in a meal then, Ixien.” he paused. “Are you able to cook?” Ahlen’s sudden question, directed at Jhan, took her by surprise.

Jhan wiped at her eyes, tossing her chin contentiously as she tried to regain her composure. “You can’t even cook?” she mocked. “Well, neither can I! Go ask your new friend if he can.”

“Caefu don’t cook their food,” Ixien replied seriously.

“Trial and error, then,” Ahlen sighed and pulled out a cooking pot from his packs. “I don’t relish eating dried jerky and pressed fruit cakes for a year. One of us had best pick up the skill.” He gave Jhan a look, but he knew better than to ask her to attempt it. Her stiff shoulders, and arms crossed tensely over her breast, told him how far he would get with such a request.

When the porridge was done, it was at least edible. Jhan forced hers down, knowing that she needed every bit of her strength for the journey. Ahlen nodded approvingly, barely concealing that he was pleased with how well he had managed at his first attempt at cooking. For a man who had only recently been a half-wit, every small step must have seemed a giant leap in his mind.

Ixien didn’t take the portion Ahlen offered him. “My strength comes from elsewhere,” he replied. “I need to eat, but rarely.”

Ahlen had that look of awe on his face again and Jhan felt a sense of dread. He was believing in a fairy tale that told him that Ixien was to be revered and trusted. Jhan didn’t have any such comfort. Having looked into the face of ultimate evil, she could see a hint of that coldness in Ixien’s dispassionate stare.

And what was Ixien? Jhan had considered the intelligent and powerful Sahvossa to be a singular oddity, but what if there were many such non-Human creatures in the world? What other creatures might they encounter that Ixien, Ahlen, or herself knew nothing about? They were, literally, babes in the woods and Jhan couldn’t help the black despair that threatened to overwhelm her. Would she live to see Kile again?

The question hung in the air about Jhan, unanswered and unanswerable, as they broke camp and mounted the baku. Ixien rejected the offer of a ride behind Ahlen or atop the baggage baku. He walked

with a tireless energy beside them as they rode down a trail that suddenly opened out into a well worn road, scored by the deep ruts of wagons.

The trees cleared back from the road and Jhan straightened her aching spine, glad that she didn't have to bend over the back of her baku any longer. Almost immediately, she missed its warmth. Glancing at Ixien, Jhan envied whatever power gave him the ability to fend off the cold. Her frozen body idly wondered if he could share that warmth and then rejected the notion with a shudder of revulsion. She didn't want the strange Caefu being near her, let alone touching her!

"This road leads back towards my mountain home," Ahlen was explaining to Ixien. "We'll skirt the foot of those mountains and then come to Owel in, perhaps, two days. Owel is a large trading town. I'm certain we'll find some caravan or trader going our way."

"In Winter?" Ixien's voice was emotionless, but he didn't need the tone in his voice to convey his skepticism.

Jhan watched Ahlen's face become lost and very child-like, but that disconcerting look was quickly gone, replaced by one of false confidence. "Owel is where all trading roads meet," Ahlen assured Ixien. "People travel in all seasons. There will be someone."

"Why didn't you play your flute for them, then," Jhan wondered acidly, "instead of traveling all the way to Sarvoy?"

"They trade," Ahlen explained shortly, "They don't buy music."

"Someone will know me there," Jhan pointed out, as more of a taunt than out of any real hope. "They'll know you kidnapped me. They'll save me, for the reward if nothing else. I told you that I wouldn't be anything but trouble to you. You won't be able to show your face in Owel."

"You won't be able to show yours," Ahlen agreed, refusing to be goaded into either fear or anger. "You'll wrap your scarf about your face."

"It speaks wisdom," Ixien interrupted flatly. Both Ahlen and Jhan stared at the Caefu. "Sell It in Owel and mate with another. Perhaps your inexperience confused you when you mistook it for a potential mate, but it is certain to impede us if it is as well known as it says."

Ahlen turned a dark shade of red all the way to his ears. "I never- Jhan isn't a thing, Ixien, to be bought and sold like a bushel of bhie! Scherial directed me to take Jhan and that's all the explanation I'm able to give you."

"Don't pretend to be better than you really are!" Jhan spat at Ahlen, face white with fury. "You infested me with parasites and then threatened me with death if I didn't follow you! If you think that's not as bad as selling me like a slave, then you are still the half-wit you claimed to be."

"I've done what I must to save my sister," Ahlen replied tightly. "If you would only come

willingly..., but that is a foolish hope indeed. I don't wish to fight all the way to the desert and back. I can only hope that you'll tire of your sorrow and rebellion soon."

Jhan gave Ahlen a smile with gritted teeth and lightning in her blue eyes. "If you think I'll grow tired of being angry, then you don't know me."

"I don't know you at all," Ahlen agreed miserably, "but I am beginning to."

Ixien walked on ahead of them as if their battle annoyed him. That caused Ahlen some concern. "I need Ixien, Jhan. Please don't offend him. He may be the difference between surviving this journey and dying because of my ignorance."

"He doesn't know any more than you do," Jhan reminded him.

Ahlen decided to be blunt with the truth. "He must know more than I do, Jhan, because I know absolutely nothing about the people, the lands, or the customs we will encounter. My own people are a mystery to me! Keep your temper, I beg you."

"Or you'll what?" Jhan wondered wildly. "What will you do, Ahlen, if I refuse to do everything you say?"

Ahlen hunched his shoulders uncomfortably. "My Father would cuff you for your insolence. My Mother would whip you with a switch for your temper and bad manners. I may not be above doing either."

Jhan was so startled by his childishness and jutting lip, that she laughed, albeit bitterly. After the incredible torture and ultimate cruelty she had suffered at the hands of masters, this was the height of innocence.

Ahlen became angry and embarrassed. "So, I'm not a harsh man--"

"You're not a man at all! You're just a boy," Jhan mocked, still laughing; on the edge of hysteria.

Ahlen cut off her laughter with words that were like a bucket of cold water. "Insult me, if you wish, but I have the medicine, remember?"

Jhan went quiet, eyes leveled at Ahlen. "Would you really let me die so horribly?"

Ahlen's hands went into fists on the reins of his baku. "That would be your choice, not mine. As long as you stay with me, I will be able to give you the medicine."

Jhan was at a loss, all of her emotions tumbling and falling into despair once more. "What do you expect from me, Ahlen? What you're doing doesn't make any sense. You'll spend a year to reach the priests of this Sun God and then what? How will you get their answer back in time to save your sister?"

"They have ways of speaking to one another across the distances," Ahlen explained.

"And if they refuse?"

Ahlen swallowed hard, but he was quick to reassure Jhan. "That won't be your fault. I promise I'll

release you and see you back to your home safely.”

“So you said before,” Jhan reminded him bleakly. “I doubt your ability to accomplish that feat.”

Ahlen turned his back on her and didn’t reply. He didn’t need to, Jhan knew, he had all the power and she had to go along no matter what. It opened old wounds that were still sensitive enough to fester and grow worse. The boy was riding with a time bomb and didn’t even have the sense to know it. He’d said that he had listened to all the tales about her, but more and more Jhan doubted he had paid enough attention. If he had, he would have known that only her slim grasp on sanity was keeping the world from being engulfed by her Power or, at the very least, her hands from killing him in one quick blow. If he had known, he wouldn’t have slept so well the night before.

“A warm spring,” Ahlen said in amazement as he dipped a hand into the steaming pond. “How can this be?”

Jhan dismounted from her baku and took a slow look around. “It seems more amazing that no one bothered setting up a house or an inn here to take advantage of it. It isn’t far from the road.”

Ahlen motioned to the thick growth all about them. “It was well hidden. The trees grow sickly here, but the brush seems to flourish. If the water were poison...”

“Not necessarily,” Jhan was quick to say. “Some plants have high tolerances for bad water. Dead animals might be a better sign, but I don’t see any.”

Ahlen had discovered the pond by stepping off the road to relieve himself. Shy, he had walked a little further than was necessary and had stumbled on the pond. It seemed an oasis, beckoning with its warmth in the bone chill of the gathering darkness of evening.

Ahlen sniffed his wet fingers cautiously. “Smells like bad eggs.”

“Sulfur,” Jhan explained softly. “Not good to drink if it’s a high concentration.”

“Enough,” Ixien stepped forward, bent gracefully, and cupped a handful of water with the fastidiousness of a cat. He took a sip of it before Jhan or Ahlen could voice a protest. “Strange, but not poisonous,” was his verdict.

That was enough for Ahlen. “I’ll light a fire close by so that we can bathe and stay warm when we get out of the water.” He saw Jhan’s disapproving eyes. “If you’re still suspicious, we’ll stand watch, one by one, until we’ve all had a swim.”

“I do not swim,” Ixien announced.

“I’m not about to take a bath in front of you two!” Jhan bit out close on the heels of Ixien’s words.

Ixien and Ahlen both exchanged looks and then Ahlen looked down at his feet uncomfortably. “I

don't have any interest in you, Jhan. You aren't a woman and, even if you were, you wouldn't be the kind that I would find... good to look at."

Ixien's emotionless face went even flatter, perhaps his expression of bewilderment. "Is bathing a type of mating ritual among your people?"

Jhan wasn't certain how to feel. After nearly two years of being told how beautiful she was, here was a man who had total control over her and yet thought that she was ugly. In one way it was a relief; in another it raised more questions about Ahlen's immaturity. Jhan had been confronted one too many times by the brutish side of men to ever believe that she was totally safe with Ahlen despite his words. There wasn't any way to tell when that innocent immaturity might vanish. She didn't know enough of the boy Ahlen to know what the man Ahlen might turn out to be like.

"No, Ixien!" Ahlen was explaining in embarrassment to the Caefu. "Jhan was mutilated by an evil man and he is living as a married woman. It's confusing enough for me without having to explain it, but he is reacting as a woman, embarrassed to show nakedness in front of men."

"I don't understand why nakedness would be an embarrassment for man or woman," Ixien replied, "unless it is afraid of initiating mating from either of us." Ixien leveled his clear eyes at Jhan with utmost seriousness. "That would be quite impossible between us," he assured Jhan. "Caefu cannot mate with your kind."

"Not that you had a chance," Jhan seethed. "Or you either," she shot at Ahlen.

Ahlen grew impatient. "Don't bathe then, Jhan! I won't let this blessed chance to get the dirt off of my skin go by because of your prudishness and temper. Sit in your dirt, if you want to, but you won't get a chance again between here and the warmer deserts in the West, and maybe not even then from what I've heard about them!"

"Maybe if I stink badly enough, you'll let me go!" Jhan shouted in reply and turned her back with arms crossed over her breast, all the more furious because she truly wanted to take a bath.

"Since we'll all stink, eventually, I doubt I'll notice," was Ahlen's last retort before he gave up.

Ahlen began taking off his coat while he searched for wood to make a fire. When he had a good stack, and some set by to feed the fire, he patiently lit them and coaxed the flame until it was blazing warmth. Between it and the warm spring, the temperature of the air was fast becoming steamy and tolerable.

Jhan settled by the fire. Having wet a rag, she wiped her face and bathed any bare skin she could manage to reach without undressing. Ixien avoided the water and the fire entirely, standing off to one side and staring off into space as if he were a machine that had suddenly been turned off.

Ahlen began to undress to swim only after Jhan had deliberately turned away, but a sudden,

strange voice stopped him. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you, boy!"

Ixien twisted about, eyes wide. Ahlen grabbed for his clothes, half putting them on again before the owner of the voice emerged from the bushes. Jhan was already standing, knees bent and hands tensed to defend herself.

Dressed in a red robe and red boots, the man was very tall; a gaunt scarecrow. Not young, but not extremely old either, his lined face, marked by the sun, made his exact age indeterminate. His balding head caught the light of the fire and a tattoo, in the shape of a sun, marked the center of his broad forehead. A long, black mustache gave him a sad appearance, but his dark eyes were steady and eager as he approached them.

"That pond is quite dangerous," the man continued, prudently stopping while they overcame their surprise. "I heard you arguing from the road and, knowing this spot all too well, I came to warn you."

"Who are you?" Jhan demanded, not dropping her guard yet.

Ahlen had finished putting on his clothes. He stepped forward slowly, glancing at Ixien for guidance. The Caefu was immobile, face as unreadable as ever. "Who are you, sir?" he said as if Jhan hadn't spoken. "What danger is there? We haven't seen any."

"My name is Theon Fomas," the man replied. He lifted an arm with a burn along the underside of it. "I took this wound when I was foolish enough to swim here. There is some unquiet fire spirit at its heart. It sends up plumes of boiling water from time to time. I was lucky to come away with only this slight scald."

Ahlen backed away from the pond, eyes wide with superstitious fear. "Can it reach us on the shore?"

"No," the man was quick to reassure him. "It vents its anger only at the center of the pond."

"So much for your bath, Ahlen," Jhan said sourly. "I told you something was wrong. You're lucky that you weren't turned into boiled meat in a pond soup!"

Ahlen nodded, swallowing hard, knowing that Jhan might have preferred that for him. "You're right. I should have listened, but you're younger than I am, Jhan, and I find it hard to believe that you have any more experience in such things than I have."

Jhan scowled at him, not wanting to bear with Ahlen's condescension on top of everything else. "I'm nineteen, by the way, but my mind is much older, Ahlen. Don't judge me by my looks, ever."

"Nineteen?" Ahlen was wide eyed again and Jhan was getting weary of that expression. "You're not as small as Ixien, but you are so poorly grown that I would never have guessed that you were older than I."

"Petite, yet beautiful," the stranger interjected at last. With a disarming smile, he stepped closer,

reminding them of his existence, “and not a man, though you’re sharp tongue would make one doubt a lady is under all those ill fitting garments. You’ll need to disguise yourself better than that to avoid any unwanted attention on your journey.”

“You’ll have to talk to my *Master* about that,” Jhan replied through gritted teeth. She disliked the man instantly, though she didn’t know why. “This was his idea.”

Theon raised eyebrows. “A slave owner then?” he said to Ahlen. “I didn’t take you for a Lord, but I suppose you wouldn’t want to advertise your wealth with such a small escort. Forgive my familiarity, my Lord.” He gave Ahlen a small bow.

Ahlen sighed, eyes narrowing as if silently asking for patience. “I’m not a lord or a slave owner. Jhan likes to make jokes at my expense. This journey isn’t to his liking.”

Theon became confused. “His? Are you continuing your charade or are my eyes failing me?”

Ahlen began to explain, stopped, and then shook his head with another long sigh as he sat down by the fire. “Perhaps we should talk over dinner. Would like to join our camp tonight?”

“I would like that very much.” Theon was pleased. He put down the heavy pack he had balanced on one shoulder and then sat down next to it cross legged. “This is a story I would like to hear.”

The pond suddenly began to boil, with loud pops and hisses, as bubbles domed underwater and broke the surface in gaseous eruptions. Ahlen turned to look and then swallowed hard again. “Thank Scherial for bringing you in time,” Ahlen intoned reverently.

“You must be special to Her,” the man replied, strangely irritated. “I once worshiped Her and Tsarianna, the Sun God. I know how little they care about mortal affairs.”

Theon’s voice sounded bitter, almost resentful. Jhan thought that the man looked too calculating, the talk about Scherial putting a chink in the smooth facade of Good Samaritan that he was attempting to show them. When she looked at Ahlen, she was dismayed, but not surprised to see his trusting expression.

Ahlen was holding up his wrist. It was tattooed with a leaf design. “I was sealed to Scherial as a baby. I was born different. My people believe such children are touched by the gods. It has always seemed to me that She has stood close by me, guiding me.” Ahlen’s eyes lit on Jhan as he said this and she frowned at him, hating the faith that had driven him to kidnap her against all reason.

Theon twisted his mouth sourly. “I fell out of favor with my fellow priests. I wasn’t very good at keeping to their strict tenants of cleansing, abstaining, and fasting. I’m a more... liberal man with my pleasures. After I was turned out of the priesthood, I experienced the displeasure of the gods in the form of continuous ill luck. As you can imagine, I’m not well disposed towards them at the moment. I would appreciate as little talk as possible about such matters.”

“That would be difficult, as the purpose of our journey is to reach the Sun God,” Ixien finally spoke up. He crouched close by, staring at Theon in his disconcertingly blank manner.

Theon studied Ixien intently, frown lines deepening. “What are you?”

“Caefu,” Ixien replied.

Theon turned to Ahlen. “You seem the most normal of this group,” he said. “Perhaps, if you would tell me your tale, I might be less... disconcerted.”

Ahlen was reluctant. He gave a warning look to Jhan to keep silent as he began to speak, letting her know that he didn’t expect to tell all of the truth. “I am Ahlen Kantori, a farmer’s son from the mountains near Owell. I’m on a journey to the Temple of the Sun God in the Tokhelan Desert. My sister was given in sacrifice to Scherial and only the Sun God’s priests can release her from her fate. This,” he motioned to Jhan, “is Jhan. His tale is his own, but I will say that he is under my protection.” Jhan bristled at that, but she bit her lip and did keep silent, glowering.

“*He*, again,” Theon interrupted, intrigued. “I would have sworn, on any holy relic, to the contrary when I first laid eyes on him.”

“Yet, he is a man,” Ahlen insisted. “One with a hot temper as well. I beg you to ignore any ill words he chooses to say. He has turned out to be without manners before strangers.” Jhan was ready to explode. She sat down hard across the fire from Ahlen and glared at him, seething.

“Your business is your own, I suppose,” Theon replied with an arched eyebrow, “but what of this Caefu? Is it man or woman?”

“Again, a man,” Ahlen responded with a flush, perhaps wondering why the ex- priest cared. “His name is Ixien. He is a worshiper of the Ahnali and not Human, as you can see. He was sent on a pilgrimage to the Sun God by his people and has decided to journey with us. Though we seem very strange, I assure you, we are harmless, Theon.”

“And very interesting,” Theon added with a wondering shake of his head. He pulled his pack close to him and pulled out the cut up haunch of some beast. It was wrapped tightly in leather. “I’ll share my meat in exchange for a more elaborate tale and a warm place by the fire.”

“It is appreciated, thank you.” Ahlen smiled and took the meat eagerly.

Jhan scowled as she watched Ahlen take rough metal skewers from a pack, stab them through the meat, and place it over the fire to cook. Once again, Ahlen was taking another companion at face value and not asking the right questions. When he walked away to care for the baku, and Ixien had wandered a little away from the fire’s unneeded heat, Jhan felt Theon’s eyes on her intently.

“What is this Ahlen to you?” Theon wanted to know, voice soft and as slick as oil. “If not master, then...?”

“None of your business, I’m sure,” Jhan growled back and attempted to ignore him, staring out into the night with her back half turned to him.

“It could be,” Theon chuckled.

“Where were you traveling to when you just *happened* on us?” Jhan wondered, ignoring his blatant interest in her.

Theon shrugged, caught off guard, but not disconcerted. “Not anyplace in particular. I’ve been a wanderer for many years now. But you, now you have soft hands and such pale skin. You’re not a farmer’s son. You’re not used to open skies and riding trails, that’s plain. It’s also plain that you’re not used to following anyone’s commands. Has he kidnapped you then? Are you some lord’s pretty son?” He lowered his voice and shot a look to see if Ahlen was looking their way. Satisfied that he wasn’t, he continued, “or daughter? Speak quickly and I may be able to help you.”

There was something in Theon’s voice that Jhan instantly picked up on. She knew, without a doubt, that rescue wasn’t on this man’s mind. He wanted her tale as eagerly as he had wanted Ahlen’s and Ixien’s. It seemed he wasn’t above lying to get it.

Jhan’s temper pricked and she balled her fists, giving Theon a brief, scathing look before giving him her back completely. Ahlen chose that moment to return and mind the meat on the spits.

“You can at least do that much, Jhan,” Ahlen admonished her. “It doesn’t take any skill and I know you’re just as eager as I am not to have to eat burned meat.”

“You didn’t ask and I didn’t know I needed to do any such thing,” Jhan shot back indignantly. “I didn’t need to cook in Pekarín and I never learned anything about it before then.”

Ahlen sighed. “I was a half-wit and yet, even I saw my mother prepare enough meals to muddle through! Surely, your Mother-”

“Never wanted anyone in her kitchen, let alone children under foot,” Jhan replied stiffly. “I was still living with her before- well, I’m not going to get into that! I don’t know anything about cooking, Ahlen, and I don’t really care to learn now.”

“You are so stubborn!” Ahlen exploded. “It can only ease your journey if you just let me show you how to do a few basic-”

“I’ve told you!” Jhan shouted back. “I’m not interested! It takes patience and single mindedness and I don’t possess either of those qualities! You’re the cook, so face the fact!”

Ahlen gritted his teeth and Jhan could see his face flush red in the firelight. He calmed himself with an effort and managed to smile at Theon apologetically. “Two men will quarrel over domestic duties. Neither of us is suited to it. I hope my cooking doesn’t offend you too much.”

“I’m not a master at cookery, either,” Theon replied graciously, but he had listened avidly to their

exchange and Jhan thought that his curiosity was too intense to be idle or well meaning.

When the meal was done, Jhan ate her portion, and then moved close to the fire to roll up in her blanket and go to sleep. She could hear Ahlen and Theon speaking in low tones. Ixien was watching like a cat in the shadows, seeming half- asleep and dreaming on his feet. Jhan wondered how she would ever be able to sleep with such companions, but she surprised herself by tumbling into dreams almost at once.

The sky was an ever changing bluish- purple, an indigo so perfect that it seemed poised to startle the mind by becoming a color never seen before by human eyes. The land stretching out beneath it was stark in contrast; rolling beiges and frozen browns in a landscape better suited to some harsh, Arctic tundra. Amidst this strange world, Kile sat on a rock of black obsidian, knees hunched up under his chin and broad arms locked about his legs as if he sought to keep his heart warm.

Jhan wasn't shocked to see Kile. She knew she was dreaming despite the odd quality of reality everything seemed to possess. She climbed up the rock and sat beside her husband as if they had prearranged the meeting. He didn't glance at her, his eyes hidden in shadow. She felt the hot heaviness of his anger and sorrow, burning her skin as it settled on her like a blanket.

"I'm blaming myself for what happened. I don't need you to blame me as well," Jhan whispered. "After everything I've been through, you'd think that I would have been more careful, more suspicious, and more aware. I walked off with Ahlen as if I were an innocent!"

"They told me that they found your corpse floating in a lake," Kile grated out from the cover of his knees. "I blamed my Mother, my brothers, and everyone I could think of. In the end, I blamed you for letting it happen. All of that skill and all of that Power and you let yourself be killed! Half of my soul is gone; half of my life. I can't live like this. I won't!"

Kile looked up at last, but he was staring off at the indigo sky. His eyes were hollows; sunken blue orbs in a gaunt face. "Maybe the gods are punishing me for having been with you," he continued tensely. "No matter how you were changed, you were still a man. I struggled with that, always. It hurt me each time someone taunted you with it, but I knew, deep down, that I was hurting mostly for me. I felt ashamed. I never regretted my decision to be with you, but I never did shake the feeling that it was wrong."

Jhan stared at Kile, trembling and fighting tears. "I wish that this were real," she moaned. "I wish that I could tell you that I'm alive and to rescue me." She shook her head sadly. "You're only saying what my mind wants you to, my Love. You're just a parrot for all my fears and doubts. I'm so sorry that

my sub-conscious would like you to die of grief rather than be happy with Caliya. I suppose it's just like me. I'm selfish. I'd better go now before I drown in my own self-indulgence."

Jhan slid down the rock and her feet never touched the ground. She seemed to fall into the indigo sky, or perhaps a reflection of it in a clear lake. As the dream swirled away, like so much mist and fancy, and she settled into true sleep, Jhan heard Kile's voice pursue her. It uttered one word. "Alive?" and then she knew nothing more.

"Wake, now!"

Jhan sat up and blinked at morning light, trying to orient herself. The campsite whirled and then settled into puzzling images that her bleary mind tried to formulate an opinion about. When it did, her heart began to hammer and she staggered to her feet in shock.

Ixien and Ahlen were sitting together, hands tied behind their backs and ankles bound. Ixien looked indifferent, but Ahlen was flushed, afraid, and angry. They both looked disheveled, as if they had struggled, but they were both unhurt and Jhan presumed that they had been taken captive in their sleep.

Theon stood beside them, long dagger at Ahlen's neck. He was grinning at Jhan and she knew the meaning of his leer well enough. "It's time to find out what you really are! It's my guess that you're some nobleman's daughter run off with her lover. If that's the case, I'm certain you must have some money hidden in your packs."

"You're a thief?" Jhan's full attention was on the knife at Ahlen's throat. She knew what her life was worth if Theon killed the boy. The thought of parasites eating her from the inside out kept her standing still.

"In need, yes, a thief," Theon replied testily, as if insulted, "but even a good man would be tempted with such fools tottering about the countryside with a purse full of money and someone, perhaps, worth another to her rich father!"

"He is under my protection!" Ahlen shouted furiously and struggled against his bonds. A prick at the throat from Theon's knife drew blood and Ahlen froze, swallowing hard and going pale.

"I'll do as I please, despite your *protection*," Theon laughed. "Right now, I please to lift your ladies skirts. I may please to do a little more. I doubt that her virtue is untouched with a hot young man, such as yourself, about her."

Theon shoved Ahlen onto his side with the rough side of his boot and strode to where Jhan was standing. His knife threatened her now, but she tilted her chin to look up at him, meeting his eyes.

Theon was out of shape, she noted in an instant, and not trained to fight. His body was lean, but his muscles were flaccid and more used to softer pursuits. Jhan knew that she could kill Theon easily. Whether she could find the courage to do it was another thing entirely.

“Off with your clothes,” Theon ordered with a warning flick of his knife.

Jhan slowly pulled off her hood and her hair dropped out of its tight coil, falling into an untidy mass of curls down to her waist. She took off her coat as well, to give herself more freedom of movement, and let it fall to the ground by her feet. “Like what you see so far?” Jhan wondered bitingly.

Theon was looking dazed, tongue licking over his lips and eyes widening appreciatively. “I thought you were beautiful as a boy, but, even with the dirt on your face, you’re easily the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. You’re hair is like a piece of darkness and your eyes are like Summer skies... or those deep blue flowers that pop up in the meadows even when the snow is deep on the ground. I’ve never seen such perfect skin or such finely arched eyebrows.” His face set hard and his hand tightened its grip on his knife. “You’re the type of woman a man like me could only have by force. I don’t think I’ll waste the opportunity.”

Jhan smiled to confuse Theon, mind racing to remember every move that General Vek had taught her over the last, difficult, year. Careful, she told herself, look docile and afraid. Don’t give any hint... “You’ve already wasted your opportunity,” Jhan replied and her foot swung around like lightening and caught Theon on the chin.

Theon dropped sideways like a felled ox. Jhan grabbed his hand and twisted while her foot jammed into the man’s diaphragm. Easy! She pulled her kick at the last possible moment; fighting a deeper training than Vek’s that urged her to use every heightened muscle she possessed to drive her foot through Theon to his spine. Still, there was a sickening crunch and Theon was unconscious, knife falling from nerveless fingers.

Panting and shaken, Jhan turned from Theon and half ran to Ahlen and Ixien. She bent to untie them and Ahlen was instantly thrusting himself to his feet in shock and amazement. “How did you-”

“Later!” Jhan shouted at him. “Get our things on the baku and let’s get out of here!”

Ahlen was dazed. He ignored Jhan’s panicked pleas as he looked past her at Theon’s body. “Is he... Is he dead?”

“I don’t know!” Jhan replied, almost weeping as she began gathering things herself and snatching at the leads of the baku. “I don’t want to know!”

“We can’t just leave him!” Ahlen protested and started walking towards the body. Jhan rounded on him and he stopped.

“He was going to rape me, Ahlen!” Jhan shouted at him as she slapped the reins of his baku into

his hand. “He was probably going to kill the both of you or sell you into slavery! If he’s dead, he deserves it!”

“No!” Ahlen objected as he gripped her arm to keep her from getting on her baku. “Look at you! You don’t want him dead! You’re terrified that you might have killed him! I’m going to find out!”

Ahlen gently pushed Jhan out of his way and she stood mutely, shaking even harder, as she watched him go and kneel by Theon. Ahlen felt for a pulse at the man’s wrist. When he didn’t speak, Jhan felt ready to collapse. “Well?” she almost shrieked the word.

Ixien was close enough to see. He was massaging his wrists, where they had been rubbed by the ropes, and looking at Theon with a surprising expression of anger. “He lives,” he said simply, and his sexless voice held a note of resentment for that fact.

“Then leave him!” Jhan begged. “Just leave him and we’ll be long gone before he wakes up.”

“If he does wakes up, you mean.” Ahlen straightened and turned to Jhan. He looked bewildered, his image of her visibly rearranging itself. “This is another tale about you that’s proven true.”

Jhan climbed up onto her baku, but Ahlen was still standing by Theon, maddeningly refusing to leave. “We can’t abandon him. He might still die so far from help,” Ahlen pointed out.

“A man like that would have left you!” Jhan shot back vehemently.

“But I’m not him, or like him at all,” Ahlen continued to protest. “We have to help him.”

“This from the man who threatens to let parasites eat me alive!” Jhan taunted wildly.

Ahlen winced, but he refused to be goaded. Instead, he carefully wrapped Theon in one of the man’s own blankets, propped food and water within the man’s reach, and checked to make certain the man didn’t have anything broken that might keep him from seeking help. “Broken ribs and a broken wrist,” Ahlen announced after long minutes. “He should be able to travel.”

“Thank you, Healer Kantori!” Jhan seethed. “Now may we leave?”

Ahlen nodded. He picked up Jhan’s coat and handed it up to her as he led his baku to hers and attached its lead to his beasts harness. He looked pale and guilty. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t protect you. I trusted Theon because I didn’t know enough of the world, and the men in it, to be afraid.”

“You should listen to me!” Jhan railed at him, whitely furious and frightened at the same time. “I know the world, Ahlen, and I know the darkness in it *very* well!”

Ahlen nodded as he mounted his baku. “I will listen, but it seems,” he flushed, ashamed, “that you were able to protect yourself quite well without my help. It frightened you, but you still brought down a man much larger than yourself. I know that I couldn’t have beaten Theon in your place.”

Ahlen admitted that as innocently and as honestly as he did everything else, but Jhan could see that he was beginning to realize his own danger. The fear of being tied hand and foot, in some misplaced

bid by Ahlen to feel safe, forced Jhan to quickly reassure him. “I’m not a fighter, Ahlen. I only did that as a last resort. I tried very hard not to kill him, even though I think he deserved it and more! You have the medicine. I can’t hurt you and go on living. I’m well aware of that.”

“Enough talk,” Ixien interjected. “This man has tried to take our freedom and stop me in my journey. If you had not brought him down, I should have had to attempt it.”

What that meant, Ahlen and Jhan didn’t know. Ixien had seemed as helpless as any of them. His expression, once again flat and as still as stone, gave nothing away.

“We’ll go,” Ahlen decided, but he was clearly upset, perhaps realizing at last that he knew even less than he had thought. His Princess had turned out to be an emasculated man, posing as a woman, with a killing skill. His new friend had proven to be a common thief, and his Caefu savior had hinted that he was, perhaps, far more powerful and alien than his diminutive stature let on. It was a great deal for a boy to handle amidst the difficulties of the quest he had chosen to undertake.

They rode back to the road, Ixien walking alongside, and the cold hit them like a blow. Jhan ducked low to keep her heart warm as it faltered and ached in her chest. She gritted her teeth and put on her coat and cap hurriedly, wondering, not for the last time, if she should have left Ahlen and Ixien tied up and escaped; taking her chances that Ahlen had been lying to her about the parasites. The awful image of herself, dying in horrible agony in Kile’s helpless arms, stilled that thought almost at once. She had to stop thinking of what ifs, she told herself grimly, and concentrate on surviving.

CHAPTER THREE

(The Wolf Prince)

The road turned rocky and rutted. It climbed upwards at a wearying angle and the baku balked and complained bitterly. When a light snow began to fall, Jhan felt ready to complain along with them. She felt frozen to the bone and her strength was beginning to lose ground, even after a brief stop at midday to eat what was left of the meat they had cooked the night before.

Jhan wished that she could ask Ahlen if the road grew any worse past Owell, but she was certain he wouldn’t know the answer. It was left for her to ask Ixien, but Jhan was long in deciding to break her self imposed disregard of the alien Caefu. Misery drove her to it at last, and a need to reassure her

body that there might be some relief for it up ahead.

“Ixien?”

The Caefu was walking beside Jhan’s baku and Jhan didn’t have to raise her voice much. Ixien gave her a bland stare, his feet sure footed on the rocky ground despite his inattention to his steps.

“Yes?”

“Do you know what the land is like up ahead?” Jhan asked, unable to keep her distaste for him out of her voice.

“There is a vast lake,” Ixien replied, eyes looking ahead and catching the milky light of the sun. “Beyond it, are mountains and rough lands. Beyond that, there are deserts. Farther than that, I don’t know.”

“Does it get warmer?”

“The deserts are cold, at first, but I’ve heard they grow warmer the farther West one travels,” Ixien replied. “Still, winter is winter, even in the deserts.”

The throbbing ache of despair beat harder within Jhan, yet, she was stubborn. She huddled deep within her coat. Death was a familiar enemy, always tapping at her shoulder; trying to distract her from life. Jhan braced herself to ignore it and outwit it if she could.

They topped a rise towards late afternoon and the baku snorted and balked when they discovered a sharp descent down into a valley before them. The way was rocky and treacherous, the road broad, but covered in ice and slick snow. Jhan didn’t like it one bit. The way would be slow and she doubted that they would be able to reach the bottom of the valley by nightfall.

“Stop for the night,” Jhan protested when Ahlen kneed his baku to goad it onwards.

Ahlen pointed down into the valley, at the great city sprawled on the edge of a vast sparkling lake. “That’s Owell! We’ll be able to buy some supplies and, maybe, a room for the night. If we hurry-”

“One of the baku will break a leg!” Jhan swore. “See sense, Ahlen!”

Ahlen shrugged off her advice, motioning at her impatiently. “Put your hair under your cap and wrap your face in your scarf. These are mountain bred baku. You don’t need to fear that they will fall. Keep silent and follow me.”

Tiring at last, Ixien swung up onto their pack baku. He perched there, as uneasy as Jhan, as the beasts reluctantly went over the edge of the valley with angry grunts and flapping ears. Hiding her hair and her face, Jhan clung with both hands to the saddle of her baku, eyes wide and heart almost stopping at every lurch, stumble, and skitter of rock under hoof.

“Company,” Ahlen warned. “Be silent and keep your head down, Jhan.”

Jhan looked up angrily, ignoring him. Three riders, on imala, were resting on a flat shelf of rock to

one side of the trail. Their imala were all russet brown, only the odd splotch of white or white hock to tell them apart. Their riders were all as different as their beasts were the same and Jhan became tense and wary immediately.

The rider in front was a large man dressed in dark red leather. His vest was decorated in gold spirals and his red leather pants were tucked into well worn, red boots. He wore a very long sword on his saddle and several daggers at his belt. A red scarf hung from his neck and it was studded with glittering pins.

He was definitely the leader, Jhan thought. He sat proud in his saddle and his eyes were a clear gold that seemed hot and challenging even from such a distance. His face was like the granite rocks all around them and his nose was like an eagle's beak. Three scars ran deeply across each broad cheek and his hair was a rough mane of bronze cut straight at shoulder and forehead.

The young man beside him was shorter and slighter in stature, but not any less proud. He wore a long black coat, slitted in the back for riding, and his hands were hidden in black gloves. Even more disconcerting than his midnight colored clothes, were his contrasting scarves of crimson red. He wore one wrapped about his lower face and neck and one braided into his hair in a long tail down his back. That hair was as black as his clothes and it was a tangled cover for the part of his face that was bare.

Like his companion, he also wore a long sword and knives at wrist and hip.

The third figure was a woman, Jhan guessed, but more than that she couldn't tell. She wore a cumbersome dress, but straddled her imala like a man. All else was covered in a shimmering crimson scarf that fell from the top of her head to the level of her waist, held in place by jewel studded pins.

"Pass them as wide as you can," Jhan suggested nervously. "They're armed. They might mean trouble."

"With a woman dressed like that?" Ixien was doubtful. "They do not look ready for battle."

"Theon didn't either," Jhan reminded him acidly.

Ahlen was of the same mind as Jhan. He steered his baku wide, watching the three riders warily. "Their imala aren't a match for our baku on this road," Ahlen reassured Jhan. "We can outrun them."

"And maybe take a fall and die trying," Jhan muttered in return.

"Useless to argue," Ixien cut in sharply. "There is not another way."

They managed to put a few yards between them and the strange riders, but Jhan still felt uncomfortably close. When they passed without incident, she began to breathe a little easier. She looked back and caught the eyes of the leader. The man was watching them idly, speaking in a low tone to the younger man beside him. He nodded to Jhan in acknowledgement, but Jhan could tell that his mind was elsewhere.

Jhan turned forward once more to watch the dizzying descent of her baku and to watch the sinking sun with trepidation. When an imala came galloping past her at breakneck speed, she was taken completely by surprise. Before she could react, Ahlen had jerked loose the lead between their baku and was galloping his beast after the imala.

“Ahlen!” Jhan was shocked, confused. She tried to make sense out of the wild galloping images in front of her as the rump of Ahlen’s baku careened down a loose scree of stone and came up even with the imala. The beast seemed riderless until Ahlen snatched at its reins and brought it up short, pulling it around. Then Jhan saw the veiled woman hanging onto the opposite side of the saddle for dear life.

Ahlen helped right her in the saddle. The woman bowed, as if gasping for breath, as he led her imala back to Jhan and Ixien. When her companions reached them, both the men looked furious.

“Foolish woman!” The young man shouted. “What would we have done if you had broken your imala’s legs?”

The older man held up a curt, commanding hand and the young man fell silent and sullen. The woman bowed even lower in her saddle, as if in shame, but the man was choosing to ignore her, turning his attention instead to Ahlen.

“My thanks, stranger,” the man said in a rough, growling voice. “Her imala stumbled and she hadn’t the skill to stay in the saddle. Her fumbling caused the beast to bolt. I am Obahn Om Sukhelan, Hyjar of Jykara. Prince, your people say. This,” he motioned to the young man, “Is Sael Ruon, Bhakali to me. The woman is my fifth wife, Zerain. For her life, I am indebted to you.”

Ahlen was clearly intimidated by Obahn’s title and manner. He stammered, cleared his throat, and then replied stiffly. “I am Ahlen Kantori. My companions are Ixien, a Caefu from the Deep Caves, and Jhan of- of Sarvoy.” Ahlen realized that he shouldn’t have said the last in the next instant, but seemed unable to think of anything else to say to recover from it. He finished lamely. “I don’t need your debt.”

That was a mistake, Jhan realized, as Obahn’s face turned red with anger. His eyes seemed to almost glow yellow in the sinking sunlight and his lips drew back over sharp, white teeth. “Are you such a great man, then, that I cannot be of any worth to you?” Obahn snarled.

“No, I meant-,” Ahlen began and then stopped when he found himself staring at Obahn’s back. The three strangers had ridden past and were going down the trail faster than was wise.

“That didn’t go well,” Jhan observed sourly. “They might actually have been of some use to us. They looked like they could handle themselves. We might have used that debt business to tag along under their protection.”

Ahlen rounded on Jhan. “Now you trust someone? They are plainly barbarians! What makes them so much more trustworthy than Ixien or Theon?”

“Or you?” Jhan seethed. “If he thought he owed you something for saving that woman’s life, then it showed he has some sense of honor. Too bad you threw it back in his face!”

“How could I have known?” Ahlen demanded. “I doubt you knew it either!”

Jhan frowned and then shrugged, admitting, “I didn’t, I suppose, but I don’t think I would have responded so badly that he could only take offense. Maybe, *Debts are unnecessary between new friends*, or something like that, but not, *I don’t need your debt*. What sort of thing is that to say to anyone?”

“So, you want to speak for me as well as tell me whom to trust?” Ahlen demanded. “It seems to me, if you are so wise in knowing good men from bad, that you would never have let me kidnap you!”

Everything within Jhan tightened and she felt herself go cold. Violent images and violent reflexes were stilled with a great effort of will. She blinked tears as her temple throbbed and the world grew dark. She didn’t know how long she sat her baku like that, trying to find her way back to reason, but when she saw sunlight again and Ahlen’s pasty white face, she knew that she had frightened him.

“Don’t- Don’t say things like that to me again,” Jhan managed to say. “You don’t know, or maybe you do now, that you are walking a thin line with me. I want to see my home and my husband again. Don’t taunt me so much that I forget that.”

Ahlen only nodded, but he didn’t tie their baku together again and he rode a little further ahead than was usual. Ixien’s comment on the matter was even and dry. “He should have left you behind. You will hinder us.”

“As much as I can,” Jhan promised, “until he lets me go!”

Ahlen chose to lag behind the strangers for safety, but they still managed to reach the gate of Orwell just as the sun was dipping behind the curve of the lake. A huge arched affair stamped with odd glyphs, the gate was an unguarded hole in a tall, whitewashed wall that ran the length of the city, yet didn’t encompass it in any form of protection. It was made, rather, to impress travelers and to give the impression that, once through the gate, you were entering another world. Jhan felt that keenly. She didn’t need Ahlen to remind her to hide beneath her scarf and to try to look as much like man as possible.

Even in winter, Orwell was a mecca for merchants. Wide streets were lined with carts and stalls were filled to bursting with every item imaginable, and some beyond imagining. Brick buildings housed more permanent wares. Jhan could glimpse ship builders, wagon makers, smithies, inns, and taverns. Stalls were set up for beasts. Jhan spotted a compound of slaves, and she shivered at the sight of their hollow faces and looks of resigned indifference.

“How did they become slaves?” Jhan wondered, but neither Ixien nor Ahlen could give her an

answer. Ahlen was just as bewildered as Jhan. Ixien didn't appear to care.

Someone bumped into Jhan's baku. Startled, she looked down as a drunken man looked up, blinking angrily and pointing a beefy finger up at her as if he were going to curse. He looked familiar. Jhan searched her memory anxiously to place that pig eyed face and those huge jowls, but his name escaped her. He wasn't having any trouble recognizing her.

"Those eyessss!" the man slurred. "I've only seen them once, and never more on anyone! You're the Princess Jhanian!"

And then Jhan was past him, looking back and torn as to what to do. To shout for help might mean an ugly death from the parasites. To keep silent, would mean a long journey and, perhaps, death later on. The crowds, and a turn in the road, swallowed the man up and the moment was gone. Jhan reluctantly let go of it, knowing she had as little choice as before. She had to follow Ahlen.

They stopped at the edge of the lake. A long line of ships were tied to a great dock. Men loaded and unloaded merchandise even as the lanterns were being lit and hung from posts. Birds squabbled and whirled about as they searched for scraps.

"Wait here," Ahlen commanded and dismounted from his baku. He tied its reins to a post and Jhan slowly dismounted as well, watching Ahlen walk to a sailor and begin speaking in low tones. The sailor was stripped to the waist, even in the cold, and burned dark by the sun. His woolly, bronze hair reminded Jhan of Bheni. The man nodded solemnly to whatever Ahlen was saying and then held up a quick flash of fingers that had Ahlen exclaiming in dismay. The sailor shrugged and walked away.

Ahlen returned scowling. "Their prices for crossing the lake are outrageous! I won't be able to afford all three of us and the animals."

Jhan had sat down on a low post, depression and anger making her lash out at Ahlen like a whip. "Then forget about me and go alone! Or take Ixien! He at least knows where you are going!"

Ahlen shook his head stubbornly. "Scherial has spoken to me and I won't go against it. You must come, Jhan, even if we have to travel around the lake."

Jhan looked skeptically at the vast lake. "That will take time."

"It may, but we don't have any choice now." Ahlen untied his baku and motioned Jhan to follow. "I'll get information before we leave the city, some supplies, and maybe a guide, if we're lucky."

"I haven't been too lucky so far. I don't know why that should change now," Jhan growled under her breath, but pulled her baku after Ahlen with Ixien and the pack baku in tow.

Jhan looked anxiously about her, wondering if they would again run into the man who had recognized her. Lanterns were being lit on every street corner and inns and taverns were blazing light into the street from open doorways, but shadows lay heavy on everything as the sun gave up its

struggle and sank behind the rim of the lake. Even if they did pass the man, Jhan doubted that they would be able to see each other.

Ahlen stopped at the porch of an inn and handed the reins of his baku to Jhan. "Stay here," he ordered briskly. "I'll go inside and see what I can find out." He tried to sound confident, but his voice wavered and Jhan saw the uncertain boy Ahlen really was. She watched him go through the door hesitantly, eyes catching the light and showing his fear.

"Paid a fair price, but I didn't bargain hard," a man was saying to his companion as they strode onto the porch and headed for the door of the inn. "Who would with his reputation and that cold eyed boy at his side?"

"Beast Prince, they call him," the other agreed as he settled his cloak under one arm. They were plain merchants and unremarkable, yet Jhan pricked up her ears, having nothing else to do. "They say he can change his form when he has a mind to."

"Into a woman for his young man?" the first man chuckled.

"Needn't do that!" the other laughed. "That young man has an Ekhal's braid. That Obahn calls him Bhakali, apprentice, but even I can see what's before my own eyes!"

"He has a woman!" the first replied skeptically.

"Maybe he enjoys both! Shape shifting would be quite the advantage, would it not?"

"As I said before...,"

Then they were through the door and Jhan was left with their words hanging in the air. Beast Prince. She thought of Dagara despite her best efforts not to. He had been able to twist and shape men into beasts, but they had still looked like men. If anyone could have had the Power to do it, it would have been Dagara. Jhan passed it off as idle talk, recalling Obahn's dark anger and his almost yellow eyes. It wasn't hard to imagine him a wolf.

Feet scuffed cobblestones as a man came to stand at Jhan's elbow. He was broad, flat nosed, and his clothes were richly tooled leather. The short spike of hair on his otherwise bald head looked almost comical. His business wasn't. "How much for the freak?" he asked, staring at Ixien.

Jhan flinched in surprise, quickly stepping away from the man. His eyes swiveled to follow her, looking her up and down intently as she replied, "He's not mine to sell."

"Pretty thing, aren't you? Who's your master then?" The man asked impatiently.

"I don't have one," Jhan snapped back, becoming afraid now.

"What's your business here then?"

"I don't have any business." Jhan tried to cover her fear with anger, but the man wasn't fooled. Smiling casually, his hands flexed as he walked slowly about her.

“What do you want?” Jhan demanded, trying to put her baku between the man and herself.

“People get jaded,” the man explained with a shrug. “They’re always willing to pay good money for something new. I try to keep my eyes open and, well, here you are, a beauty and a freak openly breaking the law. You aren’t trading. Owell doesn’t allow vagrants. It seems to me that you’re free for claiming.”

“Take that one,” Ixien agreed suddenly, breaking out of his statue-like immobility. “It is a hindrance by its own admission.”

“I’m taking you too,” the man interjected.

“I would be deadly as a mate,” Ixien replied irritably. “Your people confuse easily, it seems. It is a wonder that you are able to breed at all. That one is of your species, at least, though it will not bear children either.”

The man looked startled and confused, replying vacantly, “That wasn’t under consideration.” He collected himself with an effort and replied more strongly. “You may be too strange even for my customers. I’ve changed my mind. Go your way.”

“Ixien!” Jhan shouted in disbelief when the Caefu began walking away. He gave her a brief, bland stare over his shoulder, but didn’t stop. Jhan knew then that she was on her own. Turning her hands into fists, she faced the stranger. “Just try and touch me you-”

The man suddenly leaned forward and tossed something over Jhan’s head with the ease of long practice. The object clinked and glittered in the light of the lantern on the inn porch. The man moved quickly, yanking Jhan’s scarf off and pulling the necklace tightly enough to touch her skin. He spun around her, keeping her off balance, as he clicked a lock into place. Finished, he jumped backwards before she could aim a blow.

Something cold and hard was resting against a spot just below Jhan’s right ear. She scratched hurriedly at it, but the chain was well forged metal and the lock kept it tight against her skin. She tried to flee into the inn, her last hope Ahlen, but a strange vibration began almost at once from the object. It quickly became bone jarring and Jhan suddenly felt the world tip out from under her feet. She fell, eyes seeing the lantern and the darkness whirl and shimmer.

The man appeared in that crazy, spinning world, a stomach wrenching miasma of smiling face and glittering black eyes. “Come now. Don’t fight and you won’t feel ill. The kaunut I placed against your ear will make any movement painful and nauseating to you. It’s a vibrating stone. I don’t know of anyone who knows why it vibrates, but we’ve found some very interesting uses for it. Keeping slaves meek is just one that suits my profession well.”

Jhan couldn’t even speak. Her head was vibrating in time with the stone and she found that the

only relief was complete immobility. Lying flat in the street, she began to weep. The man didn't take any notice. He lifted her up and threw her over one shoulder. Giving a jaunty pat to Jhan's behind, he began walking down a side street and deep into the city.

"You shall call me Master Kelmus," the man was saying as Jhan moaned over his shoulder, head almost hanging upside down. She felt as if she were on the deck of a ship in a violent storm, sea-sick and ready to vomit. "I expect you to say nothing else," Kelmus continued. "I'm not interested in what you think, how you feel, or your objections to your new life; however long that might be. Doing as I tell you, and pleasing my customers, is all that is expected of you from this moment forward. Displease them or me, and I can put more than one kaunut around your neck. Can you imagine what more than one vibrating stone would do to you? Torture is one of its other uses."

There was a cart with a harnessed baku. Several piles of groaning humanity lay inside and Kelmus checked on them briefly before swinging up into the seat of the wagon. He lowered Jhan onto the seat beside him, but kept a strong arm about her.

"Can't have a little thing like you mauled by the likes of them," Kelmus said as he urged the baku forward. Its hooves clopped on the cobblestone as it began trundling down another street. "Thieves, drunks, and deal breakers mostly. They make good fodder for the games. A prize like you, though, needs special treatment."

Jhan gritted her teeth to keep from biting her tongue and tried to keep perfectly still, but the swaying of the cart made that impossible. She thought that she would pass out before too long. Her entire head was vibrating now and she couldn't even clench her hands enough to brace herself from falling. The vibrating was interrupting her brain's signals and her sense of equilibrium as well. She could only hang in Kelmus's embrace, and suffer, as the cart trundled through one street and then another before leaving through a gate and going out into the snow powdered countryside.

Before too long, there was noise, light, and the smell of campfires. Voices shouted greetings and the groans from the cart intensified as hands pulled the occupants out and led them away. Kelmus swung Jhan onto his shoulder again and easily dismounted from the cart, talking to someone Jhan couldn't see.

"We'll have a game tomorrow," Kelmus was saying, "Two of those new ones and that big, pale fellow from the North Ridges will do well, I think. This one? My own business. Something special that might wring some sympathy from the crowd and some extra coins."

"You always know best," a strange voice grunted.

"I do," Kelmus agreed humorously.

Kelmus had been standing still during the exchange and the vibrating had lessened to a point

where Jhan felt her senses starting to return. Before she could begin to react, Kelmus was walking again and the world went topsy turvy, trembling and spinning once more.

Kelmus turned abruptly. Jhan found herself looking down into a very wide and very deep pit. Torches at every corner of it lit the bottom fitfully and Jhan could just make out the shadowy form and glowing eyes of some beast. It snarled and leapt and Jhan had a disoriented view of a thing nearly five hundred pounds, eight feet long, and sporting long claws and sharp teeth like daggers. A tiger, Jhan thought for just an instant, but it was an ugly beast and had as little to do with a cat as a dog did with a wolverine.

“Mayga,” Kelmus introduced. “He’s been the undefeated champion of the pit for nearly a year now. That’s bad for business. People get bored if nobody ever wins. That’s where you come in. They’ll cry pity and forbear, but I’ll still try to throw you in. It’ll heat their blood and loosen their coins to see such a child thrown to my pet. If you’re lucky, someone will offer to buy you to save your life. If you’re not lucky, I’ll show mercy at the last moment and send my next fighters in after you to try and kill Mayga before she kills you. That strange creature I found with you, like a sliver of ice, wouldn’t have elicited a yawn, I think, or lasted a second to wet anyone’s appetite. You, now, you’ll have them raving.”

Kelmus turned from the pit and strode to where the torches and campfires were brightest. There was a covered wagon that was very large and very ornate. Kelmus swung up the steps and into a narrow doorway, pushing Jhan in before him before turning and closing shut a thick door.

The inside of the wagon was very compact and very efficient. A narrow bed was built into one wall like a shelf and a table and small stool were packed up against the opposite side. Every surface was scattered with scrolls and half open books scribbled with numbers and words. Thick carpets lined the floor and a very tiny, wood burning stove was tucked into the far end. It gave both light and almost suffocating warmth to the small space.

Sitting Jhan on the stool, Kelmus took his time pulling off his gloves and shrugging off his thick cape. His eyes never left Jhan and he seemed to be deep in thought. Finally, he crouched by Jhan and pulled off her coat. “Let’s see what we have here. I hope the rest of you is as darling as your eyes, boy. The crowd needs to feel truly sorry for you or it just won’t work.”

Seeing the two sweaters and the shirt, Kelmus impatiently removed them and then sucked in a deep breath. He chuckled and then pulled off Jhan’s hat. When her dark curls unraveled and fell down to her waist, he chuckled even louder. Bare to the waist and revealed at last, Jhan could only look back at the shimmering face of Kelmus and do nothing.

“Girl-but not a child by what I see,” Kelmus surmised as he removed Jhan’s boots, socks, and

worn pants eagerly. His warm hand went between Jhan's legs and he smiled into her eyes.

One more second, Jhan thought, as the world began to settle. One more second and she could gather enough strength and equilibrium to snap Kelmus's neck. She groaned when he refused to give her that second.

Kelmus scooped Jhan up from her stool and sat her on the narrow bed. Hooking her legs with his arms, he pulled her about until it suited him, her head and shoulders resting against the wall of the wagon at a painful angle. Satisfied, he loosened his pants and the degradation began.

The pain was nothing, she'd suffered worse... far worse. The humiliation was harder to bear, and the shame as her body reacted with flaring pleasure despite the pain of the violation. Created as the ultimate torture by Dagara, it had been Jhan's joy until that moment. Only now, long after her torturer was dead, did its original purpose make itself known; to squirm with pleasure despite anything that she might feel to the contrary.

"Gods!" Kelmus groaned suddenly. "I've never felt anything... What are you? Gods!"

Jhan could dimly make out Kelmus's face, sweating drops down onto her, eyes glazed and mouth hanging open as he gasped for breath. When they both crashed onto the floor, she thought he must be through

Jhan closed her eyes as the world pulsed and slowed to something bearable. It was at least an hour before Kelmus began to cool enough for her to realize that he was dead. How he had died, she couldn't guess. Whether it was through her own Power, or a simple weakness of heart, she was simply too ill and too desperate to escape, to take the time to investigate.

Jhan shuddered as she forced herself to search Kelmus. She found a ring of keys in the pants about his ankles. It seemed to take an eternity as she fumbled and found the right key to unlock her torturous necklace.

Things didn't magically return to normal, as Jhan had hoped, as she threw the necklace aside. Her senses still pulsed sickeningly. Her eyes refused to focus or see the room as anything other than a spinning confusion of images as she managed to push Kelmus off of her. It was tempting to lie there and give up.

"Come on!" Jhan urged herself through gritted teeth, furious at her own weakness. "This is nothing! You sat and watched as Dagara cut open your legs and arms and snapped joints and-and-" Jhan stopped and swallowed hard, wiping at her tears, as she found her clothes and put them on awkwardly. She was too ill now to even know if she had put them on right.

Crawling to the door of the wagon, Jhan pushed it open. Pulling herself to a sitting position, she swung her legs outside and sat, poised there while her mind tried to make sense out of the world.

Anyone could have been watching and she wouldn't have known, Jhan thought. She couldn't see to tell and her ears were ringing too much to even listen. She had to trust to luck, something that had never been hers, and simply run for it and hope that there wasn't anyone to see and stop her.

Jhan slid down the steps rather than climbed and poured bonelessly onto the ground. It was very cold and her cheek was resting now in a patch of snow. That freezing slap roused her more than her danger. Prying herself up, she began a stumbling walk away from the wagon; hoping against hope that it was away from Kelmus's companions.

Jhan lost track of time and distance. The world turned black and not only from the darkness of the enfolding forest. Repeatedly running into trees, falling, and sometimes crawling on all fours, Jhan refused to give up. Her fear gave her strength, driving her forward despite the fact that it was growing deadly cold and she had left her coat behind.

"Little General!"

Jhan started and gasped, whirling and trying to see past the vibrating confusion behind her eyes. She felt people all about her suddenly and she could make out figures, first as blobs, and then as streaks of familiar red.

"Little General! Come and play!"

Jhan sobbed, frozen hands going to her open mouth as she turned about and about again. A red, hot, iron rod licked out of nowhere and caught her on the skin, searing and smoking. She recoiled, but another hot iron stabbed out of the darkness behind her. More irons thrust towards her, making her whirl and dodge in a sickening dance until she was ringed completely and not offered any escape.

"No!" Jhan closed her eyes, frantic. "This already happened. It isn't happening now! I'm hallucinating."

"You killed Theyu! I saw his body! Dagara had you squeeze him to death. You'll pay for that!"

"Easy, Grunar! You know our orders. Anything we like, short of killing him. You do that and-"

"Gyven's very skilled."

"No! I won't remember that!" Jhan screamed and ran, heart pounding and mouth open as her hands searched ahead of her for obstacles. The voices followed her and she wondered if she were really running at all.

Hands caught her and held her down. A hand searched her naked body. What had happened to her clothes? She felt herself turned on her stomach and held by bodies much larger than her own. She knew what was next.

"I won't!" Jhan bit her lip till blood gushed. "I won't remember that!"

The shock of her teeth biting almost through her lip sent Jhan's body and mind over the edge. She felt herself spasm in a convulsion and the soldiers of Dagara evaporated like the dream they were. The memory sizzled and burned as if it were acid. Jhan wept and slowly calmed, her violent shaking soon ceasing altogether.

"A rape, apparently."

Jhan didn't recognize this new voice.

"Beautiful thing, even with that bitten lip," said another strange voice.

"My Lord?"

"I owe a debt. You trained briefly in healing. Is this beyond your skill, Ekhal?"

"I am uncertain. He might be damaged inside."

"He?"

"This is an Ikhil, my Lord."

Fingers touched impersonally and Jhan shuddered and groaned, begging whatever gods there were, that this wasn't part of the nightmare of Dagara's men.

"See? Here and here. This is a man, whether cut or born so, I can't say, but it can't be good to have been taken in such a place."

"Are you certain? The breasts, the body..."

"There are plant mixtures that can cause such changes, my Lord. I can explain if you-"

"I don't care to hear it, Ekhal! It is all filthy business to me. I only wish to know if you can heal it without troubling me or slowing us down. I only wish it to return to its master and report that I have repaid my debt to him by saving his creature."

"I will try, my Lord."

"More than try, Ekhal."

"Yes, My Lord."

Jhan was numb for a time, the voices flitting in and out beyond her ability to make sense of them. When they returned, louder and clearer, she felt hands on her again and wished vainly for the strength to open her eyes and defend herself.

"Not broken, Zerain, though I can't guess how he came to be born this way. A mischance of nature, perhaps, or maybe there are others like him? See, we have one single joint in wrists and ankles. This one has the bone split up into many and there are many more muscles than normal. I can't see how it

works to advantage; I could easily snap them at any point. Still, they are very flexible, allowing hands and feet to act like springs; twisting in any direction easily.”

“I don’t care, Ekhal,” a low, husky, woman’s voice replied. “You spend far too long examining your patient, Sael. Be careful of your oath.”

“My oath is safe in my keeping,” Sael growled back warningly and there wasn’t a reply to that.

There was movement; cloth rubbing against cloth, and the sizzle and smell of something cooking. Pungent incense mingled with grilling fish, both rousing Jhan from her near state of unconsciousness at last. Jhan blinked sleep encrusted eyes, trying to see in the dim light. Disoriented, she tried to make sense of the sheets of leather all about her, the glint of metal, and the figures that hovered at the edge of sight.

A tent, Jhan realized at last. She was lying among blankets and furs in a tent made out of hides. A metal brazier was positioned at the center, under a hole in the roof to let out the smoke, and a pan was being maneuvered over it with the frying fish being watched by a veiled woman. Zerain, Jhan recognized in numb amazement.

A figure was sitting by the open flap of the tent, half in and half out as if he didn’t care that he was letting in the cold. The red glare of a setting sun was dappling his bare face. Jhan didn’t know him until she saw the braid woven with a red scarf and the loose red scarf, set with glittering pins. The young man was passing them absently through idle fingers. Sael.

Handsome, and maybe younger than Jhan had at first thought, Sael was whip thin and hollow cheeked. A proud nose gave his dark eyes intensity and they were set under brooding brows. His lashes were so dark that they made those eyes look lined with mascara. Sael noticed Jhan’s slight movement at once, looking at her with an alertness that told her he was ready for anything and not to make trouble.

Memory washed over Jhan as she struggled to sit up, trembling and lightheaded. Realizing that she was naked, she tried to pull a fur over herself, but fell back weakly when her senses refused to tell her how to keep her balance. The sickening disorientation of the Kaunut was gone, but she felt an odd, ringing numbness on the side of her neck where it had lain.

Zerain had finished cooking, slipping the fish onto a wooden plate and adding some roots beside them. Sael took the plate from her and made a sharp motion, signaling her to go. Zerain seemed stiff and unwilling to let him order her, but, perhaps, she couldn’t see a reason for staying either. She left with a slow, deliberate pace to spite him.

Sael shoved a water skin over to Jhan with his foot as he lowered himself, cross legged, to sit beside her. He put the plate and skin within her reach and covered her with the fur. His deliberate motion told Jhan she wasn’t about to be violated again.

"I want my clothes," Jhan demanded and was surprised at how hoarse her voice was.

"You weren't wearing many of them when we found you dying in the snow," Sael told her steadily. He moved a pile of clothing towards Jhan. She recognized only some of them.

Jhan hastily pulled on a shirt and her two sweaters before discovering a too large pair of pants that weren't hers. Her face went hot, wondering how naked she *had* been.

Sael was aware of her embarrassment, despite his face being turned mostly away to give her privacy. "You had pants on, but they were ripped beyond repair," he assured her. "Those are mine. You'll have to belt them tightly and roll them up."

Jhan did just that and put on her own socks and boots to warm her freezing feet. Feeling more secure, she tried to unobtrusively gauge her strength, wondering how much of the conversations she had heard had been real or a hallucination. Was she a prisoner? Would she have to escape? If only she could get rid of the ringing in her ear, she thought, she could think more clearly.

Sael was sitting quietly, but he moved to look at her again, body deceptively relaxed. He didn't appear to be ready to ask Jhan any questions, as if her ordeal wasn't of any interest to him. Instead, he waited, for what, Jhan wasn't certain.

"Well?" Jhan finally prompted tensely. She tried to sit straight again, hands flat on the earth and feet braced as if she were on a rocking boat. She succeeded, just, but couldn't help feeling as if she were about to lose her balance at any moment.

"You aren't well, but my Lord Obahn's patience has grown thin," Sael offered in reply. "He intends to leave you in Okara, hoping that you will meet with your master and report that he has discharged his debt by saving you."

Jhan leaned on one side and picked up the plate of fish and roots, asking dispiritedly, "Is this mine?"

Sael frowned and nodded. He watched her eat, Jhan not offering any reply until she had filled her aching stomach and set the plate aside. "Your Lord Obahn hasn't saved me," Jhan finally said, wiping at her mouth and pulling the furs and blankets over herself once more. "If this Okara isn't where Ahlen is likely to go on the way to his Sun God, then I'm as good as dead."

Sael didn't ask her reasons for that belief and Jhan felt anger at his seeming indifference. It was something that she should be used to, she thought, and couldn't muster enough outrage in response. After being kidnapped by Ahlen, because he imagined a goddess had ordered him to do so, Ixien's whole hearted urging of Kelmus to take her, and Kelmus, at the moment of discovering that she was a woman, not considering any other action but to rape her, Jhan truly didn't expect anything from Sael except another round of harsh, indifferent treatment.

So, it surprised her when Sael glanced briefly at the open flap of the tent and then said softly, “I know what you must be feeling now. When I was younger, I suffered at the hands of unkind men as well. Some think that, because we are what we are, that they can do as they please. I must do as my Lord commands, but where I may, I can help you.”

Sael didn’t know her past, Jhan thought. If he did, he wouldn’t be expecting her to fall apart. Yet, despite her best efforts, Jhan couldn’t help thinking about her hallucination of Dagara’s men and the red hot irons. Kelmus’s cruelty had unwittingly dredged it up from within her mind. After living through that, and many more such episodes of torture and degradation, a violation only half sensed amidst a swirling disorienting sickness, wasn’t the horror that it should have been. Dagara Ku Ni and his men, even in nightmare, had more power to terrify her.

Shaking her head to clear it of dark memories, Jhan clenched her hands in the furs, replying tersely, “I don’t need your help. What that man did to me... I’ve suffered much worse.”

Sael wasn’t offended by Jhan’s rebuff. He seemed approving of her strength, nodding quietly, yet he didn’t look wholly convinced that her words were anything other than wary bravado in the face of strangers.

Realizing that her pillow was a saddle, Jhan pushed backwards until it was a prop for her body. She let out a small sigh as she was relieved of finding her balance. “How far to this Okara?” she asked to bring the conversation back to less painful ground.

“A day,” Sael replied. “We’ve made poor time caring for you, and, now that you are awake, my Lord Obahn will be anxious to make that up at morning light. We’ll travel hard through tomorrow, stay the night in the rough country, and then meet with the Okarins in the safety of daylight. They are not a people to be trusted when there are only three riders and the smell of money about.”

Jhan gritted her teeth, face going hard. “And your Lord Obahn is going to leave me with them? He must not care too much if I actually make it back to Ahlen to report his good deed.”

Sael didn’t look pleased either, but his shrug was stiff and accepting of something he must not have been able to change. “A debt is paid whether the recipient knows it or not. Obahn is fond of boasting. You owe this small journey, from your bed in the freezing snow, to his pride.”

Jhan closed her eyes and then opened them again, staring at a point past Sael’s shoulder. She was smoldering with anger and helplessness. “So, I was kidnapped by a stupid boy and dragged all the way to Owell, stolen by an enslaving rapist, escaped to almost freeze in the snow, and then saved by your lord because of a debt. Now I’m to be released in a town full of people you don’t trust, to await the man who kidnapped me in the beginning. I don’t see that my situation is improving any.”

“You are not dead,” Sael was quick to retort. “Do with that what you may, but I would consider

that an improvement.”

Jhan wanted to be lectured to as little as she wanted to be comforted by this young man. She set her chin away from him. “I need to sleep. I’ll need my strength for the ride tomorrow.”

Sael stood up and looked down at her, considering. At last, with another glance at the tent flap, he said, “If you were kidnapped, and your father is a lord or an important man, you may be able to ask for Obahn’s protection. He is a Hyjar, a prince, your people say. He might feel honor bound to help you.”

Sael was trying to help her, Jhan realized, but her distrust and anger were too great to put aside even for a moment. “He might,” she replied bitterly, “but Obahn doesn’t have any way to help me. I have to find my way back to Ahlen. He-He has a hold on me. It’s useless to go into it, but I’ll die if I don’t reach him in time.”

Sael digested this information, trying to make sense of it, but, yet again, he didn’t pursue it with questions. It was so obvious that he fighting his curiosity, that Jhan began to wonder if his silence was some sort of custom. He waited, as if giving her time to volunteer answers to his unspoken questions, but Jhan didn’t feel ready to oblige him. Finally, Sael settled his shoulders as if accepting that he would remain ignorant, and Jhan watched him leave the tent, letting the door flap fall closed behind him.

Zerain re-entered the tent and began to unroll bedding. Her hidden face turned to Jhan as she worked and Sael’s reluctance to ask questions didn’t seem to pertain to her. “Ikhil,” she said softly. “I have never seen one before. I thought they were just old women stories. Were you born thus or were you cut?”

Jhan turned away from her, and the question, and pillowed her head on the saddle. She didn’t need a translation to know why Zerain had called her an *Ikhil*.

“Do you live as a woman or as a man?” Zerain persisted. “I could give you one of my scarves, if your bare face shames you.”

Jhan gnawed on her bottom lip and then released it abruptly when it shot pain through her face. She’d forgotten that it was already swollen and cut from her earlier bite. “Does your face shame you?” Jhan asked tightly. “Is that why you wear a scarf?”

Zerain’s reply was proud, but tinged with another emotion that Jhan couldn’t identify. “I am Obahn’s wife. Only he, and those of his lodge, are allowed to see my face. I meant that, like an Ekhal, you might want to veil yourself from curious eyes and to signal that you are not a warrior.”

“What is an Ekhal?” Jhan wondered.

“One who doesn’t keep a lodge or a wife,” Zerain explained. “One who doesn’t have any interest in being a warrior. The scarf proclaims it so that a warrior will not make the mistake of challenging an Ekhal in battle.”

Jhan sank deeper under the furs and decided to be blunt. "I think you're insulting me, though I don't know why."

"Offering you peace," Zerain insisted, yet she didn't sound sincere. "We are not in gentle lands and we may fight men before we leave you in Okara. I merely wished to offer you safety among Ekhal."

"I am a woman, whatever you or Sael think to the contrary," Jhan hissed, completely certain now that Zerain was insulting her.

Zerain, thankfully, didn't pursue it further. She moved quietly about her duties and Jhan tried to sleep. The brazier kept the tent just above freezing, but the warm furs and blankets made up for it. Jhan tried to think of them as a warm embrace or a steaming tub of water, attempting to distract her mind from the worries of the next day and the inescapable replay of her recent ordeal. She had almost accomplished it when Obahn entered the tent, growling a loud command for Sael to stay outside and keep watch.

Jhan heard Obahn's steps approach her. She tried to pretend to be asleep, unwilling to confront anyone else that evening. She could almost feel Obahn looking at her, her skin beginning to crawl as if it anticipated a crude touch at any moment. His body blocked the heat from the brazier and his shadow on her became so oppressive, Jhan almost gave up her pretense and opened her eyes.

"Such beauty," Obahn said in his growling voice and Jhan firmed her resolve not to give away the fact that she was awake. "Shame that an Ikhil wears such a face."

"My Lord?" Zerain's voice was full of daggers. Jealousy, Jhan thought, and the reason for the suggestion for Jhan to cover her face became clearer. "Surely such a being is as shameless as an Ekhal, but I did not think that you would--"

"Silence!" Obahn barked and Jhan was hard pressed not to flinch. "You are my youngest wife. You've not earned the right to be so familiar with me."

"Forgive, my Lord," Zerain didn't sound convincing at being contrite, she was too proud. "If it is *keshun*, then I shall await your orders outside with Sael."

"You try my patience, Zerain," Obahn replied angrily. "Do you know me so little that you believe such as *that* could stir me enough to forget myself?"

Obahn's footsteps went towards Zerain and Jhan heard her sigh. "My Lord is strong and full of honor. Forgive me, if I wish you only for myself."

"For now, you have me," Obahn told her, his voice suddenly heavy and breathless. "You still have a son to bear for me, don't forget, and I must plant the seed in your furrow. Keshun, Zerain."

'Furrow?' Jhan mouthed, disgusted and growing even more disgusted when she heard the rather loud sounds of Obahn *planting*. She tried to cover her ears, muffling them between her hand and the

quilting of the saddle, but the inexorable rhythm pursued her. It slipped between her fingers and melted into her dreams; dreams of Kelmus at first and then darker dreams of Dagara and a bed covered in black sheets.

CHAPTER FOUR

(Racing into Darkness)

Jhan awoke, sore in every muscle, but stronger. She slowly climbed out of the furs and blankets to a frost filled morning like an old woman. She was alone and the contents of the tent had been emptied. A bowl of grain cereal sat close to hand and a brown cloak lined with fur. She ate, donning the cloak between mouthfuls. Finishing with both, she managed to stand and stagger out of the tent.

Obahn was standing far to one side in the morning light streaming through a break in the evergreen forest canopy. He was nursing a tin cup of something warm between his hands, staring off at nothing moodily while Sael harnessed the imala and Zerain bundled supplies. Sael was wearing the red scarf over his lower face and neck once more, the charms pinned to it glittering and clinking together as he moved. Zerain was a continuous flow of red gauze.

Jhan stumbled into a pile of skillets and cooking pans, scattering cookware with a loud clang and a grating slide of metal over rough metal. She recovered with difficulty. Though she felt better, and the ringing in her ear had faded to an almost imperceptible hum, she still found the ground underneath her feet as uncertain as the shifting sand on a beach. Grimacing at her weakness, she extricated her feet and crouched to pile the cookware back together again with one hand on her whirling head.

Obahn had half turned, his eyes catching the light and his scarred face unpleasant, despite the fact that it was ruggedly handsome. Pitching the contents of his cup aside irritably, he tossed the emptied cup to Zerain. She caught it deftly and added it to a pack she was lifting for Sael to place on an imala.

“Here,” Obahn growled at Jhan and pointed to a place at his side.

“Or what?” Jhan scowled darkly as she straightened with exaggerated care. She had been degraded and dragged unwillingly far enough. Desperate, despite the consequences, to regain some control over the mess that had become her life, Jhan ignored Sael’s alarmed, wide eyes, and Zerain’s hiss from beneath her veil. She crossed her arms over her small breast and stared at Obahn with what she hoped was defiance, rather than the fear and uncertainty she really felt. “Or what?” she repeated.

“Hmmp!” Obahn grunted and his eyes narrowed. He turned to her completely and caressed the

hilt of his sword. “Are you challenging Hyjar Obahn Om Sukhelan, Ikhil?”

It sounded ritualistic and Jhan felt her stomach tighten. She lifted her chin and gave him the full force of her blue eyes. “I’m ill and weaponless. Challenging you isn’t my intention, but if you think you’re going to drag me somewhere, or try and treat me like an imala, well, I’ve had enough of that! If you want a fight, I’ll give you one!”

Obahn considered it for a full minute while Jhan felt sweat run down her sides. Finally, he shrugged, returning Jhan’s scowl with one of his own. “I see that you are brave despite being an Ikhil.” He gave Jhan a short nod. “I will stay my hand. I don’t relish dirtying my blade on one who is so obviously not a warrior. What are you called?”

Ahlen had introduced her when they had met above Owell, but she must not have been of interest to Obahn then. Jhan relaxed, a bit, and replied, “My name is Jhan Dor.” Two names signified common status. Three names nobility. Jhan had given Obahn what she considered her real name, stripped of all the titles and allusions to the old Jhanian that she hated.

“Jhan Dor,” Obahn repeated distastefully as if, the name being so short, she had announced that she were a slave or a wandering beggar. “You will travel with us to Okara, or take leave of us now and make your own way in this cold forest. Without supplies, I doubt that, even with such bravery, you could make it back to your lord.”

Finally a choice, Jhan thought bleakly, but too obviously a choice between death and death. “What sort of choice is that?” Jhan retorted, “How am I going to get back to Ahlen once you leave me in Okara? From what Sael’s told me, they don’t sound the charitable type.”

“Neither am I, Ikhil,” Obahn replied coldly. “I owe a debt. I will leave you with a few coins so that you may buy supplies. Returning to your lord will be entirely up to your own abilities.”

Jhan wasn’t naive. “I see what your plan is. I’m going to be the bait for the Okarins to chase while you and your people get safely away.”

Obahn’s jaw clenched visibly and his eyes were narrowed in warning. “You accuse me of dishonor?”

“I’m not sure what you would call it,” Jhan replied, “but, you’re giving me my freedom with all the odds stacked against the chance that I’ll enjoy it for long.” She shrugged dispiritedly. “Still, it’s a chance I can’t refuse.”

“Though you look a woman, you speak as a man,” Obahn approved. Jhan put a hand to her mouth, looking down at the snow at her feet, as anger washed over her. She denied it an outlet. It was deadly clear that Obahn was too willing to draw his sword against such outbursts.

Obahn swung up on his imala and sat in the saddle with a leg crooked over the saddle horn,

waiting for Zerain to pack the tent. Neither he nor Sael attempted to help as Zerain worked efficiently. The woman shrugged away a half hearted attempt by Jhan to help. Jhan wasn't in any shape to have offered, but Zerain's refusal was more out of pique than out of any sympathy for Jhan's weakness.

"You will ride with me," Sael told Jhan, reaching down a hand to help her onto the back of his imala. Jhan had to rely on Sael's strength to get her seated and then she was obliged to hang onto the back of his coat in desperation. As the imala began to move, everything began to see- saw before her eyes alarmingly.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Jhan forced through gritted teeth not a mile down the road.

Sael's shoulders twitched at the threat, but he didn't take his attention off the narrow trail they were trotting down. "Stare at one spot on my back," Sael suggested. "Concentrate only on that. It isn't uncommon for people to become sick at the motion of an imala."

"It isn't that," Jhan groaned as she attempted to do as he suggested. "That kaunut that bastard put on my neck is still making me dizzy somehow."

"That's not good," Sael replied worriedly. "I don't know much about them, but what I've never heard about any permanent damage."

"I hope I'm not the first."

Jhan struggled with the sickness for another mile and then gave in, tugging at Sael's sleeve. She could feel her face going white and her hands beginning to shake. Her voice was weak in her own ears as she begged Sael to stop. "Please, I have to get off!" When he ignored her, she slid off the back of the imala, stumbled, and fell to her knees as she vomited her breakfast onto the frozen ground.

Jhan collapsed onto her side and then rolled away from the mess she had made; waiting for the world to stop spinning and the red haze to leave her eyes. It was only a moment, but a moment where she took chilling notice that the imala hadn't stopped for her and that the sound of their hoof beats was getting farther away.

Jhan rolled to her feet with a sob and blindly ran after them, ignoring the tipping of the earth under her feet and the sparks of color bursting behind her eyes. When she ran full tilt into the rump of Sael's imala, she grabbed the flail like tail and dug in her heels. It honked plaintively and whipped its head back to bite her, breaking stride. Jhan took that opportunity to grab it by the nose and squeeze. It stopped, eyes alarmed, but quickly became obedient.

Jhan couldn't see Sael, her head bowed as she tried not to faint. She wanted to shout curses at him for all she was worth, but she began to weep instead, unable to find the strength. When his hand touched hers insistently, she tried to pull away, ashamed of her weakness and her need for such indifferent people to help her.

“If you do not get on,” Sael warned, “I will have to leave you. My Lord and his wife haven’t stopped. My place is with them.” His voice was neither cruel nor indifferent. It was urgent and full of concern for her. Sael didn’t want to leave her. That surprisingly small show of compassion gave Jhan the strength to move, release the imala, and allow Sael to pull her up behind the saddle once more. He wrapped her arms about his waist and squeezed her hands in a silent command to hold on.

They galloped, but it wasn’t for long. Just when Jhan thought that she would either faint or die, Sael slowed his imala down to a steady walk, falling in alongside Obahn and Zerain. Neither of them commented, but the air was heavy with Obahn’s displeasure.

Sael wetted a rag from a water skin and silently handed it back to Jhan. The water was very cold. Jhan shivered as she wiped the sickness from her face and where ever it had splattered her clothes. Grimacing at the smell and the taste in her mouth, she wondered what to do with the filthy rag. Sael took it from her and tossed it aside into some bushes.

Jhan sat back on the imala and kept her tenuous balance by gripping the baggage straps. It was foolish, she knew, but she couldn’t help her unreasonable reluctance to touch Sael even to save herself from a fall. It was, not only the aftermath of her experience with Kelmus, but a fear of all men that had been planted deep within her by Dagara. Sael had yet to show her that he could be trusted. Still, despite her aversion, she couldn’t help the slow sagging of her body as the whirling feeling, and the ringing sound in her ear, took its toll. She was as surprised as Sael when her cheek finally rested heavily against his back.

Sael reached back to Jhan when she began to lose her seat altogether. His grip was firm and hard as he pulled her across his lap. She wanted to struggle, to protest, as he brought her upright in front of him and held her against his chest. He smelled of imala and too many campfires, but he was warm against her back and Jhan found herself relaxing against him, unable to do anything else. Closing her eyes against the sickening rhythm of the imala, she set herself to endure the ride.

The sun seemed stuck in one position, Jhan thought, as she urged it to set with all of her flagging might. The landscape remained the same, a dark forest blanketed in snow under a gray sky. It gave the entire day a nightmarish quality that threatened to go on forever. When Obahn finally judged that it was time to make camp for the night, and they brought the imala to a halt, Jhan couldn’t shake the sensation that she was still traveling.

Sael dismounted. When Jhan didn’t make any effort to do anything but lie over the pommel of the saddle, he reached up for her and pulled her down, lowering her gently to the ground. Jhan stretched out, face down, and gripped the earth with her fingers until the sickly vibration in her inner ear calmed to something bearable.

Zerain was putting up the tent, softly humming a tune, while Obahn and Sael unloaded the baggage, stepping around Jhan as if she were a rock in their way. Jhan ignored them in return, not bothering to stir from the freezing ground until she smelled the spicy flames of their braziers and the aroma of cooking meat. Only then did she sit up, gripping her head and moaning as it began to throb from hunger as well as the stress of the day.

Obahn had gone into the tent with Zerain. Sael was busy with the imala, taking off their harness and tossing grain into feed bags. Jhan watched him in the lowering gloom. The scarf was like a wall, not inviting conversation and giving back nothing of Sael's mood. With only his black eyes to look at, Jhan found it hard to say anything. Finally, she settled on simplicity. "Thank you, Sael."

Sael looked at her then and said nothing in reply for so long that Jhan became uncertain. When he suddenly moved forward and gripped her arm hard, she flinched and raised a hand to defend herself. His grip loosened at once and he helped her to her feet.

"I am sworn Bhakali to Obahn," Sael said at last, tight and low. "It isn't my place to help you. It isn't my place to do anything without my Lord's orders. Fortunately for you, I am also Ekhal."

Jhan backed away warily, rubbing the place on her arm where Sael had grabbed her. "I don't understand what those words mean. Why are you angry?"

Sael's next words weren't an answer at all. "Did you choose to be made Ikhlil?"

Jhan's face went hard as she forced her shaking senses on Sael's eyes, trying to fathom what it was he wanted from her. "No," she replied truthfully. "I wanted this body to be a real woman, but what I received was some madman's best attempt."

"I don't think you give him enough credit," Sael bit back.

"You didn't know him. I did." Jhan half turned from Sael, hugging the cloak about her and trying not to let her mind go back into memory.

"I am your opposite." Sael came around her to make her look at him. "You want to be a woman and cast off your man's body. What I want is to be a man entire. I desire to have a lodge, a family, and the scars of a warrior. I want to have a warrior's heart and a warrior's strength. Instead, I am Ekhal. It means that there isn't any woman in the world I wish to have in my arms. It means that I will never have all those things that I desire. I have a soft heart, a maudlin gentleness that stays my hand and makes me feel sorry for ones like you. You owe your life to it, but this woman's part of me has ruined my life."

"What are you trying to say to me?" Jhan didn't know how much longer she could stand there and, at the moment, the last thing she wanted to hear was this stranger's life story. It didn't have anything to do with her, she thought. She had enough of her own problems. "Why tell me any of this?"

“So that you understand how close you are to being cast into the snow again. Obahn doesn’t forgive weakness. He certainly doesn’t make allowances for it, debt or no debt, Jhan Dor.” Sael’s eyes were hard. “I am his Bhakali; his apprentice and sworn man. He can order me to do whatever he wishes and I am sworn to obey. If he were to know that I am helping you because of my Ekhal weakness, he may become angry and order me not to again. In his hearing, don’t speak to me. Don’t thank me. We are strangers and we must remain so in my Lord’s eyes.”

Jhan finally had to sink into a crouch and brace herself with her hands on the earth as Sael turned to finish with the imala. “You’re ashamed of having compassion?”

Sael’s back stiffened, perhaps taken by surprise that Jhan had cared only about that part of his revelation. “In my land,” he replied, “We have clan loyalty, oaths until death, and many blood feuds. Our land is very hard and war is common. A man takes many wives and fathers many children. We often die young with a weapon in our hand. To be Ekhal, not a warrior, and unable to father children for the clan, is a tragedy. To be Ekhal, and to also have a woman’s heart, is shameful.” Sael came to the point, cruelly blunt. “You are not of my clan. I should have less regard for you than an animal in the street.”

Sael finished with the imala and turned to Jhan. “Enough talk. I have explained what you must do and why. It is the custom of my people that men don’t ask personal questions of each other or speak of ourselves. I can’t even keep faith with that, you see, but must prattle like a gray beard over his drink.” Sael shook his head sharply and his eyes betrayed a grimace. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. My people are rid of me and I don’t have to struggle to keep faith with their ways any longer.”

With that cryptic remark, Sael began to stride towards the tent. “Come. You will need to eat and rest well before the morning.”

“I can’t.” Jhan replied angrily. “If you would stop talking about yourself for a moment you might realize that I’m about to collapse!”

Sael returned, more irritated than contrite, and took hold of Jhan’s already bruised arm, pulling her to her feet. She tried not to lean against him, but she was forced to, one step nearly toppling her over into the snow.

“Don’t beat yourself up over me,” Jhan seethed as Sael half carried her into the tent. “I’m not used to compassion anyway.”

Sael didn’t reply. Obahn’s eyes were on them. Instead, he put Jhan down, gently enough, on top of some furs and blankets near the brazier. Jhan piled the furs on top of herself, shivering there until the heat made a dent in the bone chilling cold. Only Jhan’s ears and hands continued to feel frozen and she lamented her lost gloves and hat. Running her stiff hands through her dirty, matted mass of black curls,

Jhan had a thought. "I at least need a hat."

Obahn blinked at Jhan from across the brazier. Zerain, cooking their dinner, was blocking Obahn's sight. He had to lean sideways to see her. "A hat?" he repeated roughly.

"Well," Jhan clarified softly. "I would rather have the Okarins think that they're chasing a boy. It might make them a little less eager to catch me."

Obahn grunted and smiled grimly as he tossed her a fur lined cloak with a hood. His eyes flicked to Sael, but Sael wasn't looking at anything but the shadows the braziers were making on the tent walls. "If being made Ikhil, gives such bravery, then at least one Ekhal should consider it."

Jhan wasn't being brave, she knew, only grasping at every advantage she could to stay alive. She could have said a great many things then, most of them aimed at Obahn's cruel plans for her, but she pressed her lips together and only opened them to eat when Zerain handed her a plate of fried noodles, strips of meat, and a dried, caked vegetable with an orange hue. She had to conserve her strength, she knew, and wasting it arguing with a man like Obahn was worse than stupid.

With a full stomach, and the awful taste of vomit in her mouth washed away, Jhan curled up under the furs and blankets until she didn't have to look at her companions. Closing her eyes tightly, she tried to form some plan for the morning. Try as she might, though, she kept coming back to the same realization. Jhan didn't know where they were. The forest was identical in every direction. Even if she could somehow find her way, Jhan knew that her inexperience was as deadly as any enemy.

"If my Lord is interested in Jhan Dor, then perhaps you should keep him with you," Sael's voice was low, but Jhan could hear it clearly above the crackling flames of the brazier.

"Why do you think that I'm interested in that?" Obahn was irritated.

"You stare, my Lord. Doesn't that indicate interest?"

"Are you jealous, Ekhal?" Obahn's voice changed to threatening. "You shouldn't be. That creature has far more chance than you'll ever have of being in my bed. It at least has the form of a woman."

"A beautiful woman," Sael agreed, unperturbed, "but you mistake me. I am not jealous. I'm only looking out for the interest of my sworn lord. If you leave the Ikhil with the Okarins, I doubt you will ever see him alive again."

"I'm more interested in our lives, Ekhal," Obahn snarled back. "It cuts above any curiosity I might have for that creature. Besides, it is only curiosity. A game, I suppose. I keep trying to see the man that I keep hearing. Jhan Dor speaks to me as if it was a prince to command and It confronts danger with open eyes. I find that I respect that and that it makes me regret what I have to do with the creature. Yet, it is necessary. Jhan Dor must be the distraction for the Okarins while we get safely away."

"My Lord," Sael's voice was stiff with his feigned obedience to Obahn's will. Obahn wasn't deaf

to it.

“You are sworn to me, Ekhal,” Obahn warned and the danger came back into his voice. “My son allowed you your eccentricities, but I will not! You willingly gave me your oath and you will keep that oath until my death or your death. If it is you this creature interests, I will have your head on a pole, Sael Ruon!”

“I swore an oath to your dead son as well!” Sael snarled back. “If you think anything, even such as that, can shake me from that oath, then you may kill me now and I will not lift a hand to stop you.”

There was a long, oppressive silence. Finally, as if both men had measured each other down to the last atom, Obahn growled in irritation. “I trust in your oath, Ekhal. It seems to be the only custom of our people that you are not willing to break.”

“My Lord,” Sael returned, voice as chill as the night air.

Jhan had tensed, expecting violence. When normal sounds began again and Zerain began to hum a tune as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, she allowed herself to relax at last. Jhan didn’t attempt to figure out what they had been talking about. These people were complex and violent in their emotions and actions. She felt thankful to Sael for trying to help her once more, but Obahn’s accusations put another face on it. If both of them were interested in her, she had one more thing to be afraid of. A small part of her was looking forward to parting company with these mysterious, veiled people in Okara, despite the danger she knew she would be facing without them.

Jhan forced herself to sleep. Her body was ready, but her mind still wanted to find a solution to the morning’s life threatening dilemma. In seeming retaliation, her mind turned her anxieties into nightmares.

She was running in her sleep, Jhan realized. Voices called, whooping and shouting behind her; hunters getting sight of their quarry. Night was gathering. The darkness was her friend this time, offering protection in its shadows among the low skirted evergreen trees and the tumbled boulders. In the dream, Jhan knew that she only had to keep ahead for a little longer.

Which way? Panic overtook Jhan as she turned and turned about again, not certain if she had run in a circle and was now facing her pursuers. When she heard them call out again, frighteningly close, she was able to run in the right direction, but the fear that she would turn about once more, made her slow and uncertain. Too slow; they were going to catch her!

“Did you know that tree trunks all have a curious property?”

The voice was in her ear. Jhan stumbled and struck out at the air around her. Her eyes, trying to

pierce the quickly falling darkness, sprang with tears. She touched nothing and her eyes couldn't find the owner of the voice.

"Feel the bark and you'll find that I'm right."

"What?!" Jhan shouted, choking on a sob. "Where are you? Why don't you just get it over with?"

"Over with?" the voice was puzzled, but compassionate. "I'm afraid it's only started."

The darkness fell completely and Jhan stumbled blindly, hands outstretched and feet shuffling on uneven ground. When her hands barked up against a flat surface, she caught her breath. Fingers searched and felt the smooth, glossy surface of wood siding. Was it a house? Had she found some sort of shelter? Her hands fumbled for a knob, found one, and turned it eagerly. She entered and found herself... Jhan choked on another sob.

She was home. It was Pekarín fortress: her and Kile's small apartment. That was her white fur rug over the hardwood floors. On the wall, was the painting of a meadow of wildflowers that Bheni had done for her as a wedding gift. In the room's center, the glossy table and chairs that she and Kile had picked out together at the wood wright's shop. Against the far wall, separated from the room by a gauze curtain; the large bed that Kile had insisted on.

"She was such a puny woman!" Caliya was trying to pull one of Jhan's robes about her ample figure with little success. She was completely nude, her hair in a mussed, blonde, tumble about her shoulders. Her face was flushed with recent excitement. "What you ever saw in that sexless stick, my love, I'll never understand! Well, once you grow used to a real woman, it will be better, I promise you."

Jhan was frozen in the doorway, unable to move or speak from hurt and shock. Caliya was looking right at her, but she didn't appear to see Jhan at all. The woman decided not to bother with the robe and she began to dress. "I'm going to tell my Mother of your decision right away, Kile," Caliya announced happily. She laced her dress and then briskly combed out her hair as she continued, "She'll be so pleased that we'll be a family at last! I'll return as soon as I may!"

Caliya gave the curtained bed a sweet, triumphant smile and then... walked right through Jhan and out of the doorway. Jhan gasped as something cold sliced through her. Whether it was Caliya's passing or her heart breaking, she couldn't tell, but it roused Jhan from her immobility at last. She walked towards the bed as if she were going to her own death.

Sprawled in his usual fashion, face down among the blankets and sheets, was Kile Helarion Dor. He wasn't asleep. His eyes were staring as if from a skull at nothing at all and his jaw was clenching and unclenching as if he were going to shout his pain to the world. Slowly, Jhan lowered herself onto the bed, pouring out beside Kile and met his red rimmed eyes. He blinked, narrowed his eyes, and then looked as if he were going to be sick.

"I knew it was wrong," Kile grated. "Now, not only do I feel like dying, but you've come to haunt my dreams as well."

"Are you dreaming?" Jhan replied shakily. "I thought I was."

"The dead don't dream." Kile's voice went as flat as his expression.

Jhan sighed and rolled onto her back. Propped on her elbows, and tear filled eyes looking up at the plaster ceiling, she asked accusingly, "What were you trying to do? Forget me?"

"Forget you?" Kile echoed. "How can I forget half of myself?"

"Then, what were you doing?"

"I didn't know what else to do," Kile admitted bleakly. "I did it for the children. I didn't want to deprive them of their father. I thought that I could just... go along with it; sink myself into a false life so deeply that I could forget about what really living, what real love felt like. I've been with a lot of women. If you close your eyes... well, a man can be with anyone if he doesn't look too hard. I couldn't. Not with Caliya. I kept thinking that she wasn't you. I'll have to tell her. Mother will be so disappointed. Lord Frelen is her Father. Mother was so looking forward to mingling our money with his through marriage."

"Dhasra," Jhan found the name springing from her lips, something her mind must have been working on all that time suddenly coming to the fore. Lord Frelen's name had been the catalyst.

"What?" Kile blinked at her and Jhan turned to face him, her nose an inch from his, excitement welling up.

"Dhasra was the man who saw me in Owell!" Jhan remembered his small eyes and his large body. It had frightened her when she had first walked the hallways of Pekarín with Rehn. He had introduced himself as the master of Lord Frelen's hunting birds.

Kile was going very pale. He was shaking his head, jaw clenching again and eyes closing tightly. "No! This is a nightmare! A trick of my mind! A cruel punishment for what I just did with Caliya."

"What's wrong?" Jhan demanded. She wanted to reach out and touch her love in concern, but her hand passed through him. He started and his eyes flew open as if he could feel it anyway.

"Dhasra came to me," Kile explained as if to himself, going over the story as if he had said it over and over in his own mind one too many times. "He told me that he had seen you in Owell. No blue eyes like yours, he told me. There wasn't any mistake." Kile shook his head sharply again, his face twisting in pain. "He was drunk. He admitted as much. The man is always drunk! I wanted to break him between my hands for giving me false hope. I knew it was just that though. I saw your body. I know that you're dead! Now I'm torturing myself with these fantasies-"

Jhan left the bed in one motion, back turned to Kile and arms across her breast, holding herself

tight. "This is my dream. I'm the one trying to give myself a fantasy of false hope. I'm going to be left in Okara in the morning. I-I'm very sure I won't live long after that, or at least, not in a way I would call living. My mind couldn't find an escape. Now it wants to hide in dreams. This isn't real. You can't be my white knight, Kile. I can't pretend that you're going to save me."

Kile didn't say anything. Jhan turned to look at him and found him and the entire apartment gone. She sagged in her dream and began walking again, trying to find the point where she could wake up and face what she had to face.

"You sleep like the dead, Jhan Dor," Sael's voice startled Jhan awake and she sat up and threw off her furs all in one motion. Too quick, her blood couldn't keep up and her head spun. Jhan put a hand to her forehead and blinked rapidly until her eyes focused enough to see Sael, veiled and brooding, crouching easily beside her.

"It's morning already?" Jhan groaned angrily and then pressed her lips into a thin line. Today she was going to be left with the Okarins, she reminded herself. Today might as well have been the day of her execution.

"I tried to dissuade my Lord Obahn from his decision," Sael told her grimly. "He wouldn't see the wisdom of my argument."

Jhan didn't thank him, remembering that part of the conversation too and that Sael might have his own reasons for trying to save her life. "I didn't expect any last minute reprieve." She managed to stand, looking around at the empty tent. "Nice of you to let me sleep, but don't I get a last meal?"

Sael handed a bowl of cooked grain to Jhan. She took it and, since she didn't have a spoon, she used her fingers to get the cold, stiff cereal into her mouth. Sael watched her without comment until she handed the now empty bowl back to him.

"Can you use a weapon?" Sael wondered doubtfully. "I might be able to-"

"I am a weapon," Jhan told him, cutting him off, but despair was in her voice and he could hear it. Leaving Sael to trail behind her, Jhan walked from the tent with leaden steps. After her dream filled night, she hardly felt that she had slept at all, but what sleep she must have had seemed to have been enough to allow her inner ear to heal. The ringing had stopped and, Jhan discovered, the ground stayed steady under her feet. That was something, but Jhan didn't allow it to give her any false hope. The cold was biting into her even under her thick clothes and she still sensed that she wasn't completely well.

Zerain took down the tent and everything was packed in efficient silence. Obahn looked on edge, one hand on his sword hilt and his face scowling at nothing but his inner thoughts. Sael paced

restlessly, checking and rechecking the harness on the imala. Jhan could only stand about idly, an outsider to their thoughts and plans. When Sael mounted his imala and held his hand down to help her mount behind him, Jhan felt relieved to finally get going, and then, in the next instant, fearfully wished that it had all taken longer.

“How much further is it?” Jhan asked in a low voice.

“Hours,” Sael replied evasively. “It’s hard to tell in this terrain.”

Jhan studied that terrain, the heavily skirted evergreens sunk deep in tumbled rocks and powdered with snow, the hard earth spotted with hardy bushes, and a blue sky peeking through the few non evergreen trees that had dropped their leaves. Those leaves were a sodden mess under the imala’s hooves, slippery and rotting.

“I’ll never find my way,” Jhan whispered dejectedly to herself.

“You weren’t trained as a man.” Sael couldn’t help a tinge of contempt in his voice. “I’m a *no man’s bastard* and an Ekhal, but I was still taught what every man should know of forest craft, hunting, and fighting.”

“I’m not a man,” Jhan replied absently, not wanting to talk, but to concentrate on thinking up some plan that would help her.

“But you were born one,” Sael persisted. “I know that, even among your people, they follow the same custom.”

“You don’t know my people,” Jhan bit back.

Sael paused and then said carefully. “You were trained as a woman,” he didn’t frame it as a question and Jhan remembered that asking personal questions was against custom. “You were always treated as one by your people, even before you were cut.” That begged for a denial, a reply of some sort, but Jhan refused him.

“Give it peace,” Obahn growled curtly, “and me mine, Ekhal.”

“I’m not an *it*,” Jhan exploded, “and I’m not a man.”

“Hmm,” Obahn breathed and then shrugged. “Call yourself what you will. I suppose it doesn’t matter in your case. By your looks, you never grew to full manhood anyway. Still, I wouldn’t have expected someone with your fierceness to hide behind the title of woman.”

“Women can be fierce too,” Jhan replied, but Obahn only barked a laugh and rode ahead.

“I’ve never seen him indulge such speech from anyone before,” Sael informed Jhan thoughtfully. “He’s left a trail of dead men who dared to be so blunt.”

“I’m not a threat,” Jhan guessed ruefully. “He probably thinks of me as a little dog, yipping and yapping.” When Sael looked back at her blankly, Jhan sighed. “Obahn thinks I’m puny, impotent, and

therefore funny.”

It was so difficult to gauge Sael’s expression behind his scarf, but his dark brows knit. “I didn’t intend insult.”

Jhan shook her head. “You’re just morbidly curious, like everyone else,” Jhan sighed. “Most people are far too shocked and disgusted by what I am to get to the questions usually.”

“For Ekhal it is the same.” Sael’s eyes lightened and she thought he was smiling bitterly. “People don’t wish to know what we do or what we are.”

“That’s like saying, getting your feet wet is the same as drowning,” Jhan retorted, “but maybe you can understand why I don’t want to talk about it.”

Zerain was close enough to hear, her veiled face turned towards them. Jhan could tell that she had her chin tilted arrogantly. “You are half men, the both of you. One of you cut and the other one as good as cut. That my husband should have such in his company... You are lucky he is in command of his outrage or you would both be tied out for the birds to eat.”

“Until you have his son, you are not any better than we are,” Sael whipped back. “Half woman!”

That stung. Zerain flung her head back and then spurred her imala ahead to ride by Obahn’s side. Sael swore under his breath and Jhan raised eyebrows at the descriptive filthiness of it.

“I can’t have children either,” Jhan felt the need to say, as stung as Zerain. Her face grew hot with her flush of inner pain. “It was cruel to say that to her.”

“She forgets her place,” Sael replied defensively. “She is only a minor wife, but she fancies herself princess if she has Obahn’s longed for son. If she is unable to conceive, though, she won’t even be a wife. She’ll be reduced to a maid for the other wives. A half woman. I only spoke the truth she already knows.”

“Still,” Jhan persisted.

“I also cannot have children,” Sael told her, and she could see that it was painful to him. “The three of us are more alike than she would care to acknowledge. We are a band of misfits with a prince at our head. The Okarins may laugh themselves into a stupor rather than challenge our lack of strength.”

“I don’t suppose I can hope for that?” Jhan was bleak.

“No,” Sael said, as if it needed a reply.

The rocky terrain, slick with patches of ice and wetted by a sudden downpour of rain and sleet, slowed them down considerably. They rode into Okara near mid-afternoon and only one or two men sauntered out of hide covered houses to investigate the intrusion.

Jhan hid within the hood of her cloak and gripped the saddle of the imala, eyes already searching for an escape. She counted ten lodges, wisps of hearth fire smoke coming from their tops. To the right,

her way was blocked by a half frozen stream. To the left, she was blocked by rack upon rack of fish being smoked. Jhan's only clear route was returning the way they had just come.

A pen of furry baku blew steam into the air at the villages center. The beasts looked old and ill used and their hooves were sunk in dung and mud. Baku never liked to run. They were too heavy for it. If she was going to be pursued, Jhan thought, it would most likely be on foot.

Sizing up the men, Jhan felt confident that the heavily furred and clumsy looking men wouldn't be a match for her speed. Endurance might be another matter entirely though, and Jhan wasn't at all certain that she would be able to outdistance them in a long race. She would have to be as clever as a fox, Jhan thought, and find a way to either erase her trail or hide until they gave up looking for.

Having finally formulated a plan, Jhan knew that she couldn't waste any more time. "I'm going now," was her only farewell to Sael as she slid off the back of the imala. Jhan stumbled as she tried to regain her balance. It still wasn't what it should have been, but it was well enough to run.

Obahn had heard Jhan's dismount, turning in the saddle of his imala, eyes keen. "Give her gear, Sael."

Sael dropped gloves, too large, into Jhan's hands, a scarf, and a small pack of provisions. Everything was patched, worn, and obviously not of importance. The small bag of food was only a token. None of them expected her to get far and they weren't going to waste their supplies on her.

Jhan bundled the things into her arms and turned to hurry away. Obahn wasn't about to allow that. Three more Okarins had come from a house, converging with the others as they approached. Obahn spoke very clearly. "Money for your trouble and food for your journey, Jhan Dor. Give my regards to your lord. Tell him that our debt is settled."

"Go to Hell, Prince Obahn," Jhan seethed equally loudly.

Obahn didn't understand her reference, but he knew a curse when he heard it. He stiffened and his hand went to his sword. Calloused fingers stroked the hilt only momentarily before falling away, Obahn deciding that personal revenge wasn't worth the disruption of his plans.

Obahn shifted in his saddle to face the Okarins. "We are only passing through to meet some of my warriors to the West," he told them. "Since it is only a short distance, we will only require a few supplies from your people. Come and I will tell you our needs."

Jhan glanced at Sael, but he wouldn't return her look and he didn't say anything. What could he say? In silence, Jhan turned, hurrying out of the village and back into the forest. Once she reached the cover of the trees, she began to run.

Jhan's body, changed by Power, had the flexibility of a cheetah. She fairly flew over the ground. Unfortunately, that ground felt uncertain under her feet, as if it threatened to tip at any moment.

Compounded by the wet leaves and slick patches of ice, Jhan's exceptional reflexes were the only thing keeping her from falling face first.

When her energy was finally spent, Jhan slowed to a fast walk, hand to her aching side and breath gasping in and out of her burning lungs. She watched her feet, trading speed now for stealth, making sure she left as little trace to follow as possible.

As to which direction she was going in... Jhan at first tried to keep her eyes ahead and not allow the forest to make her turn right or left to avoid trees and rocks. She quickly found that impossible. Following the sun, she was even less successful. There were simply too many trees in the way of the sky. Remembering the nightmare where she had run in circles, Jhan finally halted, sitting on a fallen log to think and rest.

"Did you know that tree trunks all have a curious property?" The voice from Jhan's dream came to her again, but so distinct and *present* that she stood, unnerved, and actually looked about as if she could find who had spoken.

There wasn't even a bird call. The forest was eerily silent except for her breathing. Jhan walked over to a tree and touched the trunk with a gloved hand, feeling foolish; grasping at straws. The bark was rough on one side, tracked by insects and covered in a thin moss. On the other side, it was still rough, but clean of moss and insects. And that meant?

Jhan went to two other trees to be sure and found the same condition on all of them. What did it mean? The fourth tree didn't have that condition and neither did a fifth. Why? Jhan backed up from them and gave that area of forest a wider look. The trees were in clearer areas and in fuller sunlight. The sun rose in the East, Jhan knew, and the wind mostly blew from the West. Okara was west. If the sun reached the trees in the morning and mid afternoon, and then was mostly blocked by the mountains to the West in the later afternoon, it would follow that moss, that preferred it damp and dim, and the insects that fed on it, would prefer one side of a tree over another. It would also follow that the trees that were bare on both sides never saw much shade.

Jhan smiled grimly. Follow the moss. How she had known about it in a dream, she couldn't be sure, but it was turning out to be good advice. She would at least not walk in circles now. With that worry gone, the rest piled up for attention. Soon the sun would set and the cold would settle in for the night. Jhan knew that she would have to seek a shelter, some place closed in and small where she could use her body heat to survive the night and to hide from her pursuers.

Jhan began walking quickly again, eyes scanning the forest for shelter. When nightfall began to creep into the forest, and she still hadn't found anything, she began to grow anxious. She hadn't heard any sounds of pursuit, but death was always at her shoulder, waiting for her to make a mistake. In the

end, Jhan decided that stopping for the night would be that mistake. While she was moving, she was warm. She doubted that she had enough body warmth to carry her through the night without shelter, fire, or anything other than her clothes and her cloak for protection.

Jhan peeled off a glove and flexed her fingers in the cold air. She touched a tree trunk experimentally and felt the spongy, damp moss. It would be her only guide in the darkness and Jhan wanted to be sure that she would know it when she touched it.

Wishing she felt more confident, Jhan took a last rest on a fallen tree and opened the provisions Obahn had given her. In the bag, Jhan discovered a few hunks of dried meat and several pressed cakes of fruit. It was enough for two meals. The money Obahn had spoken of was conspicuously absent. Jhan wasn't surprised. Obahn had known that he was sending her to her death.

After eating a quick meal, Jhan took a deep breath and began walking again. Her next rest, she knew, wouldn't be until sunrise. She set herself an easy pace and hoped that it was enough to keep her ahead of the Okarins. She almost doubted that they were even following her and then put it from her thoughts. If she wanted to live, she had to assume that they were.

It began to rain, light and icy, and Jhan gritted her teeth and pulled the leather hood of her cape up and over her face. As the sun set, and the darkness became complete, the cold became bone numbing. Combining with the wet, Jhan could hardly feel the fingers that she ran over the bark of the trees she passed. Several times, she paused to make sure, holding her hand under her cape until it warmed enough to regain some of its feeling.

The uneven ground became treacherous with the wet. Jhan stumbled and fell time and time again, scraping knees through her pants and adding bruises on top of bruises. With every step, she grew more fearful that she would fall and break a leg, or tumble down into some unseen ravine, yet she knew that she couldn't stop. The cold was becoming too intense.

Towards midnight, the rain turned into snow. The gentle flakes were deceptively beautiful as they drifted down through the trees. The wet ground froze and patches of ice formed over puddles. Jhan's legs, wet and then frozen in turn, were becoming as numb as her hands. She could feel her feet burning in her boots.

Jhan's body begged to sit down and rest. It was hard to deny it. The pain of that longing became exquisite, a siren song she had to ignore with every ounce of will within her. She drew on a strength that had been honed in the long torture filled days of her captivity with Dagara Ku Ni. He had taught her to suffer and to endure anything, because she had never had a choice not to. Under his cruel hands, she had learned to leave her body behind and to escape the pain that had never ceased. Jhan reclaimed that skill, using it to drive her body forward while her mind stepped back and closed itself off from

everything it was feeling. Her body would keep walking this way, Jhan knew, until she died on her feet.

“Jhan?” The voice reached Jhan distantly. She kept walking and the name, her name she slowly realized, kept being repeated urgently. When hands took hold of her, Jhan felt a heavy weight anchor her, stopping her inexorable forward momentum.

There was heat, delicious, burning heat that worked its way through wet and frozen clothes to equally frozen skin. Jhan’s boots were pulled off, along with her socks, and the blocks of ice that were her feet were bathed with something wet and hot. All of Jhan’s clothes were removed in the end, and blankets were piled all around her. She felt softness beneath her and warmth on her face. Jhan fell asleep, not caring who had saved her.

Jhan opened sleep encrusted eyes. Smoke, from the glowing coals of a campfire, danced in lazy spirals up to a hole in the roof, filling her nostrils with its acrid scent along with the rich aroma of cooking food. Beyond the fire, was a stone wall flickering with shadows. Jhan moved her head slowly, following the wall with her eyes until she realized that she was in a very small cave. The narrow doorway was blocked by the mournful face of a baku standing outside in the cold. The baku was black. Jhan recognized it as her own.

“Ahlen?” Jhan breathed and sat up stiffly, pulling blankets tightly about her in trepidation.

“Here.” Ahlen stepped from his own bed of blankets, putting aside a metal cup steaming with a hot drink. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a piece of meat that was left in the freezer too long,” Jhan replied weakly. “How did you find me?”

Ahlen crouched so that he wasn’t between Jhan and the heat of the fire. The roof of the cave was low and he couldn’t stand comfortably. “You found us. I was tending the baku outside of the cave when you appeared, walked towards me, and then walked past me as if I hadn’t been there.”

“I’d been walking all night,” Jhan explained. “It was so cold. I think I passed out on my feet and my body didn’t have sense enough to fall down.”

After spending time with dour Obahn, Sael, and Zerain, it was odd to be confronted with Ahlen’s open face and its childlike expressions. “Tell me what happened,” Ahlen demanded in a rush. “Tell me why you disappeared that night in Owell. Weren’t you afraid of dying? How did you get so near Okara? Why didn’t you try and return home?”

Jhan silenced Ahlen with a hard look and then her eyes searched the cave. When she saw Ixien, sitting straight backed and unconcerned in a dark corner, she felt a flush of anger so hot that it rivaled

the campfire. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“What?” Ahlen wondered, perplexed. “All I know is that I bought supplies and came out to find you missing, Ixien as blank as a khurie stone about where you had gone.”

“He let a man take me away,” Jhan explained in a clipped, dead tone. “That man was going to feed me to some sort of monster in a pit, but he found out that I was a woman and decided to rape me instead. I managed to escape. Obahn and his people found me and took me with them to Okara. Obahn set me up to be a decoy while he escaped the Okarins notice. The Okarins aren’t above robbing their customers, I’ve heard. I ran as far and as fast as I could.”

Ahlen had gone white. He slowly turned to look at Ixien. “Is this true? Did you let a man take Jhan away?”

Ixien finally showed one expression; annoyance. “It was determined to hinder our journey. I did not know what the man intended, but I thought we were well rid of it. I am still of the same mind, Ahlen Kantori. We do not need an unwilling companion.”

Ahlen’s jaw worked and then he looked back at Jhan, pain in his eyes. “You-You were raped?” When Jhan nodded, he sat down heavily, his face going into his hands. “I swore to protect you. I should never have left you with Ixien. His ways are not ours. He doesn’t understand...”

“Are you defending what he did to me?” Jhan could hardly believe it and then she pressed her lips firmly together and turned her face away. It was a long, tense minute before she could speak again. “I’m a thing to him, Ahlen. I’m property to be handed over. I’m an inconvenience. If you excuse that, then you’re even crueller than I imagined.”

Ahlen’s voice came tense and low, begging her to understand. “I need him, Jhan. I couldn’t have made it this far without his help. What he did to you, it horrifies me that he could think so little of you, but I can’t turn him away. If I do, I might as well sit out in the snow along with you, because we will die anyway without his help.”

Jhan wanted to strike him with all of her skill. Her anger and helplessness were almost more than she could bear. Ahlen sensed it, moving back from her to crouch near the opening of the cave. Without a close target, Jhan regained her self control with a shudder, hands clenching in her blankets and head bowed against her knees.

Ahlen waited a long while for her to calm down. When he thought it was safe, he spooned a thick stew, from an iron pot over the fire, into a wooden bowl, stuck a piece of flat bread into it, and poured a hot, spicy smelling drink into a tin mug. Bringing it over to Jhan, he stretched out his arms to put it into her reach, but kept himself out of that reach at the same time.

Backing away, Ahlen crouched nearby again and watched her with a pained expression on his face,

saying, “This isn’t turning out the way that I thought it would.”

That brought Jhan up from the concealment of her arms. Her face, red from anger and silent weeping, flushed hot again as she skewered Ahlen with her blue eyes. “Are you so innocent? What were you expecting?” Jhan’s voice lashed Ahlen with her contempt and outrage.

Ahlen’s face flushed too, but not from anger. “The world is so cruel and strange. I didn’t know I would have to rely- I thought I could protect you. I thought honor, determination, and the Goddess would be enough to see us all through.” His face shook and went pale now. “When you told me what you were, and even knowing that you were married, I never imagined that you could have been made enough like a woman for a man to- to be with you. I didn’t know that I would have to guard you against that, especially after the way you defeated Theon.”

Jhan held her blankets tight against her. “You undressed me. You tell me if I’m enough of a woman.”

Ahlen nodded stiffly. “I am inexperienced in such things, but, yes, if you hadn’t told me, I might not have guessed. I-I know that you can’t forgive me. I don’t think I will ever forgive myself, but it doesn’t change anything. I know that I still have to take you with me.”

“Your sister is worth so much?” Jhan shouted back in anguish.

Ahlen flinched. “Yes, to me she is, but there are other considerations that make it impossible now for me to turn back.”

“Those are?”

Ahlen was reluctant to say. Finally, he offered a short explanation. “The Goddess Scherial is helping me. I feel it. She wishes me to be successful. The gods are cold and indifferent to our lives Jhan. That Scherial should take notice of me and help me-”

“So you believe!” Jhan cut him off. “You’re deluding yourself, Ahlen. It’s all superstition and nonsense. You’re just trying to justify everything you’ve done to make yourself feel better and to reassure yourself that you’re doing the right thing. Well, I won’t let you do that! A goddess didn’t make you kidnap me and take me away from everything that made my life worth living. A goddess didn’t poison me with parasites. A goddess didn’t leave me with someone like that!” she pointed a stiff finger at the dispassionate Ixien, “To be given to the first man to come along so that he could rape me!”

Ahlen acted as if each of Jhan’s sentences was a blow, but he firmed his jaw resolutely and refused to be cowed. “For one that has Power, you are curiously blind to what is possible in the world.”

Jhan closed her eyes tightly and simply tried to breathe through her emotions. Finally, she opened them and stared at nothing, totally defeated. “You should have let me keep on walking.”

“I need you. I need Ixien,” Ahlen replied as he began rummaging through a pack. He took out a

bundle of cloth. "Here. Your pants were ripped. You'll have to wear a pair of mine. Your other clothes are there, next to you."

Ahlen turned his back on Jhan and she slowly dressed, not telling Ahlen when she had finished. He continued to sit with his back to her, hands doing something in front of him. Jhan turned her attention to Ixien. "I won't forget what you did to me, Caefu."

"I am capable of defending myself," Ixien replied distantly. He seemed to be staring through Jhan as if she were as unimportant as the cave walls all about them.

"I'm not that kind of person," Jhan explained grimly. "I meant, when you need me, and you will on this long journey, I won't be there. I want you to know what it feels like to be that helpless. I want you to be just as afraid as I was."

"It isn't even winter and you nearly died walking in the night," Ixien replied. "You are weak and disfigured. I am one with the elements and the Ahnali have given my people abilities. I will never require help from one such as you."

"Never say never," Jhan warned darkly.

"Never make threats to those who are stronger than you," Ixien returned.

"Enough," Ahlen tried to sound commanding, but failed. He turned about and held a cup out to Jhan. She took it questioningly. "The medicine," Ahlen explained, "for the parasites."

Jhan's anger went cold. She drank the mixture tentatively. It tasted like tea, an odd under flavor pungent, but not unpleasant. She tossed the empty cup back to Ahlen. The coldness had reached her eyes and he couldn't meet them.

Jhan ate her food and sipped at the hot cider like drink in its tin cup. Warm and with a full stomach, she felt almost human again. She didn't feel as if she had nearly escaped freezing to death. Her body was too good at recovering. Her mind fervently wished for something to be wrong, some weakness she could claim that would force Ahlen to stay in that cave until she could pull herself back together.

"We need to get moving," Ahlen forestalled any argument by beginning to drag their baggage out of the cave. "Maybe, if we hurry, we can catch up to Obahn."

"I was trying to escape the Okarins," Jhan reminded him tersely. "You don't want to run into them without any weapons. Besides, Obahn isn't indebted to you any longer. He considered saving me repayment enough."

Ahlen shrugged, tossing his words over his shoulder as he left the cave. "We'll avoid Okara and shadow Obahn. If he is still traveling in the same direction as we are, it would be foolish not to follow him."

“Why should you stop being foolish now?” Jhan muttered.

Ixien stood in one, fluid motion, and walked out of the cave after Ahlen. Jhan glared after him. It didn't help her to know that she had been right about Ixien from the start. He had secret reasons and secret plans that didn't have anything to do with companionship or ignorance needing a guide. Jhan was certain he had picked them for a purpose, or at least Ahlen. He'd already shown how contemptuous he was of Jhan, and how willing he was to get rid of her. Those emotionless eyes had regarded her in a calculating manner that put Jhan on guard that he would attempt to get rid of her again.

Weighted with the burden of that knowledge, and all that she knew was before her, Jhan wanted to curl up in her blankets and refuse to move. When Ahlen returned, it took all of her will to get to her feet and allow him to wrap those blankets up and pack them with the rest of their gear. She covered her anguish by putting on her cape and gloves; bracing herself to go back out and face her enemy, the cold.

“How are you feeling?” The question was perfunctory, Jhan knew. It didn't matter what her answer was, Ahlen was still going to leave.

“Sore. I'm not used to walking. Some of my skin feels tight, like it's sunburned.” Jhan looked down at one of her hands. It was the hand that she had left out of its glove to feel for tree moss. The skin there was red and dry.

“I don't see any frostbite,” Ahlen declared after leaning closely to look. He straightened and motioned towards the mouth of the cave. “We have to go, Jhan.”

“No, we don't,” Jhan replied. “It's your decision.” but she went anyway, knowing that it didn't make any difference.

It was near mid-day, Jhan realized, as she stepped into the sun dappled clearing at the mouth of the cave. The cave opening was only a tumble of rocks along a hillside. Even though it was straddled by the roots of several large trees, it was still plain for anyone to see, and that disturbed Jhan. The Okarins could have found them easily. She began to doubt again that they had followed her at all.

The baku were saddled and slung with baggage. Jhan took the reins of her beast and patted it absently on the nose before she mounted and settled in the saddle with a sigh. Her legs were so stiff and sore, Jhan knew, that she wouldn't have made it two yards on foot. It was a relief to rely only on her balance, as shaky as that still was, and to augment her poor warmth with the baku's furnace like body heat.

Ahlen mounted his sand colored baku and took the lead. Ixien, wraith like and inscrutable, stayed on foot, walking easily over the uneven, rocky ground. His skin and hair became almost translucent when the dappled light touched him and that made him seem more ethereal than ever.

It wasn't long, though, before Ahlen stopped, staring about them with a frown. Jhan rode up even

with him. “What is it?”

“I only know to follow the road,” Ahlen admitted. “If we can’t do that, I’m not sure how we can find our way.”

“Follow the moss,” Jhan suggested.

“What?”

Jhan pointed to the moss on the side of a tree. “It grows on the darker side of trees. I used it to walk in the right direction last night. Just use it to travel west, now.”

Ahlen accepted that, but he didn’t look as if he felt any easier. “That still won’t show me how to avoid the Okarins. There’s a narrow pass through the mountains. Their village nearly blocks the way.”

“Nearly?” Jhan echoed.

“So I’ve been told.”

“You’re the leader,” Jhan reminded him unsympathetically. “You make the decisions and you find us the way. You know I’m not about to help you.”

“Yes, I do know it,” Ahlen replied sourly, but accepted his responsibility and urged his baku back into the lead.

They hadn’t gone a yard, when Ixien, who hadn’t stopped for their indecision, came hurrying back. “Get off the trail! There are men coming our way.”

They pulled into a thicket behind a fallen, giant tree. Ahlen dismounted to obliterate their tracks. The ground was too hard to allow for many marks and he only had to scatter handfuls of snow and dead leaves to cover them. Nobody questioned the feeling that they had to hide, least of all Jhan.

“Cover their noses,” Jhan quickly suggested. Jhan covered the nose of her own baku with a corner of her cape and Ahlen grabbed the bridles of the other two and brought their noses against his chest. They all held their breaths, hoping that the baku wouldn’t give away their position.

A dozen men came striding along the trail. Faces tanned and weathered like leather, the Okarins had slitted, glittering eyes, and down turned, hard mouths. Even in their heavy furs, they moved swiftly, eyes on the ground as they cast about for tracks. Jhan took one look and then closed her eyes, shivering and terror stricken that they might be discovered.

“There.” One Okarin pointed a gloved finger at the ground. “Other tracks as well, covered over, but fresh. Too muddled to make out much, but I think they are heading West.”

“They couldn’t have passed us in the night. “ Another man stood straight and looked about, a hand stroking a short, black beard. His narrow eyes scanned the forest about them. “They are probably travelers trying to slip past Okara, or maybe heading to Osira Southwest. It’s still worth a look. Trading’s been too slim to let any travelers get by. Yaku! Take four, back trail, and try and find them.

We'll continue after this one. The tracks are still plain. Tell me again, Mikona, how beautiful this one's face was."

"Like the sun, or the bright moon," another began to say as they split up and headed in different directions. "Eyes like the jewels we dig up, rare and a hue of blue no man has ever seen. Hair, black as night skies, and curled like the pelt of a prize baku. A woman, I was certain, though she tried to hide in a cape..."

The voice drifted and then was lost behind trees. Jhan didn't move or open her eyes until Ahlen touched her arm in concern. She flinched away and glared at him. "They'll see, quickly enough, that we aren't down the trail. They'll come back."

Ahlen nodded. "We need to get far away before that happens."

"They know this place. We don't," Jhan retorted in despair. "There isn't much hope, Ahlen."

"I will protect your honor," Ahlen insisted as he mounted his baku and they left the trail, heading further into the forest where the leaves and debris hid their tracks.

"Unarmed?" Jhan mocked darkly. "How will you be able to save my life if they find us?"

Ahlen's face was set with an expression Jhan hadn't seen before. It was suddenly more mature. "I said your honor, but I will try to save your life as well."

Jhan understood his meaning then, but Ahlen spoke as if he were parroting words from memory, something he might have heard in childhood. If the moment came, Jhan didn't have any confidence that Ahlen could carry out his promise.

CHAPTER FIVE

(Teeth of the Cold)

The trees grew thick and the boulders larger the closer they approached the mountains. Jhan was torn between being glad and being apprehensive. On one hand, they had ample cover to avoid the Okarins. On the other hand, they couldn't see those self same Okarins. The forest was worse than a maze. A wrong turn could, too easily, lead to enemies rather than dead ends. Ahlen relied on the moss to find their direction, but it was a poor guide to find their way through the increasingly treacherous ravines and ridges of stone that began to block their way. Jhan thought of the straight, easy road she had taken with Obahn, but tried not to long for it as she was forced, again and again, to dismount and walk a difficult part of the journey.

Exhausted, Jhan saw a flat stone and sat on it, the reins of her baku in one limp hand as she sagged and tried to get a full breath. The air was becoming thinner, but Jhan knew that it wasn't only lack of air that was causing the sudden burning in her lungs and the beginnings of a dull ache below her navel. She was too familiar with the signs of sickness by now to even attempt to delude herself to the contrary. It seemed that Kelmus wasn't to be forgotten just yet.

Jhan looked up and saw Ixien staring at her with his crystal eyes. Ahlen, unaware that she had stopped, was still trying to get his baku and the pack baku over a rocky scree. Jhan pressed her lips into a thin line and glared defiantly back at Ixien as she stood and began to face the same scree with her baku.

The fever started towards evening. Jhan felt sweat bead on her face, chilling in the cold air. She pulled her hood up to hide the red flush of her cheeks and the sick, glitter in her eyes. She wanted to stop and make camp, her lips moving as they tried to utter the words, but she knew that they couldn't stop. The darkness was their friend. They had to hide within it to get around Okara. It was something that didn't need saying. Everyone knew where their best chance lay.

When they topped a rise, they spotted the hearth fires of Okara to their right, wisps of smoke dancing in and out of the trees. They were close, too close for Jhan's comfort. Ahlen must have thought so too. He turned left and they took an even more treacherous route down the mouth of a ravine. It was several long hours before they found a way for the baku to climb out again.

It was Ahlen now who sat down heavily on a fallen log, head bowed and body a barely outlined shape in the darkness. "I don't feel well," he muttered, "and I don't think we've moved forward a foot in all of this time. The Okarins knew what they were about when they built their village. Their road must be the only passable one."

"We must return to the road," Ixien agreed. "We must travel through Okara, buy enough supplies to satisfy them, and then continue. If it is the Half- Creature they want, then you must give it to them, Ahlen Kantori."

"I won't allow that, Ixien," Ahlen growled back wearily.

"Consider," Ixien returned, dispassionately logical, "You told me that your goddess had expressed her wish that you take it--"

"I have a name!" Jhan exploded, fists clenched.

Ixien continued as if she hadn't spoken. "-with you on your journey. Perhaps this is the reason. Perhaps your goddess knew that you would need It for just this moment."

Ahlen was silent and still. Jhan wondered, outraged, if he were actually believing Ixien, and then, he let out an exasperated, half- strangled noise and Jhan heard him begin to pace. "It doesn't work like

that Ixien. Jhan will make her purpose known all on her own. That is the way fate works. She may give herself willingly to the Okarins to save us, or things may take a bad turn and it will happen anyway, but I mustn't cause them to happen."

"But you took It because of your goddess," Ixien persisted. "How is that different?"

Jhan could hear Ahlen stop pacing, but he wasn't in the mood to argue semantics in the cold and dark. "It just is, to me at least, Ixien. Accept that."

"I don't think I want to stand around why you decide my fate in front of me," Jhan seethed. "Let me make the decision. I hate to say it, but I think Ixien is right. We have to go through Okara and hope we don't get skinned before we catch up to Obahn." Jhan gave Ixien a hard look. "Sorry, but I won't be handing myself over to them to make things easier for you."

Ahlen groaned and Jhan heard his joints pop as he stretched. "Let's go then. We'll have to take the ravine back to the village."

Jhan wanted to groan as well, but she bit her still healing lip instead and used the sharp pain to keep her feet moving and her mind alert. As she fell in behind Ahlen and they began the long journey back, she used her time afoot to catch handfuls of mud and rotted leaves, rubbing them everywhere she could reach. She turned her cloak inside out, doing without the inner fur lining so that she would look as far removed from the woman the Okarins had first seen as possible.

By the time they reached the end of the ravine and topped the rise overlooking the Okarin village, Jhan was a filthy boy on a sweated baka. The stench alone was enough to keep anyone's interest at bay, Jhan thought, let alone her mud smeared appearance.

"We can only hope that we look poor enough not to bother with," Ahlen said as he looked back at them. There was a full moon and it lit them up where they stood on the rise. Ahlen blinked at Jhan's strangely dark skin and then flared his nostrils as he caught her stench. Ixien glowed ghostly pale and looked even less human than usual. "or too strange," Ahlen finished.

"I think anything we have is enough for them," Jhan warned. "Just give them enough money to make them leave us alone, Ahlen."

"It's for Tsarianna's priests," Ahlen lamented stubbornly.

"It's for our lives now," Jhan snapped back. "Don't be stupid."

"You fear for yourself," Ixien observed. "We wasted time in the wilderness to save you from them. We could have entered their village, paid what was needed to satisfy them, and been on our way long before now."

"Do you really think those men on the trail were interested in trading?" Jhan snarled back.

"They were pursuing you," Ixien was relentless with his facts. They were all true, but cold blooded

in their conclusions.

Ahlen wasn't ready to be that compassionless. He shook his head sharply. "Enough! We'll take our chances. I doubt they will recognize Jhan now and they might not think that we are the wandering travelers they've been searching for."

"Always the optimist," Jhan mocked.

"Enough, I said," Ahlen's voice sounded different, Jhan thought as she mounted her baku and followed him down towards Okara. He sounded ill. What would happen if both of them became too ill to travel? Left up to Ixien to care for them, she could guess what would happen.

They entered the village very early in the morning. Jhan held onto a slim hope of riding through while everyone slept, but a man was standing watch and he called the alarm to the others. Once again, Jhan saw the slow shuffle of heavily furred men coming out of their hide houses. She ducked her head into her cloak and tried to twist her face into a suitably ugly expression.

"Grain for the baku," Ahlen called to them. "Dried fish and meat, if you have it, and at least eight cakes of fat."

"Kioni root," Jhan whispered to Ahlen. "Lopnar herb."

Ahlen looked at her only briefly, puzzled, but knew that he couldn't argue now. He repeated Jhan's request loudly. A man nodded to the others, as if he were the leader, and then stood and stared silently at them while his men gathered together what Ahlen had asked for.

"Bad time for travel," the man finally said when most of the supplies had been handed up in neat bundles to Ahlen. "Storms come down the pass. Wipe out the road for days, sometimes weeks."

"We're meeting warriors down the road," Jhan whispered.

Ahlen swallowed. "We're meeting warriors down the road," he repeated loudly, but his voice held a note of uncertainty. "They'll get us through."

The man grunted, curious to have so many travelers meeting warriors or not fooled at all, it was hard to tell from his leathery face. "Many lean bandits," the man continued. "Bad if you're carrying fine goods or enough money to interest them."

If he was relying on Ahlen's innocence to give them away, he was disappointed. Jhan was holding her breath, ready to lash her baku into a gallop if Ahlen should reply wrongly. When Ahlen said, "We're poor travelers; Pilgrims to the Sun God. We're relying on His good graces to see us through," Jhan could hardly stop her sharp exhalation of relief. "My brother needs the Sun Priest's healing prayers. He has a wasting disease. I suppose you can smell him even from where you're standing."

The Okarin flared his nose and then wrinkled it distastefully. "Go on your way then. We don't want sickness here."

The Okarin held up a gloved hand, but it was creeping, as if he thought Ahlen might give the wasting disease to him along with his money. He didn't tell Ahlen the cost of the supplies. Ahlen simply began dropping coins into the man's hand. He stopped twice and twice the man refused to close his hand. At last, fuming, Ahlen swore at him. "That's nearly all I have!"

"The winter is hard for travelers and Okarins," the man replied diffidently, closing his hand at last. "Safe passage becomes expensive after the first snow. After true snowfall, it becomes impossible."

It was a threat and Ahlen didn't wait to argue any longer. He kicked his baku into a lope and Jhan and Ixien trotted after him. Ixien easily stretched his small legs, but when Ahlen didn't slow down after a time, he lightly sprang up onto the pack baku.

The forest opened out into a flat plain covered in short, frozen grass. On both sides, and far ahead, they could just make out the jagged peaks of a mountain chain, backlit by the moon, and the very faint ghost light of dawn. A well worn road cut straight ahead, obviously the only way through.

"I smell rain," Ixien said. Jhan looked back, hearing a note of anxiety in his voice, but he was barely discernible from the darkness. She had noticed that he didn't like to get wet. "There is a storm up ahead."

Jhan turned around in her saddle and tried to see something in the gloom, a shelter of any sort. "This weather is terrible, rain one moment and then snow the next," she grumbled. "It's freezing at night and off and on warm during the day. It's impossible to guess how strong that storm might be. I think we should wait until it passes us by."

"As we move up towards the mountains it will get colder," Ahlen replied. "Then it will just be snow. I'm used to snow storms. I know how to deal with them."

Jhan felt the sting of dirt getting in her eyes. She took off a glove and used her clean hand to wipe at it. The hand was chilled at once. It set her to shivering. The thought of snowstorms, after a walk in less cold had nearly ended her life, wasn't as appealing to Jhan as it was to Ahlen. "You'll have to give me more of your clothes," Jhan told him as she replaced her glove. "I'm going to need them."

"I should have asked for that when we were in Okara!" Ahlen swore.

"You were out of money," Jhan reminded him with a shrug of acceptance. Ahlen's face went closed and Jhan's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You didn't give him all of your money?"

"Of course not!" Ahlen retorted and then couldn't help a tight, self satisfied smile. "He didn't even get a fourth of it."

"You're learning fast." Jhan wasn't praising him. Knowing too well what it was like to have innocence ripped away to be replaced by distrust and fear, she could spare pity even for Ahlen, her kidnapper.

“What were the plants and the roots for?” Ahlen wondered.

“Fever, and something else that I have to take care of,” Jhan replied evasively.

Ahlen wouldn’t leave it at that. “You know that I’m ill, then. I didn’t expect concern from you.”

Jhan’s hands tightened on the reins of her baku. She couldn’t let the chance to lash Ahlen with her anger pass. “Actually, it has to do with my rape. The man wasn’t very clean. You can use some of the herb for your fever though, if there’s enough left over.”

Ahlen was silent. Jhan could feel him trying to understand what she was talking about. Finally, he gave up, his inexperience too acute. “I suppose there would be problems from that,” he said at last, uncertain. “He must have hurt you, treating you as a woman. Are you in pain? I didn’t even think to ask back at our camp. I simply don’t know enough, Jhan, to know what to ask you. I have to admit that I feel uncomfortable talking about it as well.”

“I don’t want to talk about it either,” Jhan replied irritably. “Just let me take care of it. I know what to do.” The truth was crueler. Jhan didn’t want to enlighten Ahlen. She preferred that he squirm and feel as guilty as possible in his ignorance. He had seen her nude with his own eyes, but he was falling prey to the same disgust and fear that every man experienced when he thought too much about what Jhan was and how it had been accomplished. The added sex, and forced sex at that, into the confusing mix was sending Ahlen’s thoughts in, obviously, more disturbing paths. Jhan wished that their circumstances were good enough to enjoy it. As it was, she could only manage irritation, and a deep bitterness, as she hunched as near as possible to the baku’s warmth and looked ahead for the first sign of the storm.

All the baku tired and balked, snorting and flapping their ears wearily. Ahlen forced them on, thinking of the Okarins, probably, and how they might decide to follow and test Ahlen’s assertion that they had taken almost all of his money. When a finger of dawn topped a mountain at last, they were able to see a scattering of boulders on the otherwise flat plain. Ahlen headed for it with a defeated curse.

Jhan was seeing more than the boulders. She squinted and shaded her hand against the light just as the hissing of rain and sleet came to her ears. The wall of the storm broadsided them. The baku honked in alarm and pulled against their bits. Jhan heard Ixien shout and Ahlen cry out in surprise. Jhan thanked the impulse that had caused her to tie the animals together before they had reached the Okarin village.

Now the lead was a lifeline. Expertly, she dug her heels into a soft spot on the baku’s side; the kidneys. Her beast jumped and pulled wildly against the bit, but Jhan drove it relentlessly forward with her heels.

The rain and wind lifted off Jhan's hood and stung her face, washing the mud into her eyes and nose. It didn't matter. She could barely find a space to breathe and she couldn't even open her eyes to see in the freezing rain. Gritting her teeth, she forced the baku towards the tumble of rocks. Unable to see, she relied on the baku's own instincts that told it to get out of the weather, and the beast's sharp senses, to lead it to the three imala she knew they would find there. Just before the storm had hit, she had spotted the familiar pattern of skins that marked Obahn's tent and the wisp of smoke curling into the dawn sky from among the shelter of the boulders.

There. Jhan passed one boulder, and then another. The rain was partly cut off, but its force sent it over the rock's barrier, still pelting them. When they reached the flapping doorway of the tent, Jhan dismounted and stumbled inside, uncaring whether Ahlen and Ixien followed. Ixien was only a heartbeat behind, wildly shoving past Jhan in the doorway and sending her falling forward. She caught herself on one knee, pushed her wet hair out of her face, and looked up to see Obahn and Sael confronting her with bared swords and alarmed faces.

Ahlen came in last, dragging packs along with him. When he saw the swords as well, he stopped, the rain still splattering his body. "Prince Obahn!" he began and then choked and swallowed.

"Again we meet, but now, it seems, you are in my debt, Ahlen Kantori," Obahn intoned gravely.

"I don't think so," Jhan chattered through blue lips. She moved to a brazier on her knees, pulled off her wet gloves, and held her cold hands to the heat. "I think you owe me. If I understand your custom right, I saved you from the Okarins. They followed me, after all. I could have refused to leave you. I could have given myself to the Okarins right then and there. Instead, I lead them away. You owe me, Prince Obahn."

Obahn's scars stood out sharply in the light of the brazier's as his face suffused with blood. "And how shall I repay that debt?"

"Shelter, until we are well and the storm stops," Jhan kept her voice even and matter-of-fact, trying not to look at the sharp edges of the swords that were still aimed at them.

"The storm hit us as soon as we left Okara," Obahn snarled. "You can't expect us to remain here after it ends, nursing invalids!"

"No," Jhan agreed, "and I wouldn't want to waste time here either. I was more in mind of joining your company until Ahlen is well enough to lead again."

There was silence. Ahlen was growing wiser. He didn't protest with assertions that he wasn't as ill as Jhan was making him out to be, holding his pride and childish honesty in check. He bore with Obahn's pointed scrutiny and Sael's deceptively relaxed alertness that warned that he was only waiting for Obahn's orders to slay them all.

“And if you have a death sickness among you?” Obahn wondered at last.

Jhan shrugged as she peeled off her sodden cape and then began working off her boots. “Then we’ll all get sick and die. Would you sacrifice your honor to whine about *what might be*?”

A sharp intake of breath from Sael, but Jhan knew that she was heading in the right direction. She managed not to shrink from Obahn, just, as he took two steps to tower over her, fingers white knuckled on the hilt of his sword. When a bark of laughter came all at once, she flinched, but held her ground. “I suppose, being what you are, death is hardly a thing to fear,” Obahn said, sheathing his sword and crouching comfortably, “but I still find your courage astounding. It has won you a place here, but, I warn you, it won’t win you anything else from me. The journey that I’m undertaking doesn’t allow for unnecessary baggage.”

Jhan let out a slow sigh and looked over to Ahlen and Ixien. Ahlen was looking back at her, puzzled, but grateful. Ixien was too busy using a cloth to wipe the water from his skin to understand his good fortune. He was reacting as if the water was painful, grimacing and shivering until he had himself completely dry. His hair hadn’t soaked the water up at all. It still sprang in a loose fall down his back, mimicking glass perfectly.

Jhan wasn’t so fortunate. Her hair was a sodden, freezing mass all about her, a wet blanket that was chilling her to the bone. Surprisingly, it was Sael who sheathed his sword and offered her cloths to dry off and Sael who stirred up the braziers and added more coals to them. Zerain, who's duty that should have been, was a dark shadow, silently cutting meat into a pan as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired. Only the jerking motions of her hands betrayed that she was upset, her face hidden in a cloud of veil. Jhan knew how the woman felt about her, imaging that she was a rival, but Jhan would have preferred a woman’s touch then, even Zerain's.

The storm lashed at the roof of the tent and rain dripped down, here and there, along with tendrils of cold. A low howl of wind was an unnerving counterpoint to the stillness inside. Jhan wrapped blankets and furs about herself and curled up, trying not to imagine what it would have been like to be outside on that plain without even a tree to cut the storm.

Slowly, feeling came back to Jhan’s body. The long ride, through the night and that morning, caught up with her, aches and pains from strains and cuts were making themselves known. The fever began to gain momentum as well, and Jhan felt it prickling her skin with heat. She forced herself to eat the grain and meat dish Zerain had cooked for them and drank a great deal of water to combat the fever.

Ahlen had already fallen asleep in a corner, one hand shading his eyes from the light of the braziers. His breathing wasn’t good, Jhan noticed, and he seemed flushed and sweaty. Ixien had fallen asleep as well and Jhan came to the realization, just then, that she had never actually seen the Caefu

sleep before. She wondered if he were ill as well, and then, close on the heels of that, wondered how long Obahn would tolerate three sick people using up his supplies.

Obahn and Zerain retired to a far corner, wrapping themselves up in furs. When Jhan heard, clearly, what they were doing, she pressed her lips together and deliberately turned away. That brought her face to face with Sael. He was sitting, cross legged, as he oiled his sword with a clean cloth, eyes intent on Jhan and not the blade in his lap. It came to Jhan that Sael might want something from her, something she might have to fight to keep from him.

“I am Ekhal,” he said as if guessing her thoughts.

“Meaning, what?” Jhan wondered tightly.

“You are not of interest to me.”

“Good.” Jhan made as if to lie down and go to sleep, but then she realized that there wasn’t going to be a better time to do what she had to do. She sat up again, but Sael misinterpreted the motion.

“You doubt me?” Sael unwound the red scarf from the bottom of his face. Jhan was struck again by how young he was. He seemed so self-assured and serious; it was hard to remember that he was a young man. “I’ve told you. I am unable to be with women.”

“Thekling?” Jhan surmised, but she wasn’t put at ease.

“Yes, that is what your people call me,” Sael sheathed the sword and put scabbard and blade aside, “though that word has a dirty sound to it.”

Jhan searched through Zerain’s packs and found a little pot that she used for brewing tea. Jhan went aside, rinsed it out, and then filled it with clean water from a skin. Putting it on the brazier to boil, she took out some of the herbs and the root she had made Ahlen buy in Okara. Crumbling them into the hot water, she caught a faint, acrid whiff as they reacted with the water.

“I’ve found,” Jhan said absently, “that some people, can do anything if they can give themselves a good enough excuse. Say what you like, I’ve learned not to trust anyone.”

“You are not adept at listening,” Sael replied angrily. “I can’t keshun with women.” That was putting it bluntly. Jhan could see that he was embarrassed, but she didn’t give him any sympathy.

“Why?”

“Why, what?” Sael was even angrier now. “I don’t think that I can make it plainer, Jhan Dor.”

“Is it that you don’t like them?” Jhan persisted as she stirred the herbs with a wooden spoon. “Are you frightened of them? Is there a problem... physically, and you just can’t do it at all with anyone-”

“Stop!” Sael hissed, still managing to keep his voice down. “Who are you to ask me such questions?”

“I’m the person you’re asking to trust you, remember?” Jhan raised eyebrows pointedly.

Sael's face went closed and he looked down fiercely, long enough for Jhan to take the pot from the fire to cool. Finally, Sael forced out a reply. "There is nothing within me that... responds to women," he clarified. "An imala won't mate with a baku. They sense that they're not for each other. It is the same when I am with women. But, you know that. You must, being what you are and wanting what you want. You desire men, just as I do."

"No," Jhan admitted, wincing at that unexpected, painful subject. "I don't *want*. Not since I was first tortured. I can..." she flushed, embarrassed now too, "enjoy keshuning as much as anyone, but I don't feel any need to, any desire for anyone, man or woman. If I never had it again, I don't think my body would care."

Sael shook his head, backing away from that stark candor. "Enough, I won't speak about such things. It isn't proper. "

Jhan shrugged. "It's to the point, Sael. You're telling me to trust you because you only feel desire for men. I hate saying this, but, stripping away my soul, which is a woman's, and everything that was done to me, I am still a man."

Sael was quick and adamant. "There is nothing that you are that I desire, Jhan Dor. You are beautiful, and intriguing, but I don't sense the man that you were. In any case, I am sworn to Obahn until death. That oath demands that I answer only his needs and commands. Since my Lord Obahn isn't Ekhal, I have done the same as swearing chastity until death. It is an oath that I will never break; certainly not for an Ikhlil."

Jhan used a cloth to take the cooling pot into her hands, her attention shifting from the conversation to the task at hand. "Nothing you say will ever convince me, Sael. I'm sorry, but, if you knew even a quarter of what I've been through, you'd understand. Now, I have to be alone and I need... I need you to not watch and to take your assurances and oaths to another corner of the tent."

"So you may drink tea?" Sael's tone was incredulous.

"I remember hearing you say that you had trained as a healer," Jhan recalled. "Surely you know what kioni and lopnar are used for?"

Sael did and he looked contrite at once. "I've taken them. They are powerful drugs and not to be used lightly. Are you certain that you mixed them in proper amounts?"

Jhan nodded. "I've had similar problems. I'm married, you see, and this body doesn't always accept my attempts at being a woman."

"Ekhal have such problems as well," Sael said, "Though I do not subscribe to the practices that cause them, rape makes it unavoidable."

Jhan saw the darkness pass across Sael's face and she felt a momentary communion of pain with

the young man. They had both suffered cruelty it seemed and he would understand, perhaps, more than Zerain, what she needed. When she remained silent, hopeful, holding the pot in her hands, it didn't take Sael long to comprehend.

"Of course," embarrassment made Sael's pale skin redden to his ears and he mumbled as he rummaged through his packs. Finally, he fashioned a tool for Jhan and handed it to her gingerly. When he turned away, Jhan couldn't help but be grateful.

"I know you don't want me to thank you," Jhan glanced to where Obahn was still busy with his wife, "but I don't think anyone can hear. I can't trust you completely, but you've shown me that you can be kind."

There wasn't a reply. Jhan could hear Sael moving away to give her privacy. Using the mixture and the tool Sael had given her, Jhan administered the herbs as she had to. It was uncomfortable and stinging, but that killed the bacteria that Kelmus had forced into her. Cleaning up with cloths, she drank more of the stinging potion. It settled uneasily in her stomach, but Jhan could feel it already beginning to work.

The embarrassment of the treatment in the midst of strangers, and the heavy weight of her fever, conspired to cause Jhan to experience an agonizing flashback to Kelmus and a grinding depression. More than ever, she felt used and helpless, a rag doll being ripped between cruel hands. The intuitive bravery she had shown Obahn, had been a thin veil over her fear and desperation. In reality, she felt as small as a mouse among lions, lions who were all thinking about snapping her up and making her an easy meal. Kelmus had only exposed the lie that she had some control over the situation. His degradation had been a culmination of inner destruction that she couldn't deny any longer. Something inside of Jhan broke, and she felt the hot tears of loss, as she tried to hide from the pain in sleep, wondering what would be left of her to wake up to.

"Jhan Dor," Obahn's rough voice, and even rougher, the sole of his boot, prodded Jhan awake.

Jhan blinked blearily, rubbed at her eyes, and reluctantly sat up out of the warm cocoon of blankets and furs. The fever had banked, but she felt dead inside, mind as numb as the cold of the storm that still howled against the top of the tent. Her hair had dried into a rat's nest halo about her and she pushed it dejectedly out of her face as she looked blankly at Obahn standing above her.

"Your lord is ill. He calls for you." Obahn motioned towards Ahlen, still lying where Jhan had last seen him.

Jhan might have retorted to the easy assertion that Ahlen was her lord, but she found anger a

stranger and the words lost on her tongue. She only nodded wearily and moved stiffly to Ahlen's side. Ahlen's eyes were open and watching her. "What is it?" Jhan asked dully.

"I'm sicker than I thought," Ahlen admitted softly. His face was drawn and hollow around the eyes. "Can you make the fever medicine for me?" He glanced past Jhan's shoulder to the others. "Somehow, I don't think Lord Obahn, or any of the others, will help me."

At the mention of the medicine, Jhan's mouth drew into a taught line. "I didn't use it all."

"What is it?" Ahlen wondered with a concerned frown. "Has something happened?"

"You're acting as if we're friends," Jhan replied evenly and looked away. "You're asking me to help you, but, if I want to go on living, I have to help you, don't I?"

That disturbed Ahlen. "I never wanted to hurt you, Jhan. At first, it was just my simple minded childishness that put my sister's life above everything and everyone. Now, it's my Goddess's choice that I take you. I think, if the choice were mine again, I would set you free. I have Ixien now, after all, and Obahn, if he'll let me follow him. He's going to the Sun God himself, did he tell you? Something about his dead son, but he wouldn't say much more than that."

"Do you think any of that makes me feel better?" Jhan demanded. She clasped her hands together in her lap until her fingernails drew blood. It was the only thing she was in control of.

"Don't," Ahlen gasped and started to touch Jhan, to stop her. She flinched away and glared at him.

"I thought I was free, you see," Jhan explained tersely, "in control of my destiny. The man who tortured me, filling my nightmares, was dead. I was married to the man I loved and I had good friends. There were troubles, but everyone has them. Even when you kidnapped me, I thought, I can still speak my mind. I can still argue with you and maybe change your mind. After Kelmus, I tried not to think how easily I had been handed off to a rapist. When Obahn took me up and then left me behind as bait, I still deluded myself into thinking I was still in control. After last night, when I had to ask Sael, a stranger, to help me do something that- that still mortifies me, I finally stopped lying to myself. I'm still a prisoner. I was never free. People can still take me and use me however they please. I'm too weak and too frightened to stop them."

Jhan wiped at tears on her cheeks, sniffing a little. "Where I come from, we had strict laws that protected everyone. I was taught that hurting or killing people was wrong. This land is hard and the people in it harder. They seem to do violence on a daily basis and never think twice about it. I just can't do that Ahlen and, because I can't, I'm always going to be a target; someone's prey."

Ahlen gave her words careful consideration, seeing how much she was distressed, but, in the end, he didn't have any easy reply. "Women are never in control in my land, but we have strict laws and customs to protect them. I would protect you, Jhan, but you know how long I would last against Obahn

or Sael. I'm sorry. At this moment, you are not any better than a slave and that pains me. I'm not indifferent. Please believe that I'm not."

Ahlen shifted onto his side and coughed a little before continuing. "I think that you're frightened, Jhan, perhaps too frightened to remember your strength. With me, you have to hold your hand, but with those others, you may act as you wish." He glanced surreptitiously towards the Caefu, but he was still sleeping. "Even where it concerns Ixien. I won't have anyone abuse you, not ever again. The Goddess never commanded that."

Jhan looked down at her bloody hands. "I don't think you were listening, Ahlen. I am skilled enough to kill everyone in this tent before they could lift a weapon. Knowing that is one thing. Being able to be cold blooded enough to do it is another. It's not in me, Ahlen, and I hope it never will be."

Ahlen clearly didn't believe Jhan about the extent of her ability, but he didn't take time to further erode her confidence by saying so. Instead, he revealed a little more about himself. "I was a simpleton, Jhan. The other children used to taunt me and throw stones. When I grew older, and not much wiser, the village men would make sport of me when ever they found me out alone. I was always strong. I caught them off guard and beat one man to the ground. After that, they grew wary and left me alone. One show of strength was enough to protect me. After seeing you defeat Theon, I certainly wouldn't ever challenge your skill, Jhan. If you're afraid of Obahn and his people, or even Ixien, show them what you are capable of. It is nature for beasts to attack the weak. Don't be weak."

"You still don't understand," Jhan retorted with an exasperated shake of her head. "I kill, Ahlen, easily, if I'm not careful. Do you recall when you confronted me in the hallway at House Dor?" at Ahlen's nod she nodded as well, to drive the point home. "I was a breath away from breaking your neck when I recognized you. I have reflexes that were honed with torture. Control of those reflexes is always uncertain."

Ahlen grew even more flushed and not only from the fever. He wiped at new sweat on his brow, his mind thinking back to how close he had come to never starting his journey. Jhan stood and looked down at him bitterly. "I'll get your medicine," she said. "At least that is something that I can do."

The storm broke up the next day. Sunlight streamed through the flap of the tent and Sael was the first to go out, suspicion on his face. After long minutes, he returned, wrapping his scarf about his face and nodding in relief. "The sky is clear all the way to the mountains."

"Thank the gods!" Zerain intoned as she began packing.

Obahn stood grimly and strapped on his sword, gold eyes piercing Ahlen. "I hope that you are able

to travel.”

Ahlen was packing his things as well. He looked up nervously. He was still fevered, but the medicine Jhan had given him had kept it from getting worse. “Good, mountain air can only improve me,” he replied confidently.

“And your companion also?” Obahn nodded to the Caefu. Ixien was sitting as if in a stupor, but, slowly, he began climbing out of the tent and into the sunlight like a starving man suddenly spying a feast.

“His people need light,” Ahlen explained. “They live in the brightness of lava and volcanoes. My mother used to tell me tales that they would die if left in the darkness too long.”

Obahn’s eyes lit on Jhan last. He hadn’t said two words to her after she had demanded repayment for his debt. She had thought that it was only anger, but she saw something else in his eyes that she didn’t like. She wondered if he would bother with revenge now.

“See that you don’t end up having to repay a debt to me, Jhan Dor,” Obahn said warningly. “My repayment would be far more costly.”

He didn’t wait for a reply as he strode from the tent, but Jhan didn’t have one for him anyway. She quietly helped Ahlen pack and then helped him carry those packs out of the tent. Sheltered by the boulders, the baku and the imala had weathered the storm in a miserable huddle. Still wet and irritable, they munched hungrily at the grain Sael fed them, honking in protest when harness and baggage began being loaded on top of their wet backs.

Looking about for Ixien, Jhan saw him perched on top of a boulder, face turned towards the sun and a contented expression on his face. He did seem to suck energy from the light. Already his skin had lost its sallow color. Now it was almost glowing whitely. Jhan wanted to doubt her eyes, find some other comforting explanation, but she’d seen too much to refuse to believe completely.

Zerain finished with the tent. After it was packed, a sodden wet mass, they all mounted the baku and imala, even Ixien, and began their journey once more. The plain, swept clean by rain and sleet, had lost its stubble brown appearance. Now it was covered in hardy green grass so short that it was almost impossible to tell it from moss. The sky was blue, almost cloudless, and the mountains were stark and wreathed in a veil of mist.

There was still a dull ache below Jhan’s navel, but it was much better. Her fever had broken. It was strange not to feel, physically, as bad as she did mentally. In the cold morning, with a brisk breeze tousling her tangled, black hair and the sun shining down, Jhan could only feel darkly depressed. It was as if a piece of the darkness had burrowed deep down inside of her. It hid there, hating her returning health and the bright morning. That part of her almost wished something would happen to

spoil the day- almost. When Obahn began looking about them nervously, Jhan began to wonder if her thoughts had taken on reality.

“Is something wrong?” Jhan asked Sael quietly.

While he traveled, Sael had kept to the rear of the group and Obahn to the fore. He rode his imala with a straight back, his long black coat and black gloves giving him a dangerous appearance. That and the scarf made him hard to address, but Jhan felt, strangely, more comfortable speaking with him than she did even to Ahlen. By his own admission, Sael shared something with her; a point in his life when he, maybe, had been as helpless as Jhan was now.

“Bandits roam this land,” Sael replied, his eyes sweeping the plain and his hand on the hilt of his sword. “They prey on the traders and travelers that cross here in the spring, but they don’t all slink away at the first hint of winter. Some of them have permanent dens.”

“So, that’s why,” Jhan said with a knowing grimace. When Sael raised eyebrows at her she gave him a sickly smile. “I thought that Obahn gave in too easily. He could have reasoned his way out of being in my debt. I was just desperate, saying anything. Now I know that we’re just here to help him once more. The bandits might not attack this large of a group or, if they do, Obahn now has some spare bodies. He can throw us at them and hope our dying takes long enough for you to get away.”

It was plain that Sael hadn’t considered any of that. “Obahn is honorable,” he told her, but his voice lacked conviction.

“He’s been perfectly honorable,” Jhan agreed, “but he can certainly twist it into his favor.” Her voice filled with mock sympathy. “Don’t worry about it, Sael. I’m just used to being used. I can spot the signs pretty quickly.”

Sael was offended. “Where is your bravery, Ikhil? What would you do differently? You act as if you didn’t have a choice.” Sael’s eyes pierced her fiercely. “You could have stayed out in the storm.”

Jhan glared back, stating the obvious. “We would have died.”

“Even death is a choice,” Sael pointed out.

“Not for me,” Jhan countered.

“That also is a choice,” Sael persisted, “It doesn’t help you to wail and complain because my Lord Obahn takes advantage of it.”

“So, you think I’m just feeling sorry for myself,” Jhan bit back. “Whining?”

“Certainly,” Sael replied seriously, but his eyes crinkled as if he were finding humor in it. “You faced Obahn and spoke to him as if he were no one, least of all a Hyjar. You’ve lived to tell about it. You demanded he repay a debt that he didn’t even owe to you, and, though he might have had ulterior motives, he’s done your bidding. Even Ahlen, the man you claim you are enslaved by, cries out for your

help as if you were his lord. Even I find myself speaking to you as if we were equals; as if we were lodge mates of the Ekhal. I prattle to satisfy your demand for knowledge. There is something about you, some noble temper, that can't be denied. You are far from helpless! This journey may not be your desire and, yes, terrible things befell you, but those are things to over come. Even this Ahlen isn't invulnerable. He seems a child to me. Surely you can over come a child?"

Obahn looked back, noted Sael's inattention, and barked an order in their language. Sael went red and pulled his imala away from Jhan, falling silent and becoming diligent again. Jhan didn't notice, suddenly lost in her own thoughts. Her eyes were on Ahlen riding ahead of her. Sael had handed something back to her, but Jhan wondered if she could accept it. He was asking her to believe that she did have some control over what was happening to her, that she could still make choices, and that she did have the power to stop and not go a step further.

Jhan imagined herself sliding off of her baku and sitting down on the road. What would they do? Obahn had left her behind before, she was certain he would do it again. Ixien would keep on going as well. Ahlen would threaten her with the parasites, but, as Sael had said, death was a choice. It wasn't one that Jhan could accept, but it still had the power to dispel some of her helplessness. To know that the ultimate choice was hers, something that she hadn't had with Dagara Ku Ni, lifted the darkness over her soul enough for some light to touch her and warm her cold fear.

That warmth stayed with Jhan throughout the day. When they stopped to make camp, away from the road, she felt more confident about standing among her companions. She was even able to help lay out the tent to dry without feeling a shrinking fear of abuse.

Without the tent, they made camp out under the stars. Zerain used precious coals to make their fire, in the absence of any wood on the plain, and they all gathered closely around it as night fell, breezy and cold. The imala and the baku made a welcome wall of warmth against that chill, but everyone was still obliged to huddle under layers of blankets and furs to keep off the drafts.

Zerain was too cold to bother with an elaborate dinner, but nobody had the strength to complain as she dished out the dried meat she had soaked in hot water, seasoned with some sort of spicy plant she had found along their road. She also managed to griddle tough pieces of flat bread on the backside of a heated pan. They all used that to soak up the meat juices that had cooked into the water.

"You will freeze to death," Sael stated. Jhan turned her head, thinking he was speaking to her, but saw that he was staring at Ixien curiously. Sael spoke out of envy, Jhan thought. Sael was wrapped in only his black coat, spurning the blankets as if being cold was a weakness he wasn't willing to admit to in front of them.

Ixien sat away from the fire. His eyes drooped in the torpid manner that came on him when there

wasn't any light. He had eaten only a little, ignoring the bread in favor of the meat. Now he spoke as if he were half asleep. "The Ahnali, the fire spirits, protect me."

"What do you give them in exchange?" Jhan found herself asking, knowing that Sael wouldn't.

"Peace," Ixien replied cryptically as he curled up on the hard ground to sleep.

Ahlen, still fighting his sickness, took more blankets than anyone else, moving as close to the fire as he could before lying down to sleep. Sael looked from Ahlen, to Ixien, and then to Jhan in speculation as to what Ixien's words meant, but Ahlen was already falling asleep and Jhan had nothing to offer him. She moved close to the fire as well, feeling the cold creeping around her face and neck, and tried to find a measure of privacy under a flap of fur.

"I will watch first," Obahn was saying to Sael. "You will watch second. These others I won't trust to take such a duty."

"My Lord," Sael replied.

Jhan was surprised when Sael made his bed close to her, his back nearly touching hers. She couldn't help her discomfort, even knowing that it was necessary in such cold. They had to sleep together for warmth's sake. Ahlen was only an arm length away and Zerain and Obahn had made their bed close enough to him to touch. Still, she found herself tensing and staying awake even after Sael's breathing softened in sleep.

Obahn and Zerain were talking. Jhan strained to hear them, wanting to know more about her forced companions, but she couldn't hear a word, the wind carrying them away. Zerain signaled the conversation was at an end by beginning to hum a low tune. The lilting sound, and the whistle of the wind over the plain, was like a lullaby to Jhan's tense nerves. She fell asleep despite her trepidation.

Jhan awoke first, the coals of the fire making a bit of light in the misty dawn, but too low to give any real warmth. She was forced to shed her cocoon of furs and blankets, to stand and stamp until her blood began to move once more. The sudden noise was enough to wake Obahn, who started up away from the warmth of his wife with a hand on his bared sword at his side. He blinked rapidly until he focused on Jhan, and then he grunted sourly and stood up as well.

Zerain yawned and replaced her veil before turning to face the company, arranging her heavy skirts properly as she moved to the fire and began stirring it up with a blackened poker. Expertly, she began cooking a thick porridge. The smell made Jhan's mouth water and her stomach growled for the feel of its warmth. She had almost decided to settle by the fire again until it was done, when Obahn uttered a furious curse.

Sael was propped up against some baggage, Jhan saw, his chin touching his chest in sleep. The look on Obahn's face made Jhan straighten and move away, knowing what was coming. Zerain had paused as well, hand frozen in the motion of stirring, veiled face turned to watch the scene with an almost eager tenseness.

Obahn took his sword and reached out with it to touch Sael's shoulder with the point. Instantly, Sael awoke and lifted his own bared sword to menace Obahn. They stood there, wills sizzling like oil and water, and then Sael lowered his sword and carefully stood up. Obahn hadn't lowered the point of his blade and he seemed torn as to whether to plunge it into the Ekhal or not.

Obahn stated the obvious, as if he could hardly believe it. "You slept on watch."

Sael's black eyes, over the edge of his scarf, were full of shame and, when he carefully unwound the scarf from his face, so was his expression. He re-sheathed his sword and stood stiffly. "I don't have an excuse."

"Do you imagine that I would accept one if you did?" Obahn snarled. He sheathed his own sword with one violent motion and then twisted his fists into Sael's coat, shaking him violently. Sael staggered when Obahn released him, but was unprepared for the cracking, backhanded blow that Obahn delivered to his face. He went down on one knee and then thrust himself up again as if he were at attention.

"You have only been under oath to me for a short time," Obahn snarled, his eyes glittering. "I'm not Hagen to let you hide among my wives. You are a man, even though you are Ekhal! If you fall asleep on watch again, I won't wake you. I'll simply cut your shameless head from your worthless body!"

Sael nodded stiffly and then moved past Obahn to care for the beasts. He passed Jhan. She could see a corner of his mouth tremble before he began wrapping his scarf about his face once more.

Zerain had held up a bowl of porridge as if mocking Sael, but he didn't take it. Obahn took it instead and ate the porridge as if it were gravel, his eyes glaring after Sael. "If I didn't need him..."

"Why do you need him?" Zerain wondered softly, but Jhan was able to hear despite the sounds of Ahlen and Ixien rising from their beds to see what was going on. "You hate all Ekhal, as a warrior should, and yet you've taken this one's oath, not as a mere guard, but as Ekhal and Bhakali."

"We've made a bargain, he and I," Obahn replied as he handed her his empty bowl. "He demanded the oath of me in payment. I don't know why."

"To shame you in front of your people, perhaps," Zerain guessed. "He blames you for Hagen's death."

Obahn shrugged. "Sael seeks only death, little wife, but that desire serves my purposes. Don't concern yourself with things not of the hearth."

It was obvious that Zerain was angered by Obahn's flippant dismissal, but she held her tongue as Ahlen sleepily moved to the fire to get his breakfast. She spooned it into Obahn's empty bowl and handed it to him absently. Ixien didn't join them, wandering away with his face turned up to the morning light. Jhan was reluctant to get her breakfast with Obahn so apparently still angry, but, when Obahn finally strode away for private business, she crept to the fire and settled nervously with the bowl of porridge Zerain handed her.

"What happened?" Ahlen asked Jhan around a mouthful of food. "What was all the shouting about?"

"I don't think these people need a reason to fight," Jhan grumbled, not wanting to talk about it. "It doesn't concern us."

Zerain having overheard her, she turned her face towards Jhan. She seemed to approve of her reply and nodded as she began cleaning up, banking the coals to gather up.

"I can help," Jhan offered.

"It is woman's work," Zerain replied.

"Help me instead," Ahlen asked Jhan. "I'm still not strong on my feet and a night out in the cold didn't help."

Jhan nodded silently, not feeling too well herself, but unwilling to face Zerain's blank scarf another second. Speaking to Sael was difficult enough. Speaking to Zerain was like speaking to a red wall.

"I am asking you," Ahlen thought to say. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

Jhan blinked at Ahlen with a puzzled frown, mind still on the scene with Obahn, Zerain, and Sael. She shook herself and her reply was only a bitter grimace as she bent to help pack blankets. When Sael and Obahn returned from harnessing the beasts, she helped them pack their gear as well. It was far better to do something, she knew, than to be left standing with her own miserable thoughts. Ixien was of another mind. He stood as still as a statue, oblivious to any of them.

"Is something wrong with him?" Jhan wondered, almost wishing that Ahlen would say that there was.

Ahlen shook his head, only glancing briefly at the Caefu. "He hasn't spoken to me since we met with Obahn. I was surprised when he replied to Sael's question. I might have offended Ixien, but I can't think how. Maybe he's as sick as we are and conserving his strength. I don't know."

"I wouldn't care about offending him," Jhan said tightly.

"I do," Ahlen admitted. "If Obahn decides that I'm well enough to cut loose, we may be depending on Ixien's guidance all too soon."

"Then keep looking ill," Jhan insisted waspishly and turned away to bring up their baku.

Sael had the leads of the baku. He handed them to Jhan without glancing aside from his contemplation of the road. A large, red mark was turning his left cheek purple. His gloved hand rose to inch his scarf up, as if to hide it or to keep the cold off of it.

“Are you all right?” Jhan wondered softly.

Her question made Sael furious. His jaw jumped and his eyes skewered her. “I am not a woman to ask such a question of me!”

Jhan backed away, unconsciously pulling the baku with her. Her fear must have leapt into her eyes. She heard Sael say something else, but she was leading the baku away to put distance between her and any violence his anger might put into motion. When a hand touched her elbow to stop her, she swung without thinking, her fear unloading along her arm like a suddenly released spring. She heard a crack! She backed away then, with the reins tangling in her fingers and those fingers rising to her face in horror.

Ahlen was standing before her, Sael behind with a shocked look in his dark eyes. Ahlen was looking equally incredulous. In his hands, he held a pack saddle, a wooden affair with prongs and leather lines to secure it to a baku. Jhan’s blow had hit it squarely and broken it cleanly in two! Ahlen was holding it up and Jhan turned, shrinking, to see Obahn staring as well, his eyebrows raised and a hand rubbing his chin in amazement. Zerain stood with a pot poised to place into a pack and Ixien was eying Jhan with calculation.

“I-I was-” Ahlen faltered as he folded the two pieces of the pack saddle together. “You were walking past me with the baku. I only wanted to stop you. I-I’m sorry if-”

Jhan swallowed hard, slowly lowering her hands and turning them into fists as if they had betrayed her. “I was afraid,” Jhan explained, keeping her voice low and only between themselves. “I told you... I feel so helpless and afraid. I thought Sael was going to hurt me.”

“Helpless?” Ahlen looked down at the pack saddle and shook his head, perplexed.

“I could have killed you,” Jhan choked. “And me by killing you.”

That was something Ahlen didn’t want to think about. “I’ll tie the saddle together. Maybe we can still use it.” He walked a short distance away and crouched to begin working on it.

“You are trained as a warrior,” Obahn finally spoke up. He seemed pleased. “You moved like a master. That blow was quicker than I could see and deadly. Where did you learn this? I’ve never known anyone to use their hands as weapons.”

“I’m ill,” Jhan replied, lowering her eyes and beginning to tremble with reaction. “I was surprised and lost control. It’s not something I would want to repeat. I’m not a warrior. I’m not a fighter of any kind.”

“You didn’t strike me as a coward, Jhan Dor,” Obahn retorted. “And you dissemble if you attempt to convince me that you aren’t a warrior. I’ve only seen the one move, but I can easily tell that you must have trained for years. If you wish to dishonor yourself by playing a womanish Ikhil, that is your business, but know that I will not tolerate it in my company. I have need of warriors. I left enough women at home.”

Obahn mounted his imala and turned it towards the road. Sael was left staring at Jhan and Jhan stared back. It was a moment before Sael collected his thoughts enough to ask, “That blow was for me, wasn’t it? You thought that I was grabbing you, attacking you maybe?”

“I’m terrified, always,” Jhan replied and left it at that as she mounted her baku, rubbing at the sore part of her hand that she had used to break the saddle.

Zerain tied her last pack to her imala and mounted, joining Obahn. Sael was slower, moving at last and turning to help Ahlen finish with the saddle. Tied together with leather strips, Ahlen slung it hurriedly over the pack baku and loaded on their supplies. Mounting his baku, he looked for Ixien.

The Caefu was staring off at the mountains ahead, oblivious to anything that had just transpired. He had an expression on his face that Jhan didn’t like. It was fervent determination; an almost fanatical look that didn’t bode well for anything or anyone that tried to get in his way. It was only there for a moment, but that was long enough. When he finally responded to Ahlen’s third call, he only blinked and went as blank as stone, as he mounted atop the baggage on the pack baku.

“I think you’ve shown them now,” Ahlen said in an undertone to Jhan as he rode his baku knee to knee with her.

Jhan gave him a tortured look. “Shown them what? That I’m some sort of warrior that Obahn can use or that they should leave me alone because I might kill them? I thought I could control it, Ahlen. The only thing I’ve shown is that I can’t when I’m really afraid. Next time, it might be your head I put my hand through and not a saddle.”

That quieted Ahlen and Jhan urged her baku up ahead of him to deepen that silence. She knew that she hadn’t shown Obahn anything. Men were too arrogant, she knew, too sure of their own strength and superiority. Obahn would never dream that someone like Jhan could ever be a match for him. Sael was another matter. She knew that she had earned his respect. Whatever he intended, Jhan was sure he would think twice about it now. Yet, Jhan didn’t feel safe. The only safety she had ever felt had been in Pekarin, in her husband’s arms.

CHAPTER SIX

(Revelations)

By nightfall, the mountains didn't seem to have moved any nearer, but the air had turned colder and the plain had grown rockier. They made their camp by the bank of a half frozen stream, everyone grateful to set up the tent, fill it with blankets and furs, and warm their bodies by the braziers Zerain lit.

Zerain made a stew of dried meat and vegetables and served it with pressed fruit cakes. After a long day's travel, everyone was silent, shoveling food into their empty stomachs; dazed with weariness. Ixien curled up and slept at once. Ahlen nodded over his bowl of food, trying to finish it before sleep claimed him. Jhan sat next to him, still waiting for feeling to come back to her frozen feet and the hands she had curled around her hot bowl of stew. She couldn't seem to stop shivering. Every spoonful of food was a contest of determination as Jhan tried to get it to her mouth without spilling it.

Zerain and Obahn were seated on the opposite side of the braziers. Obahn sat with his legs stretched towards the brazier and his body propped back on his elbows. Zerain sat behind him, patiently working a comb through his shaggy hair. He accepted her ministrations as if she were a servant, familiar and ignored. His gold eyes were on Jhan instead, contemplating what, Jhan didn't like to think. She tried to avoid looking up and meeting those eyes, afraid that noticing him might make him bold enough to speak what was on his mind. When Sael approached, and crouched by the brazier near Obahn, Jhan couldn't help a sigh of relief as Obahn's attention shifted to him.

Sael was silent for a long moment, but Jhan knew that he was supposed to be on watch, and that he wouldn't have dared Obahn's anger without some reason. Finally, with a clinking of charms, he shifted and said a word that made Jhan shrink into herself. "Keshun."

Obahn sat up and Zerain backed away. Obahn leaned close to Sael. "Tell me, Ekhal," Obahn's tone was biting, knowing that Ahlen and Jhan were there to hear him, "Did my son ever honor the oath of Ekhal you took with him?"

"You've asked me that already," Sael replied.

"I ask again," Obahn insisted.

Jhan glanced at them from under her eyelashes. She saw the deep pain in Sael's eyes and their tense bodies confronting each other. "No, he didn't," Sael replied at last. "He only swore it so that he could take me into his lodge. There wasn't any other way, he being a warrior and I an Ekhal. We were barred from swearing as clan brothers because of that, but you already know the law my Lord."

"I do," Obahn said and then, with ill concealed disgust, "but, in the end, my son did take the oath

of clan brother with you, despite the law!”

“Everyone knows the tale, my Lord. It doesn’t need repeating.” Sael stared into the fire now, his hands twisting together as he recalled a black memory. “He didn’t take me into his lodge as some warriors without honor do with Ekhal. It wasn’t like that and you do him a dishonor by thinking it.”

“How was it then?” Obahn exploded, face twisting in fury. “Are you saying that you took the oath of Ekhal with a man who never intended to honor it? Are you telling me that Sael Ruon, no man’s child and every man’s bed mate, chose to be chaste for the rest of his life?”

Jhan glanced at Ahlen. He was fully awake now, digesting what Obahn and Sael were saying, slowly working it out in his head and beginning to understand. She saw a disgust that matched Obahn’s grow on his face and a fearful wariness creep into his eyes. More of Ahlen’s innocence was being lost, Jhan knew, and marveled that he could so quickly hate what Sael was and still be completely indifferent to what she was. It was her appearance of being a woman, she knew. Sael’s shared manhood was far more threatening to Ahlen.

Sael was getting more than he bargained for. Jhan could tell by his voice. He might have wanted only to embarrass Obahn, though why, Jhan couldn’t guess. Obahn must have realized it as well and was determined to turn the tables on Sael. Sael tried to retreat. “It isn’t good to discuss such things in front of the others. I am sworn to you. I will honor that oath as I honored it with your son.”

“Why come to me now?” Obahn demanded. He spat aside and it hissed into the flames of the brazier. “You forced me to take your oath as Ekhal. You knew that I would never call for you to honor that oath. If my son wasn’t Ekhal, and what you swore was to be chaste, then why is that chastity a burden to you now that you are with me?”

Sael rubbed at his eyes and let out a long breath. “You forced me to swear the oath of Bhakali, though I was training to be a healer. You wished to save yourself disgrace and still have me accompany you on your journey. Forcing you to swear Ekhal was my revenge. Chastity is a small price to pay.”

Obahn surged to his feet, hand grabbing for his sword. “Your oaths are the root and branch of my grief! It was the oath you swore with my son that estranged us! It was you who made him die thinking his father hated him!”

Sael straightened slowly, a hand on his sword hilt as well. “I wished for a lodge. Hagen gave me his,” he replied in a dead tone. “We were friends.”

The red scars on Obahn’s face stood out like streaks of blood and his eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets. “Enough! You will never ask keshun of me again! Why you even thought that I would-”

Sael seemed to shrink within himself. “I must offer. We are sworn.”

Obahn showed his teeth and it wasn’t in a smile. “You may have made me swear Ekhal with you

out of revenge, but you were wondering all this time whether I would really call upon that oath! You asked keshun to shame me before these others, but also to quiet your fears. Keep on wondering, Sael Ruon, I will not ease those fears.”

Obahn took Zerain’s hand and led her away to a corner of the tent. They lay down together, probably for more than warmth, Jhan thought sourly. Sael stared after them bitterly and then he marched out of the tent to attend to his watch. That left Jhan with Ahlen. She glanced at his troubled face and then rolled up into her blankets after putting aside her bowl of stew. She tried to turn her shoulder to him and make it clear that she didn’t want to talk, but Ahlen was too upset to care.

“He- Sael- is the one my father warned me about... thekling,” Ahlen said in a low, tight voice. Fear crept into that tone. “I’ve been alone with him. He could have- anything could have happened! He’s looked at me... I didn’t understand those looks. What if he-”

“Ahlen!” Jhan interrupted harshly. “Go to sleep! I’m exhausted. Sael isn’t going to do anything to you. He’s vowed to Obahn. He’s chaste. Weren’t you listening?”

“Yes, I was listening!” Ahlen retorted, angry that she was shrugging off his fears. “But how do I know how honorable he is?”

“He’s had me alone enough times,” Jhan reminded him, wearily trying to reason with him. “I was even naked... He never tried to do anything.”

“But-But you’re... He wouldn’t be interested in you,” Ahlen finally finished.

“Thanks!” Jhan growled and tried to pull a fur over her ears. Ahlen reached out tentatively and pulled it back.

“What if he comes in while I’m sleeping?”

Jhan sighed. “I can’t see Sael trying to rape you in a tent full of witnesses. Of course, after what happened to me, I think it would be just what you deserve. Don’t cry out to me for help.”

That shocked Ahlen and left him speechless, but, as Jhan tried to sleep, Ahlen’s fearful tossing and turning made it elusive. It was several, long hours before he finally drifted off and Jhan was able to sleep herself.

“This is the one, Tagara,” a dream voice said, tickling Jhan’s ear. Jhan grumbled in her sleep and tried to ignore it.

“Yes, she is small enough, Togo,” said another, feminine voice.

“Maybe too small and too troubled,” a guttural voice interjected.

“Hush, Minyah,” the feminine voice chided. “That is why we chose the other as well. He will help

her free Selaya and us as well."

"Shall we take them now?" The first voice sounded eager.

"No, be patient," the feminine voice urged. "They will come to us soon enough."

"Wake up Jhan. We must be going."

"You wake Jhan. I don't want to lose my head."

Jhan started awake, sitting up to confront who ever might have been foolish enough to try and touch her. She saw Sael standing a foot away and Ahlen sitting closer, still in his blankets and looking irritable. Everything had already been packed and taken outside. Someone, probably Zerain, was tugging at the tent pegs as if she intended to wrap them all in it.

"There," Ahlen grumbled in satisfaction as he slowly rose.

Sael grunted and walked out of the tent, distant in his scarves and black clothes. Ahlen stared after him with narrowed eyes, saying to Jhan, "I don't know how you could have slept through all of that."

"All of what?" Jhan replied around a yawn, feeling miserable. She stood reluctantly, letting her blankets slide off, and gasped in shock when she discovered that the tent was freezing. Zerain had already taken out the braziers and the tent flaps were wide open.

Ahlen reached down and retrieved a fur. He threw it about Jhan's shoulders. When she had grasped it tightly about her, he crouched to roll up the rest of the bedding. "I spent all night thinking," he finally said.

"I know," Jhan retorted sourly. "Your tossing and turning kept me up."

"I was considering leaving Obahn and his people," Ahlen continued impatiently.

"You mean Sael, don't you?"

"Particularly him, yes," Ahlen admitted.

"It wouldn't be the first stupid thing you've done."

Ahlen looked up at Jhan for a long minute, either trying to hold his temper or considering how to continue in the face of her insult. Finally, he replied evenly, "I asked Obahn why he was traveling to the Sun God. I thought that if I knew, it would decide what course I would take."

"I thought he wouldn't tell you," Jhan recalled.

"He did this time. I suppose he knows us better." Ahlen straightened with the rolled bedding in his arms, looking down at Jhan intently. "He told me that he was going to ask Tsarianna to call up the shade of his dead son, Hagen. The boy died of a fever when he and Obahn were very angry with one

another. Obahn wishes to apologize, to make peace with Hagen's spirit."

"Obahn expects to find a real god where we're going?" Jhan was incredulous. "You at least expect to have to deal with priests! I can't believe Obahn is even more superstitious than you are! It just doesn't seem right. He must be playing some game..."

"I didn't consider that. The other things he said were more interesting to me," Ahlen continued. "He said that Sael wants to join Hagen's spirit in death. If the Sun God grants Obahn's petition, he intends to- to commit suicide as soon as Hagen's spirit materializes."

Jhan was amazed and sickened. "That's ridiculous! No, it's horrifying. Maybe we should leave. If they're that crazy-"

"You don't understand!" Ahlen interrupted. "Those were all very good reasons for staying. Obahn isn't going to the desert for frivolous reasons. He won't turn aside. I can trust him as a guard and a guide. Sael still disturbs me, but now I know that I'm protected against his perversion. He longs for a dead man and he's sworn to Obahn. Obahn has assured me that breaking that oath merits death."

Jhan shook her head and rubbed at her eyes. "I must have been tired to sleep through that and breakfast." Her stomach growled and she added plaintively, "Don't I get anything to eat?"

Ahlen handed Jhan a few grain cakes that he had set aside for her, and turned to leave the tent with his burden of blankets and furs. Jhan nibbled on the cakes awkwardly as she tried to keep the fur about her and follow Ahlen. Zerain was just outside. She muttered something insulting under her breath, as she brought the tent down with a practiced flick of her wrist and then began folding it.

There was a stiff wind. Jhan finished her breakfast, huddling with her back to the wind, as Ahlen packed the baku and then brought them forward. The imala were restless, not liking the weather and more nervous than the sturdy baku. Sael had his hands full keeping them in order, his coat and scarves flying as he turned sharply, this way and that, to get them saddled and loaded with their baggage. Obahn stood on a slight rise of rock, staring out towards the mist covered mountains as if planning strategies. Ixien was pacing, uncharacteristically showing his impatience.

Jhan found herself staring at the snow capped mountains as well. If the cold alone didn't kill her, she thought bleakly, then, if what Sael suspected was true, thieves might. The journey was just beginning. Already she had survived death a handful of times. Fear, abuse, and the torturous trail were taking their toll on her; paring down her body and her spirit. What would be left of her if she managed to live through it and return to Kile? Would he still see the woman he loved?

Jhan pressed her cold hands against the spare bones of her face. The cold was devouring her flesh, despite her best efforts to eat enough to thwart it. When she frowned, she felt a line crease between her brows, deep and brooding, and a pinch to the corners of her mouth from keeping her lips closed on the

screams she wanted to utter. When she lowered her hands, and clasped them tightly together, she felt more certain than ever that she wouldn't have to worry about what Kile would think; her body wasn't going to survive the mountains.

"Jhan?"

Jhan turned and took the reins that Ahlen handed her. She could have done any number of things just then. She remembered her promise to Ahlen, that she would kill him if she ever thought that she wouldn't survive the journey. Looking into Ahlen's eyes, Jhan couldn't find the will to carry out that threat. She hated Ahlen, but, strangely, not enough to kill. Failing that, she wondered; why not just refuse to go a step further? Why not sit and let the cold have her? Why bother with the hard climb to the top of a mountain when she knew that she was going to die there?

Ahlen was still meeting her eyes, maybe understanding that she was losing her nerve and falling prey to utter despair. "I will see you safe," he promised, but it was hollow and he knew it.

Jhan tightened her hand on the reins of the baku. "I know I'm not going to make it," she said at last, to herself more than Ahlen, "but I'm too angry and stubborn to give up. That would be too much like letting you win."

"I'll give you all of my extra clothes," Ahlen told her anxiously, ignoring her verbal attack. "I was born in the mountains, remember? I don't feel the cold like other people."

"It won't matter," Jhan assured him, "but you can do what you like. I'm just the victim, remember?"

Jhan mounted the baku, pulled her hood down around her ears, and wrapped her face in her scarf. Hugging the fur about her, she still felt as if she were standing in ice water. Ahlen chose not to reply to her, knowing there wasn't anything he could say. From the look on his face, Jhan knew that he was thinking the same thing that she was, that he was taking her to her death. Still, there was a set to his shoulders that spoke of his higher authority. He was sidestepping responsibility and guilt by laying the blame on his Goddess.

"We will reach the mountains by mid-afternoon, if we keep a steady pace," Obahn assured them. He mounted his imala. He didn't need to say that, anyone not keeping that pace, would be left behind, but it was implicit in his grim, gold eyes and the hard set of his mouth. "Once we reach the mountains," Obahn continued, "we must all be alert. We must move quickly, not stopping to rest until nightfall. The pass is short, three days, but treacherous if the weather should turn against us."

Sael took the rear guard behind Jhan. Ahlen rode before her with Ixien keeping pace on the pack baku beside him. Zerain trailed behind Obahn and he took the point, separating himself by several yards. Jhan gritted her teeth as they began a bone jarring trot. The baku, used to being tied rump to

rump with leads, were anxious and hard mouthed about being separated. Jhan fought with her contentious baku, cursing Ahlen for not allowing the leads. He wasn't sure of her temper or her mind, she knew, and didn't trust her enough to be so close to her deadly hands.

When they reached the skirt of the mountains, Jhan was relieved when the loose stones and cracked, narrow trail forced them to slow down. The incline of the trail, however, and its narrow confines, soon had Jhan gritting her teeth in misery again. The wind whipped down the trail from the mountain tops and she felt her heart slow and beat sluggishly to keep from turning into a block of ice. Sael heard her gasping and saw her huddle down close to the warmth of the baku.

"Obahn's warrior," Sael said deprecatingly and knitted an eyebrow at her. "Little bird bones and hardly any flesh to cover them. This will be hard for you, I think, and maybe impossible."

"You're angry," Jhan surmised acidly, "and you're acting as if I'm trying to be something I'm not. I don't think I've pretended to be anything but a frightened, weak woman since we met. If you want to be angry, then go bother Obahn or Ahlen. Obahn's the one who keeps calling you names and Ahlen's the one who hates you for being a thekling. Oh, sorry; an Ekhal."

Sael scowled and hunched his shoulders. "I understand Obahn. He only speaks the truth. I'm not a warrior and I don't have the strength and the heart a man should have. Your Lord Ahlen... I understand him as well. I'm used to men hating me for what I am; even fearing me. You, I don't understand, and that is what makes me angry."

"I'm not a mystery," Jhan growled back, turning her head towards him to keep the wind from lashing into her eyes. "What you see is what I am."

"Is it?" Sael was skeptical. He had to raise his voice to be heard, but there wasn't any fear of the others hearing. Jhan was a few yards behind Ahlen and Sael was almost riding on her baku's rump. "What do I see? Undress you and you're a beautiful woman. Look closer and you're a man. Dressed, you look tiny and weak, yet when confronted, you strike like a warrior. You stand before prince and warrior and speak your mind, yet you tremble, cry, and whine like a woman from dawn until dusk. You are contradiction itself and I don't understand you."

"Why does that make you angry?" Jhan wondered tightly. "Is it that Obahn tells you to be more like me; someone so obviously flawed?"

"That would be the half of it," Sael acknowledged. "The other is that you are so obviously highly skilled and yet, you are so afraid."

"Cowardly, you really want to say, am I right?" Jhan corrected.

"I did not say it," Sael retorted quickly, but he looked away too.

"I'll say it for you then," Jhan said with a shrug of indifference. "I am a coward. My temper makes

me seem brave. It stops a part of my brain that wants to run and hide, and makes me do outrageous things. When you're like me Sael, so very small and weak, you tend to feel very close to death. So close in fact, that it often doesn't seem far enough away to bother trying to avoid it. So, I get angry. I stand up in front of Obahn and shout and dare. I talk to my kidnapper as if I actually had the power to argue with him. I ride my baku up a mountain at the beginning of winter. I trade words with you, a man who could slit my throat, I think, and not worry about it too much afterwards. There is simply a point where it doesn't matter, Sael, and I reached that point some time ago."

"May I ask?" Sael was still averting his eyes and his tone took on a hint of the ritualistic.

"Go ahead," Jhan replied. "Maybe, if we keep talking, I won't notice that I'm freezing to death."

"How did it happen, that you became Ikhil?"

Jhan sucked in a cold breath. "That's a long story. Do you think we're friends, that you feel comfortable asking me that?"

Sael didn't reply and Jhan tried to reason it out herself. Finally, she said, "I've been told that I bring out the worst in people. I make them crazy with my contradictions and my temper. You're not the first person who wanted to understand me, but I would like to know why."

"I see in you something that I want in myself; an edge," Sael managed uncomfortably. "We say that those who aren't afraid to look into the eyes of the Goddess of Death are true warriors. You not only look. You stare. You stare and you ride to meet Her as if you didn't have any choice but to confront Her on your feet, not cowering back by our last camp."

So, Sael had seen her hesitation there as well, Jhan realized. She swallowed and pressed her chapped lips together. It took her a moment to gather her thoughts and then she sighed. "I don't have the cold bloodedness to kill every one of you," she said intently, wanting him to know that part of her so that he would give her peace. "I guess that's one of the choices you were talking about. Lacking that, I find myself unable to stop from being dragged up this mountain by my kidnapper. What you call staring into the eyes of death, is simply resignation."

Jhan's mouth quirked in a self-deprecating smile that was full of pain. She continued, "Or maybe it's a stubbornness that will never concede, despite all the odds to the contrary?" She gave Sael a sharp look, suddenly understanding. "Are you looking for the bravery to face your Goddess of Death, Sael? Is that what this conversation is all about?"

"Sael blinked as if he feared to cry. "You know." It wasn't a question.

"Ahlen asked Obahn about it and Ahlen told me," Jhan admitted. "Take it from me, Sael, suicide isn't the answer. I've tried it enough times. It seems sweet, a rest of some sort or an escape, but it isn't really any of those things. When you realize what you'll lose, birds singing in Spring, the colors of a

sunrise, flowers pushing up through the snow after Winter, a child's smile- well, I suppose you would just call that woman's weakness, but that's worth any amount of torture or pain to me, Sael. Maybe that's where my stubbornness comes from. My body wants me to give up. It begs, cries, and fears pain. My mind reminds me that there's something beyond the pain. So far, it's been the stronger."

"I don't seek rest or escape from pain," Sael replied sternly. "I seek my Lord Hagen. It's him I wish to die for- to join in death."

"Why?" Jhan was amazed.

The light skin around Sael's eyes reddened, but he'd asked her to be open with him and he couldn't be any less. The words came out choked, almost unclear in his embarrassment. "Because I loved- love him."

"That's quite an admission for one of your people, isn't it?" Jhan mused, and then bitterly, "My story doesn't come cheap. It's very painful. Tell me more about yourself and I'll consider it repayment."

"We are not lodge mates," Sael growled, rejecting the idea as offensive. "You are Ikhil and I am sworn to Obahn. Men do not share such confidences."

Jhan was almost enjoying being cruel to him. "You've just asked me a very personal question, Sael. I think I should be the offended one."

Sael worked over that, but it seemed the knowledge he wanted was worth more to him than custom or his own reluctance. He cleared his throat and began, but Jhan quickly realized that he was saying as little as possible. "I was learning the hunt from older Ekhal. We are sometimes allowed to shadow the warriors and their Bhakali. The Heir, Lord Hagen, was learning to hunt as well. We spooked a haynuk. It was old, with very large horns. I took chase alongside Hagen. Our imala were sure footed and we outdistanced the others in the forest. Hagen's imala tripped up on a root and threw Hagen before the haynuk. It charged him and I... I was in time to spear the beast clean through the heart."

"So, you saved the life of Obahn's son," Jhan prodded, demanding more. "You'd think he'd treat you better."

Sael's eyes went very dark. "Hagen owed me a life debt and asked what I wished for repayment. I told him it was only my duty and that, being Ekhal, I was beneath the custom where a prince's son was concerned. He didn't leave it at that. He pursued me to the Ekhal lodge, even going inside! Such a thing is shameful for a warrior. He demanded to repay me. He said that his honor was at stake. He was so intense, so very handsome, and so full of youth. I loved him from that moment."

Sael didn't seem inclined to continue. Jhan prompted again, impatient to know the depths of this man. "But, he died."

Sael nodded. "He refused to forget the debt. As repayment, he gave me what I had always wanted. In the face of his father and all the warriors, Hagen took the oath of Ekhal with me, even though he wasn't one. He took me into his lodge among his wives and we were friends. I felt I had a home, a place at last. Obahn took it badly, of course. He and Hagen exchanged words and then spoke not at all for some time. When Hagen broke with custom to make me his sworn clan brother, I thought Obahn would either kill Hagen or me." Sael shook his head as if at some harsh pain. "Hagen stopped all the fighting by dying of an illness. I was tossed out of his lodge at once, but Obahn was there to take me up again."

"And now he's going to the Sun God to apologize to his son's ghost?" Jhan wasn't sympathetic. "Why would he take you? Why let you join his dead son when he didn't want you two together in life?"

"Atonement?" Sael replied hollowly, but he clearly didn't believe it.

"You're not willing to tell me everything," Jhan accused, but his obvious emotional agony was leaving a bitter taste in Jhan's mouth. Revenge, even where words were concerned, wasn't going to make her situation any better. It only made someone else join her in her misery.

"What good does it do to tell you more?" Sael was deep in his own pain and careless of Jhan's. He was clearly alluding to the fact that Jhan wasn't going to make it over the mountains and that, what he wanted to know, was more worthwhile since he would.

"How can you expect me-" Jhan began to shout back, but Sael spoke over her, just as angry.

"Always you talk," Sael exploded. "You cry like the woman you claim to be, facing this challenge of honor crawling on your belly! I only asked you to share some wisdom with me, but instead you seek to shame me, to cause me to speak of what should only be my business!"

"I cry, because I have the right to!" Jhan bit back in protest. "The cold may be going to kill me, but I intend to point out to people what bastards they are, and that what they're doing is hurting me horribly, until my last breath! That you should complain-! You're going to be as much to blame as Ahlen if I die! You're standing by and watching it happen! I think, asking for a few answers from you, hardly matches the shame of treating me as if I were Ahlen's pack baku, and allowing him to do whatever he wants with me!"

"You belong to him just as I belong to Obahn," Sael explained, a tick along his eye and his sharply knitted eyebrows the only display of his outrage not hidden by his scarf. "Obahn can order me to jump off of this mountain and, because he has my oath, I would have to do it. I would no more expect you to stop or help me than you should expect me to help or stop you."

"That must seem completely logical to you," Jhan hissed, turning her face away so that the wind

stung it. After a long minute, she firmed her shoulders and then faced him again, eyes cold. She only wanted to end the conversation now. Horror, she thought, would be as good a way as any to accomplish it and make Sael leave her alone. “Do you really want to know what happened to me or do you just want to know why I’m still alive afterwards?”

Sael took great care in asking his question, wanting an answer that cut to the heart of his own problem. “You found great courage, courage to face death and to win.”

“You don’t want to win,” Jhan pointed out.

“I do,” Sael insisted. “What we consider winning are different things, though. It is your daring, I want, your fearlessness with it.”

Jhan motioned up ahead to Obahn. “This body used to be just like Obahn’s. It used to be someone to be feared and respected. A man called Dagara Ku Ni took it, for revenge, and made it into this. “

Jhan touched her breast convulsively, hand shaking as she continued harshly. “I don’t remember being Jhanian Kevelt. I only know what others have told me about him. What I do remember is being this, Jhan, and being tortured, day in and day out, for the amusement of a palace of criminals and sadists. Dagara was an artist of torture. When he realized that his tricks were getting stale, he delved deep within me and found out my one desire; to be a woman. He used it for my final torture, cutting me, healing me with his Power, and leaving me this shadow body; this wisp of air and darkness mimicking womanhood. It is contradiction. With one blow, I could kill you. With one negligent sweep of your hand, you could snap any bone in my body or even kill me easily.”

Sael was horrified. “Like Obahn?” he repeated in disbelief.

“Like Obahn,” Jhan insisted, “I can’t explain it so that you can understand, but I was never Jhanian Kevelt. I have always been a woman. When I awoke and found myself a man, I would have done anything to change it. What Dagara did to me still gives me nightmares, but it is what I wanted when all the horror is pushed aside. It actually made it easier to live afterwards. Courage had nothing to do with it, or daring. Love, maybe. My husband and my friends helped me want to live. They were my strength when even my stubbornness wasn’t enough.”

Jhan saw disgust in Sael’s eyes. “How could a man marry you, knowing what had been done to you? Was he Ekhal?”

Jhan scowled. “No, he wasn’t! I told you and, well, you’ve seen for yourself. I’m a woman where it counts. Love is strong enough to reach across any boundary, Sael, even that one. You should know that better than me!”

Sael was still confused, but not as horrified as Jhan would have wished. He ended the conversation, saying determinedly, “Love gave you your courage. That is the only thing that is plain.

Perhaps mine will be enough to aide me when the time comes.”

Sael pulled his imala up sharply to put distance between them, as if he couldn’t deal with their stark candor any longer. Their conversation left Jhan just as disturbed. Her thoughts were on Kile now and not on her chances of survival or her dark memories of Dagara Ku Ni.

Jhan traced the memory of Kile’s face in her thoughts and felt her heart throb, painfully, as she recalled the light in his blue eyes and the way his mouth would lift when he grinned at her. Jhan recalled waking up on lazy spring days to find him entangled in white sheets, sun glowing on his long, hard body; his gold curls tumbled all about his strong face.

Kile’s big arms were safety and his love was a haven. The thought of never feeling either of them again made Jhan groan and bite her lip. She’d spoken the truth better than she’d known. It was her love of Kile that was making her go on, the slim hope of returning to him that was making her grip her baku and steal its warmth; hoping to survive long enough to do just that. Courage had nothing to do with it.

Jhan’s baku trudged up the mountain path sure footedly, but it grew as tired of the wind in its face as Jhan. Taking the bit, it gave a start of speed and caught up with Ahlen and Ixien, lowering its nose behind their baku’s rumps to escape the cold. Ixien didn’t give any notice of Jhan’s presence, but Ahlen glanced back briefly in concern.

“Are you well?” Ahlen called back to Jhan.

“No, of course I’m not!” Jhan returned irritably, having been shaken out of her thoughts by the baku’s sudden, bone jarring trot.

Ahlen almost looked ready to ask Ixien to help Jhan, even opening his mouth, but he closed it in the next instant, knowing it would be futile. Ixien was having as much trouble with the cold as everyone else. He had wrapped a blanket about himself. His inner warmth wasn’t proof against the biting wind that whipped against him. His face was buried and his eyes mere slits over the edge of the blanket.

“You should put on more of my clothes,” Ahlen said to Jhan as he leaned over to rummage in the pack baku’s baggage. He pulled out a long, thick sweater and then leaned far back to hand it to Jhan. She took it and lowered her fur to put it over the two sweaters and the cloak she was already wearing. Wrapping her fur about her again, she tried to leave as little skin as possible bare to the weather.

“It’s not going to matter,” Jhan said as she tried to warm herself up again.

“What?”

“Pile all the clothes on me you want, but it’s my body that has to keep me warm underneath it all.”

Ahlen frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s the way Dagara made me,” Jhan explained bleakly. “I’m small and light. He didn’t want any

fat getting in the way. He allowed some on hip and breast, but that was only for aesthetics. Muscle was more important.”

Ahlen shivered in disgust. “That he had the ability to do such things was monstrous!”

Jhan shrugged. “The point is, that cold burns fat fast and furious. I can’t eat enough to keep up. It’s too much like bailing a boat with a big hole in it during a storm.”

“I don’t know anything about boats,” Ahlen replied.

“Never mind!” Jhan wrapped her scarf about her face more tightly, leaving only her eyes exposed. Ahlen looked troubled, but his gaze soon returned to the person he’d been studying when Jhan had first approached; Zerain.

Ahlen’s face was stung red by the cold, but Jhan could see another kind of flush there as well. Ahlen’s jaw tightened and released to whatever inner thoughts were disturbing him. Zerain was only showing Ahlen her back, but her full scarf was plastered to her body by the wind and there was a feminine outline to see.

“She is Obahn’s wife,” Jhan reminded him, wanting a reaction and getting one. It confirmed her fears. Ahlen was beginning to know that he was a man. The innocent boy who had kidnapped her, and promised to guard her virtue, was gone at last. The time had come to see what the man, Ahlen, was going to be like.

Ahlen was nervous, embarrassed. “I said nothing!”

“You don’t need to,” Jhan replied, goading him. “Have you seen under her veil?”

“No!” Ahlen shifted in his saddle uncomfortably and then asked, “Have you?”

“No,” Jhan admitted. “She might be ugly, though I think Obahn is far too proud to marry someone like that. They certainly didn’t marry for love.”

“No,” Ahlen agreed distantly, eyes going back to Zerain’s tantalizing outline. “He treats her harshly; disrespectfully.”

Jhan went angry and sour. “What’s new about that?”

“My people don’t treat women like that!” Ahlen snapped back. “They are the bearers of life. They risk themselves to give us sons. They keep our homes and raise those children. How could we not have respect and honor for them?”

“Your father didn’t give much respect or honor to your sister,” Jhan pointed out.

Ahlen winced. “No, he didn’t, but he thought that it was necessary. Without sons to till the fields, there couldn’t be homes, wives, and families. He told me that Ajha went willingly.”

“How old was she?” Jhan wondered.

“Twelve.”

“And she made a decision like that, at twelve?” Jhan shook her head sharply. “I don’t think anyone that young could know what they were doing.”

Ahlen looked back at her, forgetting Zerain. The pain in his eyes was overwhelming and Jhan knew that she had made a mistake. Her anger had only reinforced Ahlen’s determination for his quest. “I didn’t think so either. That’s why I’m doing this, Jhan. She didn’t know. She couldn’t have. It wasn’t right, to trade her life for mine as if she meant nothing.”

Black despair raked across Jhan’s mind and she bowed her head, not wanting to see Ahlen’s pain any longer. She had wanted to hurt him, make him feel a fool. Once again, her need for the only paltry revenge she could exact had backfired. Jhan had only herself to blame.

CHAPTER SEVEN

(Black Birds)

They stopped for the night under a shelf of rock that had a natural wall curving in a semi circle. It protected them from the wind and gave their tent a firm foothold against any sudden storms. Jhan left everything to Ahlen and huddled so close to Zerain that she interfered with the woman lighting the braziers. Zerain finally pushed her roughly aside with a muttered oath, but Jhan was back at once as the first coals caught and burned warmly. She almost put her hands into the flames, jerking off her gloves with her chattering teeth. For a long while, she was oblivious to anything but the sizzling ache of her body, as it slowly defrosted, and the dragging pulse of her laboring heart.

Zerain used a wooden bowl to mix flour and water for her flat bread. She tossed oil onto the back of a pan with a practiced flick of fingers and heated it on the brazier Jhan was huddling near. Once it was sizzling, she patted a flat round of dough and tossed it onto the pan to fry. It did so quickly, and then Zerain dared burned fingers to flip the flat bread over to fry on the opposite side. Jhan watched her make one after another with one hand, while her free hand made a thick soup in a kettle. Cutting squares of dried vegetables pressed in some sort of fat, she warmed these in a pan.

While, she served food to the hungry men all about her, Zerain seemed serene and competent; in her element. When she served Jhan last, the proud tilt of head and her quick motions made up for her lack of features. They said, as plainly as words that Zerain had a place and it was as a prince’s wife. Jhan was nothing; a nobody huddling at her hearth side. It was hard to believe that so much could be

conveyed by so little, but Zerain managed it. It was a clear warning and a snub at the same time; a hint that she was disturbed by Obahn's interest in Jhan, yet confident that she was woman enough to keep it only interest.

Jhan bore with Zerain, ignored her even, as she concentrated on eating everything within reach, keeping it down, and trying to absorb as much warmth as the brazier would allow. When the tent finally began to warm up from the press of bodies, and the baku and imala tethered along its walls, Jhan was able to part with the brazier and crawl under furs and blankets. She hid her head under them as she tried to keep the warmth that she had gathered.

"The night is black," Obahn muttered. "The wind is fierce and the cold deadly. Even a thief wouldn't be foolish to walk these narrow trails in such weather. I won't command a watch."

"My Lord," Sael's voice was relieved.

Bodies moved and Obahn called to Zerain. Jhan heard him speaking to her as they moved away to their bed. When silence fell, Jhan began to drift into sleep, exhausted.

"Let the Ikhil go," Jhan heard Sael say close by in a low voice. "Jhan will die otherwise. What good will that be to you?"

"I don't wish you to speak to me, thekling," Ahlen's voice replied, edged with low grade fear and disgust. "Jhan is my business. I intend to make sure that she lives."

"She?" Sael echoed acidly. "You don't even know what he is, if you say that."

"I know. It is hard to remember it."

"What good is he to you?" Sael persisted.

"Jhan has saved my life. There was a thief he defeated. He helped me find you. Even with Ixien's help, I know that I wouldn't have made it this far without your Lord Obahn's good graces."

"He doesn't have any good graces and you should remember that well, boy," Sael bit back. "He has his reasons, never fear... or maybe you should."

"Jhan said the same."

"Then he has some wisdom," Sael paused and then said intently, "What hold do you have over him? Why doesn't he just snap your neck and return to where ever he came from?"

"I thought that it was against your custom to ask questions?" Ahlen growled and it sounded like he was wrapping up in blankets, preparing to turn his back on Sael and end the conversation.

"You'll find, if you continue with us, that I'm not very good at keeping custom."

"Jhan doesn't dare kill me, if he wants to go on living. That's all you need to know, thekling," Ahlen snapped. "As for why I'm doing it. He knows why and he knows why I can't let him go." Ahlen became impatient. "I don't want him to die! I wish none of this had been necessary! It's my Goddess I

have to answer to, not you.”

“A goddess?” Sael wasn’t skeptical. He sounded superstitious and he became swiftly silent.

Jhan was glad of the silence. She didn’t care what Sael thought and certainly didn’t want to hear her tragedy retold. She closed her ears and mind to it and sought sleep with single minded intensity.

Jhan felt little shocks of cold on her eyelids, on her cheeks, on her mouth. She opened her eyes and saw Kile looking down at her. He kissed her mouth again with a frustrated intensity, but his lips were passing through her and she started up at the unnerving vision of his face sinking into hers.

Kile was huddled inside of a very small, hide tent filled with furs and a little iron stove that glowed red with banked coals. Jhan was lying beside him. She should have been warm, but she felt nothing, her body obviously walking in dreams again. Realizing this, she groaned in pain and turned away.

“Don’t go!” Kile begged. “I’m not asleep this time. I know it! I’ve been sitting up, thinking.”

“I’m the one that’s dreaming,” Jhan hissed, tears trailing down the dream image of her face. “I keep torturing myself with this! It has to stop!”

“Jhan!” Kile begged, almost weeping himself. “This isn’t a dream! I-I don’t have that much imagination!” he laughed, choking, almost hysterical. “You know me. Thick headed. Single minded. I realized in Sarvoy after- after Caliya. I know I can’t dream something this colorful!”

“I can,” Jhan said with a shiver. “Usually, it’s nightmares. I suppose this can count as one, though.”

“It must have something to do with your Power,” Kile reasoned. “You’re bringing yourself to me somehow. I can’t really explain it, or even understand it, but it must be true.”

Jhan did look at him then, unable to stop herself. He looked worn, she thought, hollow eyed and red with travel in cold weather. His hair was a tangle and he was wearing thick clothing. A bruise colored his forehead. Jhan reached out a hand in concern and sobbed as it passed into him. Jerking it back, she clutched it to herself, feeling unsubstantial.

Kile touched his own forehead, frowning. “I went to Owell, trying to find out if anyone had seen you. A man named Okrin said that his master, Kelmus, had been playing with some pretty boy in his wagon. Later, he’d been found dead and the boy gone. He described you. Your blue eyes again. I knew then, knew I wasn’t going mad.” Kile’s frown deepened. “The man then tried to knock me unconscious, to use me in some sort of game he had outside of town. Luckily, I have a hard head and that man is serving his master in death now.”

“It all sounds so real,” Jhan breathed, but she wasn’t fooled. “It’s good to see you Kile, even if it is

only a dream. It's worth the pain it causes, and the hopelessness."

"It's not a dream," Kile argued desperately. His hands clenched. "I wish I could touch you! At least who ever kidnapped you is treating you well."

That was the proof, Jhan thought. She knew that she was worn to the bone, hair matted, and face streaked with dirt. She was wrapped from head to toe in clothes, blankets, and furs, but here... She looked down at herself. She was wearing a wine red dress, the same one she had been taken in, and she was clean, hair a tumble about her, and skin pale and glowing.

"We are in the mountains," Jhan muttered as if trying to conjure up reality. "I'm freezing to death. I don't even know if I'm going to wake up in the morning. I'm not safe and I'm not being treated well. That's why I'm dreaming this. It's the only way that I can escape them."

"You're in the mountains?" Kile face twisted in misery. "I'm so far behind! I'll never catch up!" He rose in a half crouch and threw open the tent flap. "Jaross!" he shouted. "We have to leave now!"

"I've been humoring you this far, Kile Helarion Dor, but this-" Jaross had stuck an exasperated face into the tent. In an instant, his face transformed from exasperation to shock. "Jhan?"

Jaross was looking right at her, Jhan realized. If this was a dream, why would she want Jaross in it? He'd never been more than an irritating friend to her. "Caliya didn't see me," Jhan said numbly, trying to reason with herself.

"Maybe you didn't want her to. You do hate her," Kile replied. "It's not a dream, Jhan."

"I can't believe that. I can't! It hurts too much!" Jhan fled them, tent and astonished faces dissolving; turning into a spinning soup of colors and confusion. Jhan couldn't bear the burden of thinking that Kile would be forever following too far behind to help her. Her despair alone would kill her, she thought. It was far better to think herself alone and far better not to rely on anyone but herself to see her through.

"She's blue!" Ahlen's panicked voice cut through Jhan's dream. She awoke, but couldn't manage to open her eyes or do anything other than listen to the voices around her.

"Here, wrap the coals from the braziers and put them around Jhan," Sael ordered, sounding calm and competent.

"They are too cool," Zerain announced, her voice just as cool and unhelpful, "and I will not light more. We have just enough coals to see us over the mountains. We must not waste them in a useless attempt to save an Ikhil."

"She is right," Obahn agreed. "Using up our coals would only keep the Ikhil alive until we broke

camp, then the cold would have it again. The Ikhil has always been weak and unfit. Such a creature was never meant to live.”

“No!” Ahlen protested, shocked. “You can’t mean that!”

“I do,” Obahn retorted. “Prolonging the inevitable is only cruelty and a waste of our supplies. Sael, take Jhan outside and let the cold end the Ikhil’s suffering.”

“I- It isn’t an honorable way to die,” Sael objected. “My Lord-”

Obahn was quick to cut him off with a searing challenge. “Use your sword on Jhan then and finish it now, if you think it is more deserving of a warrior’s death.” There was a pause, and then a harsh laugh. “Are you going to use your knife, Sael Ruon? I think the Ikhil has shown enough bravery that it shouldn’t be treated like a lame imala! Are you afraid to dirty your sword?”

“No.” Sael was tense, but defiant. “I think Jhan has been brave enough that he merits a chance at surviving this.”

“Then who is the knife for?” Obahn snarled.

“To cut strips of leather,” Sael replied. “I will tie Jhan onto his baku. He will not trouble our journey and he may live or die as he can.”

“Why?” Obahn demanded.

“Why, my Lord?”

“The death sign is in the Ikhil’s face,” Obahn continued. “What is Jhan to you that you refuse to see it?”

Sael was well aware of his danger. Obahn was questioning his oath now. Sael’s reply was careful. “You’ve told me that Jhan is an example that I should learn from. I haven’t finished my lessons yet.”

Cryptic, but Obahn was through wasting time in argument and was certainly not going to waste time questioning Sael’s meaning. He took it at face value instead, grunting his displeasure and muttering a curse. “We can’t wait any longer. We must break camp. I need your sword arm free, Sael. Let the Ikhil freeze to death on the back of a baku, or in the snow outside our tent, so long as you are not involved in it any longer.”

Jhan felt herself lifted. Someone, perhaps Sael, carried her out of the tent. The cold hit her like a wall, savaging away what little warmth she had. She gasped in shock, the world spinning. She thought that she had lost consciousness again, but the voices around her, shimmering syllables at first, solidified again into recognizable words. There was another argument going on. The cold slipped fingers under all of Jhan’s clothes and tried to steal her life as quick as a thief in the night.

“I will take her.” That voice sliced through all the rest, distinct and clear. Jhan didn’t recognize it.

Jhan was lifted up. She wanted to struggle, imagining herself being given up to a stranger, but her

body was as unresponsive as if it were already dead. Arms went about her and hands slid under her clothes. Jhan sobbed weakly as those hands softly moved over her breasts and then pressed themselves against her breastbone.

The warmth started slowly, like thousands of electric shocks; not painful, but tingling all along Jhan's skin. The hands were the warmest, placed over her struggling heart. When that warmth reached all the way to her fingertips and to her toes inside of her two layers of socks, Jhan groaned in pleasure, feeling as if she were being immersed in a hot bath. Death retreated reluctantly, with a promise to return, as Jhan began to feel like flesh and blood again.

Jhan's mind drifted amidst her pleasure, touching unexpectedly on her dream of Kile. She lingered over it, wondering at the way her mind had woven such a masterful dream to keep herself from knowing that she was dying. It had seemed so real; Kile so much Kile and Jaross... very much Jaross. Kile had said everything that she had longed to hear. Rescue was on the way. He still loved her. He was faithfully pursuing her on the slimmest of leads because of that love. Jaross, that was stranger, and harder to explain, but she knew that dreams rarely had rhyme or reason.

Jhan had dreamt stranger when Kile had taken her through the Rhenwall Pass in winter. She had nearly died there too, but it had been that or confront the soldiers of the Dark King on the plain. They had traveled in half days, making numerous camps to warm Jhan up while men broke through the snow to continue. During those stops, Jhan had often been delirious, still suffering the effects of her captivity. Most of her dreams had been of escape; strange, comforting, warm landscapes where she had felt alone and safe.

Often, one dream had intruded on another, and Jhan had found herself confronting nightmare figures from memory. Each time, Kile had seemed to appear in those dreams. Jhan remembered them clearly still. He had held her and chased those nightmares away with the power of his anger and love. That her subconscious would still try to bring him to her rescue in her dreams wasn't so outlandish when she remembered that.

Reality had to be faced, Jhan told herself firmly. It didn't feel as if she were going to die just now, but her problems weren't going to be dreamt away either. Jhan brought her mind back to the here and now with difficulty, forcing herself to think about who held her and how she was being kept warm and alive. Reluctantly, she finally managed to open her eyes.

Jhan found herself in the saddle of her walking baku. Disoriented, she clutched at the saddle horn. Snow drifted all about her and frost and ice were everywhere. The baku's breath steamed and its fur was matted with its own frozen sweat. It plodded, miserable, at the rear of the company.

Ahlen was riding ahead, leading the pack baku. Obahn, Sael, and Zerain were riding ahead of him.

That left... Jhan stiffened and turned her head. Ixien's crystal pale eyes met hers dispassionately. He was shorter than she was, but holding her with surprising strength, his small arms locked about her and his tiny body cushioning her against the jolt and sway of the baku beneath them.

"Get your hands off of me!" Jhan grated, her voice thin, weak, and unable to convey her outrage.

"That would not be wise," Ixien replied evenly. "My heat is all that is between you and death."

It was true. Jhan felt his inhuman heat pulsing and flowing over her. The snow was steaming on them both and the cold wasn't even making Jhan shiver. "How?"

"It is difficult to extend my energies thus," Ixien complained in way of explanation. "I was required to eat quantities of food and to absorb as much light as possible. One is not inexhaustible and the other is not constant."

"Why?" Jhan's asked suspiciously.

"Why?" Ixien echoed.

"I could hear them talking earlier," Jhan told him, her voice quavering unsteadily as she forced it from her parched throat. "They were going to leave me out to die. Isn't that what you wanted?" It felt incredible that she had to remind him of it. Was she so far beneath Ixien's consideration or compassion? Maybe, not being anything like his people, they all were.

"Why did I save you?" Ixien clarified with his maddening blandness. "That is your question?"

"Yes," Jhan seethed.

"You have become of worth," Ixien replied simply. "Ahlen needs you as a voice between himself and Lord Obahn. Without you, we may be left behind. That would be detrimental to my goal."

"I think-" Jhan hesitated as she felt the word haze. She breathed through the moment of disillusionment until the world came into focus once more. She forced herself to continue, wanting to know. "I think you're overestimating my worth to Obahn. I seem to recall that he was telling Sael to run me through with a sword."

"That is when he thought that you were dying," Ixien explained logically. "Now that you are not, and not likely to now that I have you in my care, he will once again show mating interest towards you. He will allow you, Ahlen and I to accompany him because of that."

"Mating interest?" Jhan felt her stomach tighten in nausea. "Did Obahn tell you to leave when he thought that I was dying?"

"No. He needs us until he leaves the mountains," Ixien told her. "We swell his numbers and give the thieves pause. Once that danger has passed, he will not have any use for us. His interest in you will give him reason to keep us with him."

Jhan wanted to throw off Ixien's arms, slide from the baku, or better yet, throw him off.

Fortunately, she wasn't so far gone that she couldn't regain control of her emotions. The mountains were much higher and much colder than the Rhenwall Pass. Without Ixien, death would come swiftly. This wasn't the place for hysterics.

Jhan turned to stare straight ahead of her, body rigid with hatred for the little Caefu. He was so cold and calculating and so totally alien. That she owed her life to him now, made her feel even more ill. "I don't even know why you're going to the Sun God," was, at last, all that she could find to say.

"I was sent by my people," Ixien replied. "I have a task to perform. I must accomplish it. I *will* accomplish it. That is all I will say."

"You haven't said anything!" Jhan lashed back. That was the reason that she hadn't recognized his voice when he had taken her to save her life. Ixien hadn't spoken to anyone for longer than she could recall.

Ahlen heard Jhan's last, accusing shout, and looked back. Seeing that she was awake, he pulled his baku back until she and Ixien came close. Leaning over, he handed Jhan a few grain cakes laced with strips of jerky and a skin of water that had been kept thawed by his baku's belly. When Jhan took them, Ahlen's hand paused before drawing away, as if envious of the heat that surrounded her.

"I won't ask how you are," Ahlen wisely told her. His face was creased with worry and his eyes were full of guilt and helplessness. "You look terrible. Even with the heat, there's a blue tinge around your eyes and mouth. You look bloodless. I think you were close to meeting the gods."

"Close to dying," Jhan stressed hoarsely, strength to even be angry almost beyond her. "Don't try and make it sound pretty."

"I wasn't-" Ahlen sighed, huddling into his coat and scarf. "It's just a saying," he finished lamely.

There was a bitter silence and then Jhan thought to ask, "What about the medicine for the parasites? It's been days now. I would hate to survive the cold just to get eaten alive."

Ahlen looked confused for only a split second, but it was enough for Jhan to realize the horrible truth. "You lied, didn't you?" she shouted it, her weak voice rallying to match her outraged disbelief. "It was all a lie! I knew it! I just knew it! You bastard!"

Jhan wept, long and hard. She ignored everything as her mind closed in, seared by anguish and horror and the knowledge that the truth didn't matter. It was too late to turn back. Even having come this far, and with Ixien's help, the mountains might kill her yet. To try and return alone, unaided, even in high summer, was a mad dream that Jhan didn't even bother contemplating. Ahlen didn't need his parasites to hold on to her. Jhan's life was still dependent on remaining his captive.

"It was the only way," Ahlen was explaining, his voice a distant buzz. "The stories that I heard about you frightened me. I didn't have any idea what sort of person you might really be. I'm sorry for

all the pain that it's caused you... I-" There was a choked sound and a harsh sob. Ahlen was weeping now as well.

Ahlen's guilt was only a background cacophony of noises to Jhan, her mind playing for her all the missed opportunities when she could have simply fled, hurting nobody, and escaping all the suffering that she had endured so far.

"Your people are strange to me," Ixien commented obliquely. "They seem so disordered and prone to their base instincts, always caught up in mating rituals and emotional exercises that cause them to be irrational and non productive. It is a wonder that your people rose to any semblance of society."

Jhan began to turn, a cry of rage ready to spring from her lips, but Sael's sharp command to halt forestalled her. Startled, Jhan fought a way through the blinding cloud of her despair and anger to see Sael wheeling his imala away from a cart buried in the snow. He drew his sword with a clatter of metal against scabbard and his eyes were wide as he rode to Obahn.

"Fresh; one day, maybe," Sael was saying. "It's bandits for certain."

Ahlen was wiping at the tears that were freezing on his cheeks, looking up from his gloved hands to shakily see what Sael was talking about. When the line started up again, with a nervous gait, Jhan saw Ahlen's face as he approached the cart before she did. He went pale and his mouth went slack with horror. It prepared her a little, but not adequately for the butchered bodies tumbled in the remains of the broken cart. They were all men, eyes sunken and faces frozen in shocked expressions; realization of their own deaths.

The sight was like ice water and Jhan began to shake from head to foot. Instantly, she forgot about everything, except the fear that she might not only be attacked and killed, but worse, become the captive of someone else. It was immediate danger that didn't allow for the luxury of wallowing in despair or thoughts of revenge. It had to be faced now.

A black bird flapped lazily by to investigate the bodies, but they were too frozen to interest it for long. When it flapped awkwardly back into the sky, Zerain made a sign in the air. "A bad omen," she said in the stillness.

Obahn looked over at Sael and his words carried back to Jhan easily. "Now we will see how willing you are to use that sword, Ekhal!"

"You doubt my oath?" Sael snarled back.

"I doubt your ability not to be spitted should it come to fighting!" Obahn returned harshly. The scars on his face stood out as he scowled at Sael fiercely. "When the blood spurts from a wound that you have caused, we will see if a woman lives under that scarf or a man!"

"I was born a man!" Sael's hand tightened on the hilt of his unsheathed sword until his knuckles

went white. It was hard to tell, because of his hidden face, whether it was from anger or fear.

Obahn chuckled darkly, maybe guessing the latter. “There is a difference between being born a man, Ekhal, and acting as one.”

“Obahn,” Ahlen interrupted, his voice sounding sickly. He wasn’t ashamed to show that he was afraid. “I’m not a warrior. I was never trained to fight.”

Obahn shot Ahlen a contemptuous look. It was obvious that he didn’t care whether Ahlen lived or died and his words expressed it clearly. “If a warrior comes at you, it will be up to you whether you kill or be killed.”

“I- I only have a knife.” Ahlen gripped it uncertainly. It was a long knife with a sharp edge, but he had used it mainly to cut meat and to repair harnesses.

Zerain pulled out her own knife. “It is my only weapon as well, but I will use it in my Lord’s defense.”

Obahn was pleased by her fierceness. Ahlen was mortified. He continued to grip his knife fearfully, eyes darting wildly all around them in trepidation. Jhan was looking around in fear as well, but she didn’t worry, like Ahlen, about how she was going to defend herself. She could hardly stay upright enough in the saddle to keep her back from touching Ixien’s hated body. In a fight, she knew that, not only would she be less than useless, but she wasn’t even sure if she would be able to muster the will to want to defend her life.

Sael fell back to ride even with Jhan, but it wasn’t because he was worried about her. Instead, he was looking around in agitation. Sael even went so far as to stand in his stirrups, coat fluttering like black wings in the light, cold wind, as he attempted to get a better look at the rises of rock on each side of them. “There could be caves anywhere,” he muttered to himself. “This is a good place for an ambush.”

As if his words had called the bandits to action, they burst from the top of a shelf of rock, jumping down towards them with curved blades slicing the air. They wore white furs from head to foot, in order to hide among the drifts of snow, and their eyes, peeking out of slits in their hoods, were the only part of them visible.

Sael’s imala jumped sideways, startled, and Jhan felt Sael’s leg driven hard into the side of her baku. Sael cried out, swearing, as he reined his imala aside sharply. His beast’s rump came around into Jhan’s baku full force.

Jhan flung herself free of the saddle as her beast stumbled and then fell. Landing hard, but unhurt, Jhan crawled quickly out of her baku’s way as the beast rolled, surged up again, and almost trampled her as it galloped past. Ixien, remarkably, was still clinging to the saddle, but he wasn’t any match for

the baku. Both of them disappeared down the trail in a flurry of rock and snow churned up by the baku's large hooves.

Sitting up in the snow, Jhan felt her head spin and her lungs constrict as the cold rushed in to fill the void left by Ixien's heat. It stung like fire, too much like burning for Jhan to bear. She lurched to her feet and tottered forward, in a stiff legged walk, as she mindlessly sought an escape from the pain.

Sael was shouting again, driving his imala into the bandits fearlessly, Obahn at his side. Swords slashed and bright, red blood sprayed onto the snow while men cried out in pain, death, and challenge. It seemed impossible that two men could hold back so many, but the trail was too narrow for a full assault. Unable to overwhelm their prey, the bandits were forced to squeeze forward and hinder each other, making themselves easy targets.

Zerain sat as still as stone, body straight in the saddle of her nervous imala, as she watched with anxiety clear in every line of her veiled form. Her knife was clutched tightly in one hard fist, as if she longed to ride forward and sink it into an enemy.

Ahlen was on the ground, standing beside Zerain. He must have thought to help defend her, but he was, instead, battling with his baku and the pack baku. Smelling blood and wide eyed at the struggling men, the panicked beasts were attempting to flee after Jhan's baku.

A sword opened Sael's arm from shoulder to wrist before he parried and opened an attacker's throat. Jhan, halfway to Ahlen and Zerain and the trail beyond them, stopped at the sight, sickened. When she saw Sael's knees tighten and his imala lash out with iron shod hooves into a bandits face, she nearly vomited as the dead man took on the semblance of a smashed, red fruit.

Obahn was fighting calmly and expertly, stabbing and slashing as if he were striking wooden targets on a practice field. His eyes were as keen as his blade and his lips were shaped into a smiling snarl of enjoyment. To Jhan, he had always seemed on the verge of turning into a beast, but the battle was proving that he didn't have to turn into a beast to act like one.

"Honorless-!" Zerain's half swear of desperation stole Jhan's attention from the fighting and her own freezing body. Zerain was struggling wildly to keep her seat in the saddle while she slashed at a bandit who was attempting to drag her off of her imala.

Ahlen wasn't in any shape to come to Zerain's rescue. He was kneeling on the ground, one hand on his head while the other was tangled in the reins of the baku. They were in full panic now, fore feet planted and tugging at Ahlen so hard that he was being dragged, inexorably, across the icy rock of the trail. Ahlen's hand on his head was bloody. The bandit must have slipped past the defense and struck him, preferring to deal with easier prey than Obahn and Sael.

Jhan stopped and stood, watching numbly, as the bandit disarmed Zerain at last, cuffing her hard as

he threw her to the ground. In a moment, Jhan realized, he was going to disappear with Zerain into the rocks, never to be seen again. What her fate would be, among a band of ruthless men, wasn't hard for Jhan to guess.

As if she were being forced to watch a horror movie, Jhan was unable to block out the replay of memory; the long days spent in the hands of masters of cruelty. In the beginning, she had longed for a flicker of sympathy, a guilty look, or an ounce of humanity in the faces of Dagara or his men. That hope had proved futile. Her torturers had never shown an instant of remorse. That Zerain might be about to face even a shadow of that torment was too much for Jhan to bear. Whether she liked the woman or not was irrelevant. Jhan simply couldn't allow any living creature to go through the pain, in body and mind, that she had been forced to endure.

Jhan lurched forward, her frozen muscles like lead weights, as she began to run. Her heart skipped beats, aching as if it were going to burst, as she reached Zerain's attacker and came to an abrupt halt. Jhan's vision blurred, but she was still able to spin about, her foot coming around to take the surprised man in the mouth.

What the bandit had expected from such a small, and clearly unarmed, attacker had obviously not been a kick in the face. He howled in surprise, staggering away from Zerain, as he spat blood and teeth. He looked as if he was going to fall, but then he regained his senses and whipped his sword out as he lunged at Jhan, shouting curses.

Jhan couldn't find her balance. She stumbled backwards and fell to one knee. It saved her life. The bandit's blade sliced the air where her neck had been. When the blade came around again, Jhan rolled, came up, and kicked out. Her inner ear hummed and she felt a sickening nausea grip her. Her blow missed and she fell to both knees as the last of her strength left her.

The thief straightened and grinned, looking down as Jhan panted and wiped at her eyes to clear them of their haze. His blade came up and Jhan flinched, feeling almost glad that it was going to be over.

The sun chose that moment to come from behind the snow swollen clouds. It sparkled on the mountain tops and made the mist about the peaks a beautiful combination of blue and pink. Jhan watched the spectacle over the bandit's shoulder, preferring that to be her last sight rather than the cruel eyes of the man about to kill her.

Ahlen suddenly appeared to block that grand vision. Jhan blinked at his white, frightened face, as he seemed to take the bandit by the shoulder. It was an almost friendly gesture, but it ended violently. Ahlen pulled that shoulder back as he buried his knife blade into the man's heart, reaching around to the man's front to drive it home. The bandit started, looking down in horror as his sword fell from

nerveless fingers. When he collapsed sideways, dead, Ahlen let him fall, staring down as if he couldn't believe that he had done such a thing.

Silence reigned. The fight was over. The bandits all lay dead. Ahlen fell to his knees and vomited while Zerain picked herself up from the ground as if she were still dazed. Obahn had dismounted from his imala. He thrust his bloodied sword into the snow to clean it of blood and gore and then used a dead man's back to wipe it dry. He looked very pleased, still grinning fiercely to himself.

Sael went to Ahlen, pulling out a rag. He held Ahlen from toppling over while the man continued to vomit. Finally, spent, Ahlen turned to thank his helper, but, when he saw that it was Sael, he twitched away and said something under his breath. Sael stood, eyes hard, as he dropped the rag he held by Ahlen's hand.

"Keep it," Sael told him sternly, "I've already emptied my stomach."

Black birds began settling on the bodies, unconcerned with the living as they began their feast. Jhan looked away and then slowly began to sink to the ground, her knees feeling suddenly boneless as she distantly wondered if those birds would feast on her after she died.

"It's not time to rest, yet, Ikhil!" Obahn growled as his large hand caught Jhan under the arm and lifted her to her feet again. "It seems I am in your debt once more!" For saving his wife, or trying to, Jhan thought hazily, too weak to even cringe from the smell of blood on Obahn's body.

"Like a bundle of sticks!" Obahn muttered distastefully as he propelled Jhan to some unknown destination. "How did you survive childhood?"

"My Lord?" Sael was gripping his bleeding arm, his body swimming before Jhan's eyes like an image in a kaleidoscope.

"Heal It!" Obahn ordered simply as he handed Jhan over into Sael's arms.

"We will need to camp," Sael began, "Make a fire and wrap the coals--"

"To be attacked again?" Obahn spat aside and his spit froze against a stone. "We need a more defensible position; a cave perhaps."

"Jhan won't live to see it," Sael replied tersely. "Without the Caefu, it wouldn't matter even if he did."

"I am here," Jhan distantly heard the sound of Ixien's voice mingled with hoof beats. He had regained control of the baku at last and returned. "Give Jhan to me." It was the first time that he had ever used her name.

"In time for our victory, but too late to win it," Obahn snarled accusingly. "I do not like you, Caefu. You are without honor."

"Your words are nothing to me," Ixien replied evenly. "Will you let Jhan die while you strive to

insult me?”

Jhan was lifted into the saddle without further argument, and Ixien slipped his hands under her clothes. She gasped as his warmth spread throughout her body, but she didn't revive. Everything stayed distant, half in and half out of dreams; shadows against the whiteness of her sight. She felt the baku moving beneath her, but it was a long time before she could do more than hang limply in Ixien's arms.

They rode away from the smell and sight of death and the feasting birds, hoping that there weren't more bandits at some camp up ahead, waiting for their fellows to return.

Jhan heard Zerain say something to her, and then again, repeated. She understood the words with difficulty. “I owe you my life, Ikhil. That doesn't sit well with my pride.”

“Ahlen saved you,” Jhan mumbled, wondering if she had said it loud enough for Zerain to hear. “I-I fell... failed.”

“The attempt was made, nonetheless,” Zerain replied. “You nearly died for me. You have shown that you are worthy of respect and honor.”

“Honor,” Jhan hissed, closing her eyes. “It's all you talk about.”

“It's all that matters,” Zerain retorted, as if Jhan had shown herself to be a fool.

Jhan shut everything out, trying to reclaim some of the world out of the fog gathering around her mind. That was hard to do, swaying in the saddle with her senses still reeling, but, at last, when she opened her eyes again, there was color and form and something besides the whiteness. That something was Sael, riding slightly ahead. He had shed his black coat and had pulled his sleeve up, patiently sewing up the wound on his arm. It was a clean slice, but it bled copiously until he had the lips of it shut.

Obahn was riding on the other side of Sael, watching his cool demeanor with approval. “It would seem that you are somewhat of a man, Sael. You fought well.”

Sael stiffened, ducking his head until his black hair hid his eyes. “I am not a warrior, Lord Obahn. I kill because I must.”

Obahn grunted sourly. “Your father would-”

“My father raped my mother, got her with child, and then would not acknowledge me!” Sael exploded. “Don't speak to me about my father, my Lord Prince!” Zerain handed him a strip of cloth and Sael took it with a jerk and began wrapping up his wound as he continued, “My mother lived only until I could care for myself and then she took her own life!”

Jhan couldn't believe Obahn's cruelty. The man slitted his gold eyes and said, “No father would have acknowledged an Ekhal child.”

Sael went hard jawed, but he acted as if he had heard that one too many times to let it sink too

deeply. “My mother never pointed my father out to me or spoke of him, so deep was her shame, but nothing would have changed if she had. I can’t change what I am, even for a father’s name. I am as the god’s have made me.”

“You are ill made,” Obahn returned acidly and Ahlen, walking along with them, gasped at the blasphemy as Obahn kicked his imala into a trot and rode up ahead.

“They fear nothing, not even gods!” Ahlen swore and Jhan saw him make an odd gesture in the air, maybe some sign to ward away evil.

“Foolishness,” Ixien grumbled in Jhan’s ear. “What has any of this to do with our danger or our goal?”

Jhan could almost agree. It was foolish to hash over old grievances when bandits might descend on them again. It seemed that Obahn couldn’t pass up a moment to harass Sael, despite their danger. Jhan wondered at that and wondered, not for the last time, how there could be such hate between them when they had sworn to be together until death. It was obvious that Obahn needed Sael’s sword to defend him, but why Sael’s? Why not another warrior’s? Why take an oath and bring a man he so obviously despised and hated? So many unanswered questions about them and Ixien, Jhan thought wearily. The mystery kept her from thinking about her own situation, almost.

They found Ahlen’s baku and the pack baku up ahead, forlornly standing on the trail. They weren’t stupid animals and it hadn’t taken them long to realize that the ones who fed and cared for them had been left behind. Not a good situation on a bare mountain. Given time, they would have thought it through enough to return on their own. Ahlen spoke to them gently and patted their noses to calm them enough for him to take up their leads and mount his baku. With obvious relief that he wouldn’t have to keep on walking, Ahlen fell in line behind Jhan and Ixien as they continued down the trail.

“You are not well,” Ixien said suddenly in Jhan’s ear. “You remain cold to my touch.”

“My head hurts,” Jhan complained softly, more to herself than to Ixien. “I can’t see straight. It almost feels like that kaunut, but nothing’s that bad.”

“You must not cease to be,” Ixien said, as if that were only common sense and Jhan had a choice. “You are needed.”

“I know you aren’t saying that to make me feel good,” Jhan replied, her voice breaking and going hoarse. She coughed hard and felt her lungs constrict painfully. Her insides were tight, throbbing almost, and her skin felt dry to the point of cracking; stretched like dry leather over her aching bones. Instinct warned her that she wasn’t going to make it much further.

“I need to eat and drink something,” Jhan said when she could speak again. “I’m burning up everything from the inside out just to keep warm.”

“It is good that you have made another debt between you and Obahn,” was Ixien’s oblique comment. “His mating interest could not be sustained looking as you are now.”

“That’s all you think about.” Jhan coughed again. She was so weak that it caused her to almost fall from the saddle.

Ixien caught Jhan and easily pulled her back into his arms as if his fifty odd pounds obeyed a different physiology. The claws on the ends of his fingers, so much like a cat’s, scratched her inadvertently as he slipped them back under her clothes.

“It is all your people think about,” Ixien felt the need to reply. “It motivates almost everything you do.”

“Zerain would say that honor does,” Jhan rasped, barely able to have the last word, “but you can argue it with her. I’m too far gone.” She closed her eyes then and, though she hated it, she let Ixien worry about keeping her alive and in the saddle as she drifted off into the white haze again.

The storm came over the top of the mountain peaks like a white, falling cloak of death. They could see it approach, horror stricken, as they scrambled to find shelter. Obahn galloped ahead, taking a turn of the trail at breakneck speed. He returned almost at once, shouting for everyone to hurry as he fought with his imala. All the beasts began to panic on the narrow trail and it wasn’t difficult to get even the baku to break into a ponderous trot.

Jhan felt the jog of the baku, but she didn’t attempt to discover what was going on. It was just one more danger in a long string of them. They either made it or they didn’t and Jhan’s comforting numbness was far better than fear. Only when the wind ceased abruptly, and things began to echo, was it enough to capture her attention. She roused herself, reluctantly, as she was lowered into warm furs and blankets near a brazier that Zerain had just lit.

They were deep within a cave, the brazier and an oil lamp the only light. The animals were shuffling and sighing a few yards away and Sael was using rocky outcropping to string their tent up as a barrier against them.

The fierce cold was gone, left behind on the surface. Deep within the cave, it was a survivable temperature. Coupled with the warmth of the animals and the braziers, Jhan hardly felt the lack of Ixien’s warm embrace. The Caefu had deserted her, curling up in the darkness to conserve his own strength. Ahlen and Zerain had taken his place, sitting almost touching Jhan on each side to add their body warmth.

“Keep all the dung,” Zerain was telling Sael. “We will run out of coal if the storm keeps us here for long. I will only use the cooking oil if I must.”

“Food?” Obahn asked.

“We stocked well,” Zerain replied confidently. “There is still good stores of jerky and pressed vegetables in fat. Salty provender, but it will keep us alive easily. I will make a thick stew and use some of the wine to help the Ikhil. He needs one solid meal before we must conserve what is left.”

“Agreed,” Obahn grunted and turned away. He took out a cloth and began cleaning his sword meticulously.

Sael wasn’t so calm any more. Finished with the animals, he sat cradling his arm. After a moment, he took off his sword and put it aside, unwilling to look at the blood on it, let alone clean it off. Now that the fighting was over and they were safe, his adrenalin had finally run out, leaving him obviously disturbed.

“It seems that I owe you a debt as well as the Ikhil, Ahlen Kantori,” Obahn said suddenly as he finished with his sword and sheathed it. His words were stiff with formality, but clearly filled with annoyance at the way things had gone. “You joined with the Ikhil to save my wife.”

Jhan heard Ahlen’s voice answer with a quaver of deep emotion. His body tensed beside Jhan, and she wished that she could manage to turn her head, or even open her eyes wide enough to see him, but her body failed to respond. “Jhan distracted him,” Ahlen said, “or I wouldn’t have had the chance.”

“You saved me, as did the Ikhil,” Zerain insisted.

Ahlen was trembling now. “Please, don’t speak of it! My people are peaceful farmers. We don’t kill one another!”

“Can’t you see that you are sickening him?” Sael interjected furiously, “and me. We don’t glory in the kill as you do, My Lord.”

“Phuthar, Sael, until I give you leave otherwise,” Obahn ordered through gritted teeth, one finger pointing at Sael in warning.

Sael fell silent. He pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them, burying his face into the tight knot of his body as if his scarf wasn’t enough to conceal his anguish and shame at his own weakness.

“I have given the order of silence,” Obahn explained to everyone. “Don’t attempt to speak to him. He is unable to answer.”

Ahlen was surprising in his outrage, considering how he felt about Sael. “Must you give such an order?”

Obahn measured Ahlen sharply, as if he suspected that Ahlen was challenging his authority. “Sael

is mine and of my people. I have shown him remarkable restraint until now. Another warrior would have beaten him for speaking such insolence or even cast him out.”

“Our way is the way of battle,” Zerain added, quietly proud. “There isn’t room for those who would cower from the fight or those who would refuse to hold a sword altogether and hide among women.”

“Such a one would be welcome among my people,” Ahlen said, almost defending Sael, but then he stammered lamely, “if- if he were not perverted.”

Sael’s head came up at that and his eyes were twin pools of black warning, but they flicked away to his lord as Obahn replied, “Your people know peace. My people have lands that are coveted by others. To refuse to fight them threatens our existence!”

Ahlen let out a slow breath, suddenly realizing that he was on dangerous ground and that it wasn’t wise to argue with such volatile people. He turned away, ducking his head, and said only. “We have different ways.”

Obahn grunted, accepting Ahlen’s withdrawal from his challenge with contempt “And different lives that bred them, mountain boy. Those vermin back there weren’t trained warriors and you and the Ikhil performed worse than I could have imagined, even though you still managed to save my wife. There will be much worse where we are going and not any room for the weak of heart.”

“He is only a foreign boy, my Husband,” Zerain said, as if trying to distract Obahn. “Don’t waste strength arguing with him.”

“I am a man,” Ahlen bristled.

“You have shown it today,” Obahn agreed. “You were able to kill a man and our numbers gave the thieves pause enough for us to block them from a full assault.”

“Jhan was right, then,” Ahlen realized and unwisely spoke it aloud. “You do need us. It wasn’t just for a debt that you took us along.”

There was a silence heavy with waiting, everyone wondering what Obahn would do in the face of that insult. Jhan found herself holding her breath and then let it out slowly along with her trepidation. What did she care what happened to Ahlen?

Sael chuckled, appreciation of Ahlen’s innocent daring. It cut like a knife through the silence. Obahn wasn’t amused, Sael’s mocking laugh like a springboard as he strode forward and sent the Ekhal sprawling with a single blow. When Obahn spun back to Ahlen, breathing hard and hand white on his sword hilt, his eyes seemed to glow beast yellow in the light from the brazier.

“They didn’t believe me, my people!” Obahn shouted at Ahlen, at everyone, at a hated memory. It echoed on down into the depths of the cave. “They called me mad and turned away from me, even my

warrior brothers! Only one person stood to be my guard; an Ekhal! It didn't even shame them!"

Obahn went to Ahlen and Jhan could smell his tanned leather clothes and the reek of imala as he leaned close. "Truth, Ahlen Kantori," Obahn choked out in fury, "I do need you. I need you to hold a weapon and I need your Jhan to get well enough to fight again. There are too many dangers to rely on only one Ekhal."

Ahlen's fear was so tangible that Jhan almost believed that she could feel it pulsing against her. He swallowed audibly, but he was adamant in his beliefs, even before someone who might possibly slay him in the next instant. "I am going to the Sun God to save a life, not to take lives getting there."

Obahn spat aside and moved away. "When a man is threatened with death, such words become mist. You will fight Ahlen. You have already proved it."

No one spoke after that, as if afraid of drawing Obahn's attention. That made the shuffling of the beasts and the scraping and clatter of Zerain making dinner, almost deafening.

After a long time, Ahlen's shaking stopped and his breathing became nearly normal. Sael recovered as well, gathering himself off of the floor as he cradled his arm and nursed the purpling bruise on his cheek at the same time. Drawing away from everyone, he buried himself in some blankets near his imala and seemed to sleep.

"It is unusually warm in here," Zerain dared to comment at last. "It seems to come from the back of this cave. Could there be fire spirits living there?" Her voice was tinged with superstitious anxiety.

"Let's not find out," Ahlen whispered absently, his mind still on his confrontation with Obahn. "Let's just thank them for Jhan's sake. I don't think she would be alive now, otherwise."

"She," Zerain mused. "Always you return to saying she. You are a boy if you don't know the difference."

"What does it matter?" Ahlen sighed, grateful to be distracted. "Jhan is woman enough to the eye, as she's told me enough times. The man she was is nowhere to be seen. I tire of trying to keep it all straight in my head."

"A woman births children," Zerain was haughty now, delivering her information as if Ahlen were an ignorant child. "You shame all women by comparing us to an Ikhil."

"Her own people allowed her to be a woman among them," Ahlen informed Zerain wearily, too tired to watch his tongue. Jhan heard Ahlen's words through her haze, her cracked lips almost smiling in anticipation as his tongue continued to trip along foolishly. Jhan wondered if she were going to get her revenge on him after all before she died. It hinged on whether Obahn's people cared about such things. A slim hope, but she had little else.

"They called her Princess Jhanian," Ahlen continued, as if his common sense had been left back in

the snowstorm, “and Jhan was not only married to a lord, but had been the brother of the King of Karana-”

Obahn straightened and turned, his face becoming an unpleasant red color. “What are you saying? This-this creature is a Prince of the Blood?”

Ahlen stopped his rambling and Jhan wished that she could gather the strength to see his face. He was shocked, realizing his stupidity at last. He tried to recover, too late, his words slow and difficult. “I, yes, Jhan was a Prince of Karana.”

“And how did such a person come to be with you?” Obahn demanded.

“Our business is our own.” Ahlen tried to recite Obahn’s custom of minding one’s own business at him, but Obahn wasn’t to be turned aside so easily.

“You’ve just made it mine,” Obahn told Ahlen in a deadly tone of voice. “I wondered at Jhan’s noble bearing and his fighting skill. It all makes sense now. What you’ve done, dragging a member of a royal house after you as if he were the lowliest slave, merits death, Kantori.”

“Even a prince that’s been cut to be a woman?” Ahlen was brutal in his desperation, tossing aside his insistence on calling Jhan a she in his effort to convince Obahn of his point. “What use is such as that to any kingdom? They despised Jhan and called what he was a perversion. Jhan’s marriage to a lord was shocking to them; outrageous. When I took Jhan, so great was he reviled by his own people, that I didn’t expect anyone to pursue us. I wasn’t disappointed, Prince Obahn! I never once saw any sign of pursuit!”

Obahn considered it, pacing with a hand rubbing at his chin thoughtfully. “Married, to that? For what reason, would any man do such a thing, especially a lord? Surely, not for his- for its pretty face? How would there be children? Did this man have other wives?” By returning to calling Jhan *it*, Obahn’s verdict was already clear.

“He had two children,” Ahlen remembered uncomfortably.

“Only two?” Obahn was amazed. “To risk such a bending of nature when he’s only begun to father children-” Obahn cut himself off abruptly and then turned to Ahlen, perplexed. “They are a strange people. I will not take issue with this. Jhan may be a prince, but, as you say, its worth has been removed. The matter is none of my concern in such circumstances.”

The conversation was at an end, the danger once again over for the moment. “The food is done,” Zerain announced quietly, and then added when Ahlen ignored her, sitting rigid and dazed by too many brushes with death. “You must help, Ahlen.”

Ahlen stirred himself and Jhan felt herself lifted from her furs and blankets. She felt Ahlen’s arms hold her upright, her head resting against his breast. The room shimmered and then steadied. Jhan

found herself looking at stew on the end of a wooden spoon. She opened her cold ravaged lips and took it into her mouth. It was bursting with flavor and very warm. She swallowed it greedily and then opened her mouth for more. Zerain fed her like a baby, holding a cup of hot wine for her to drink in between bites.

Jhan ate until her stomach hurt and then forced a few bites more. Bloated, she sighed and turned her face away when Zerain tried to get in one last bite. The woman relented, sitting back on her heels to begin cleaning up. The food worked its way into Jhan slowly, but the hot wine was quicker. When she began to feel like being alive again, she looked up at Ahlen's face.

"How do you feel?" Ahlen wondered, his face full of his guilt.

"The only thing that is keeping me alive is my hope of returning back to my home," Jhan rasped out with all of her flagging strength.

"I exaggerated so that he wouldn't kill me," Ahlen admitted in a tense whisper, glancing nervously to where Obahn had gone to sit down.

"No, it wasn't exaggeration," Jhan retorted and then coughed weakly. When she could breathe again, she continued angrily, "It was the truth. I know it. They do all despise me. I am a half creature of little account to anyone... anyone except one man, Ahlen, and he's the man I want to return to. Try not to take even that away from me."

"Did you hear everything?" Ahlen's guilt deepened, patently hoping that she hadn't.

"I heard enough to-" Jhan broke off as dizziness swept over her. "I'm feeling drunk; fuzzy," Jhan groaned.

"Are you in pain?"

"No, but my skin feels tight, like there isn't anything left of me," Jhan noticed with distress.

"Your eyes are dilated, even in the light," Ahlen observed anxiously. "You need to keep on eating."

"I can't, not yet." Jhan sank deeper under the furs, gathering strength to voice her outrage at Ahlen further. "At least it's warm in here."

"The storm is a strong one," Ahlen told her, letting her head come to rest on a rolled up blanket. He moved a little away to get his own meal. "We may be here for a few days. You'll need them to recover."

"I'm good at recovering, but even Ixien couldn't help me through that last bit." Jhan was brutally frank, accusing Ahlen harshly, "You're going to be burying me along the trail, and you know it."

"No." Ahlen said that one word with all stubbornness, unwilling to face anymore death.

"Are you going to stop it somehow?" Jhan lashed back sarcastically, turning her cold chapped face away. "One part of me wishes that you could, but the other part is glad that you can't!"

"Why did you try to save Zerain?" Ahlen's question was strange and desperate, his face white with

the need for Jhan's reply.

Jhan was confused, her mind slow to change gears. "Why ask?"

"On the trail, you were so full of pain, despair, and anger," Ahlen reminded her. "You had just found out that I had lied to you. You were nearly in death's arms and you knew it. Why did you risk what life you had left for Zerain? She has done nothing but insult you."

Jhan found it hard to think about it. She preferred screaming her outrage at Ahlen than trying to delve into her own psyche. His eyes, though, were so compelling, that she couldn't help but reply. "I remembered how I was tortured by men like those bandits and I couldn't let the same thing happen to Zerain. I didn't care about myself at that moment. Was it noble? Was it brave? It doesn't really matter now, but it might be nice to die thinking so."

"I-I was terrified," Ahlen admitted, almost choking on his words. "I couldn't do anything... until I saw that thief trying to kill you. I let go of the baku and I killed him to save you, not out of anything noble or-or brave, but because of what I had done to you; all that I took away. I killed that man because I knew that I couldn't live with the guilt of having taken your life as well. I couldn't let you die then. I'm not going to let you die now."

"You are still so innocent!" Jhan exclaimed and then shook her head in exasperation, hating how her gentler side wanted to feel sorry for the man. "You're just like a baku; stolid, stubborn, slow, but willing to bear a burden to its last drop of life. If I could forget all that you did to me, which I can't, I might have liked you."

"You're a flame," Ahlen returned, eyes distant. "You are beautiful; all consuming, hot, and destructive."

"I'm destructive to myself," Jhan growled deprecatingly, "forcing myself to go on, despite knowing what the end will be."

"You don't see it do you?"

Jhan felt unconsciousness plucking at her mind, trying to make her forget her anger and her need to figure out what Ahlen wanted from her. She rallied briefly to voice her confusion. "What?"

"I've become nothing but a moth to your flame," Ahlen explained. "Women have a set role in my culture, in Obahn's, in yours. Even men have a set role. We both must act in certain ways, perform our certain duties. We expect these things, expect them of each other. I stepped outside of that when I defied my father and went to save my sister's life, yet I still defer to my set role. I will still act and do things as if I were still on the farm in the mountains."

"Except for the killing part," Jhan grated.

Ahlen's jaw jumped and then he nodded stiffly. "Yes, except for that. You aren't what anyone

expects. You are a cut man, pretending to be a woman. You act as if that were normal and call yourself woman, yet you don't act as one, or as a man for that matter. You are something else. A flame, as I said, burning me; burning my conscience. As a man, I fear what was done to you, but there is something in you that compels me to protect you and treat you as the woman you claim to be. I can't just take you and use you on my journey as I had wanted to. You're too good at reminding me that you are just as worthy of life as my sister. I can't fight for her right to live and ignore yours any longer."

"And all of that means?" Jhan wondered blearily as she began a long, slow spiral into needed sleep.

"We're going to be companions from now on. Once we reach the other side of the mountain, you are free to do as you please."

"What about your goddess?" Jhan struggled to ask.

Ahlen forced the words out with difficulty. "If She truly wants you to be with me, She will find a way to convince you. I'm done ruining your life. When you risked your life for Zerain, despite everything, I knew that you deserved better treatment, even from a Goddess."

The pain of that lashed Jhan back to consciousness. She managed a bloodshot glare. "That's all very nice, but you're acting as if I had a choice. When you told me that you had lied about the parasites, I already knew that I still didn't have any choice but to follow you. I can't return on my own and, I know that my *flame* doesn't burn you enough to make you take me back now."

"Then Scherial has already spoken to you." Ahlen sounded awed.

Jhan felt sickened. She stopped fighting unconsciousness, throwing herself into its soft oblivion with all of her heart.

Jhan slept through the night and the next day, allowing herself to wake only long enough to relieve herself and to eat the myriad meals Zerain forced on her. Those meals ended with the inevitable hot wine and some herbs that Sael mixed into it. Those herbs seemed to open Jhan's constricted blood vessels, making her heart pump more strongly, as they relaxed her enough to let the food and wine restore her depleted body.

Jhan was dimly aware of talk, animals moving about, and people walking to and fro in tasks or sheer boredom. Little by little, though, those small sounds and motions began to fade away, until even the light winked out of existence.

She wasn't sleeping, Jhan realized, not alarmed yet. It had happened too gradually to be surprising.

She was only wearily puzzled, her mind almost annoyed to have to do anything but attempt to stay asleep. She almost convinced herself that Zerain had thought the cave warm enough to let her meager store of coals go out while they slept, but the silence was too deafening. There should have been any number of sounds. When she finally sat up, blinking and trying to see in complete darkness, she understood then that something had gone terribly wrong.

When Jhan had been Dagara Ku Ni's prisoner, he had used to take his time changing her eyes to suit him. Blind during that time, Jhan had been forced to crawl about, feeling her way to obey his laughing orders. Her dreams had taken on such a quality of reality lately that she could almost fool herself into believing that this was just more of the same thing.

Jhan waited expectantly for Dagara to say something horrible, or for his guards to attack her, but nothing of the sort materialized. She had a long time to feel her clothes, her gloves, and to touch her hood. She noticed that blankets and furs were gone, but that it was soothingly warm wherever she was. The floor was stone and her hands, searching timidly, felt nothing in any direction. Familiar smells; beast, brazier, cooking food, dirty bodies and dirty clothes, even the odd, spicy scent Zerain always wore, were conspicuously absent. There wasn't anything to tell Jhan where she was or what might be about to happen.

After another long stretch of time went by, Jhan sighed. "If this is a nightmare, it's boring."

Sael's voice came from the darkness, startled and tight. "Jhan? You're here as well?" Jhan felt his hand brush her, but she pulled back. When his voice came again, it was almost boyish with his anxiety. "I'm afraid this isn't a nightmare, or even a dream. I think someone has taken us prisoner."

Jhan took in a sharp breath, coming fully alert at last. "Who? How?"

"Bandits, probably," Sael replied. "We must have been taken in our sleep. As to the why... surely you must guess?"

Jhan sobbed, curling up in a ball of misery on the stone floor. "Then it is a nightmare," she wept, "and it's only just begun!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

(Selaya)

The world reduced itself to a fine point and nothing else; darkness crushing and suffocating like the maw of some ravening beast. Intent on swallowing sanity whole, its teeth were made of silence; the absence of the background noise of every day life. It made of the world a void in which imaginations

ran wild; a blank canvas in the belly of the mountain on which to paint nightmares.

“Stop touching me!” Jhan’s cry shattered the silence only momentarily, as she scrambled within the tight confines of her prison. Trying to avoid the fearful presence of her cell mate, she wrapped her arms about her knees and huddled into a ball of misery.

“I was only touching your ankle.” Sael sounded contrite, but then added irritably, “What else am I to do when you stay so silent?”

“Is that supposed to make sense?” Jhan demanded. “I’m not going to suddenly disappear! Our prison is only five feet square and neither of us could find a door!”

Sael didn’t reply at once. Jhan could hear his measured breaths before he finally admitted, “I was making sure that you were still alive.”

Sael was being too matter-of-fact for such an appalling admission. It made Jhan confused and sickened. She found it hard to steady herself long enough to simply ask, “Why?”

“You were very ill, almost dead from the cold,” Sael reminded her. “I felt compelled to know if you were being silent out of spite or because the gods had taken you to them.”

Jhan had purposely avoided thinking about her physical state, knowing that it would only cause her more misery. Sael’s words were like barbs, pulling her down within herself, making her confront the possibility that she might die long before their captors had any hand in it. What she found though was puzzling, and she hardly dared believe it. She felt rested and strong, her heart pumping with an unaccustomed vigor. She felt as if she had never attempted the impossible, climbing over a mountain in winter.

“I can’t bear your silence,” Sael complained softly. Jhan heard him moving about, searching for a door to their prison for the fourth time in as many hours.

Jhan couldn’t bear it either, but she had nothing to say to Sael, even to tell him that she didn’t think that she was about to die. It was her distrust, she knew, and her fear of being trapped with him in a place that made escape impossible. It was also her own experiences that kept her tongue frozen. Knowing what the future could hold for them, Jhan feared that, if she talked too much, she would only start screaming. That wouldn’t do either of them any good.

“The others might be in different cells,” Sael suggested thoughtfully. “Perhaps bandits were living deeper in the cave where we camped, taking us unaware while we slept. If Obahn is lucky, they will ransom him to our people.” His voice didn’t change as he added, “I don’t have any such hope for us.”

Sael came to rest near Jhan again and she couldn’t help tensing. “It’s very warm in here,” Sael continued, “That’s good for you, but I feel like I’m being roasted.” Jhan heard Sael open his coat, cloth rustling as he undid the buttons. He seemed to be groping for words, desperate to break the silence,

saying, "I wish there were food and drink as well. You will need your strength. "He paused and then reconsidered, "It doesn't matter. You won't last long among them anyway, I think." Among the bandits he meant, but he was unwilling to elaborate. He didn't need to.

The silence stretched and then Sael uttered a mortified exclamation as he realized, "I've broken my Lord's command of silence!" He stopped speaking, as if to take it up again, but then growled angrily in the next moment, "I suppose it's too late now to try and be something other than a disgrace!"

Jhan hid her face against her knees, as if even the darkness wasn't enough to hide her anguish. Sael's disgust with himself was another weight on her mind that she didn't want. Her thin grasp on sanity was quickly slipping and she didn't know how much longer she could endure their close confinement. Sael's brief insinuation was the least of Jhan's fears. She knew that rape could be just an appetizer in a banquet of humiliation and pain. Whether Sael knew that he could, just as easily, be a part of that banquet, Jhan didn't know, but expecting death, there wasn't any telling what the man might do to make his last moments enjoyable.

Cloth rustled again. Was Sael removing something else in the warmth? His scarf? His gloves? When his hand tentatively touched Jhan's ankle again, she expected only the worst. He must have sensed her imminent, violent reaction. Sael threw himself on top of her, jamming both of his hands against her shoulders while he drove a knee into her diaphragm. Pinned, Jhan choked for the air that had been driven out of her lungs.

"You doubt my honor?" that became clear to Jhan after it was repeated for the third time, Sael's furious anger blowing heat into the ear he was shouting in. "I am sworn to Obahn! Before that it was to Hagen! I have been chaste for three years, Ikhl! I wouldn't break that oath for a coward; an emasculated man who welcomed his own mutilation! Even I own more pride than to sink so low!"

Red lights jumped behind Jhan's eyes, the first thing she had seen since their captivity. She knew that it was a sign that she was suffocating. When Sael moved his knee at last, she could only gasp in air and attempt to get oxygen to her starved lungs, fighting back the last thing on her mind. Sael counted on that, not allowing her to go free for long. He turned her expertly and drove his knees into the backs of hers, strong hands pinning her down at the curve of her slim neck. One move, she felt, and her spine would snap under that pressure.

"When I was fifteen," Sael said fiercely in her ear, "some warriors pretended to be friendly with me. A lonely boy, starved for affection, and only beginning to know that I was Ekhal, I welcomed their attention. We drank, laughed, sang songs, and then, one by one, they put me on the floor in front of their oath-brothers and raped me all night. I nearly died of it. The Ekhal saved me, took me away, and spent weeks ministering to the fever and infection those warriors gifted me. When I was finally well, I

stayed with them, but it was a long while before I let anyone touch me again. You don't trust. I don't trust either. We understand one another and know that neither of us will ever, truly trust again. Still, there must be tolerance and cooperation if we are to--"

"To escape?" Jhan finally gasped out, mocking him through her tears.

"There is always the possibility," Sael assured her.

Jhan leaned her head against the warm stone beneath her. She lay limply, waiting for her breath to slow, and then said more normally, "I'm sorry... about what happened to you, but it doesn't make any difference. You know it doesn't. I can't help the way I feel. I can't stop being afraid of you."

Sael was off of her in one motion, standing, maybe, and whitely furious. "How can you say that? Will you kill me in one of your panics? Will you do the work for our enemies?"

Jhan heard something odd above Sael's ranting. It startled her out of her fear, hurt, and anger; their argument forgotten in an instant. "Wait!"

"For what?" Sael demanded. "If you refuse to work with me against our common enemy, how will we ever hope to--"

"Wait!" Jhan shouted back again, rolled, and sat up. Her joints and her stomach protested the sudden movement, but she ignored them as her ears picked up the sound again. "Don't you hear it?"

"I've heard enough!" Sael misunderstood. "You are being infuriatingly self-centered; without honor in the way that you are disregarding simple sense and endangering--"

"Shut-up!" Jhan screamed at him. In the silence, her voice came back to them as an echo.

Sael gasped. "Is it an opening?"

"In the ceiling?" Jhan felt the smooth rock above her head. They had both avoided it, not wanting to know that their cell was so very small and so much like a tomb. Almost at once, Jhan's hands encountered the edge of an opening. She stood slowly, one arm reaching up and up and not finding anything to block its way. "Here, I think, but surely it has a door?" Her voice was full of pessimism. "What's a prison without a locked door?"

"Still," Sael muttered, pushing Jhan out of the way to search for handholds, "I would like to know where the door is. I would like to know that there is a way out."

Jhan crouched, moving back as Sael scrambled up into the opening. Bits of rock fell down, skittering on the floor as she waited with held breath. After a minute stretched into two, she began to hope, despite herself.

"Sael?" Jhan ventured to call out at last, unable to take the suspense any longer.

"It goes a long way," Sael called back, his voice echoing down to her. "Wait until I return."

Jhan heard Sael begin to climb once more. Without a warm presence and a voice to concentrate on,

Jhan felt the darkness close in around her, ready to fill her mind with her darkest nightmares. Shuddering, she grabbed for handholds, found them, and then pulled herself up into the opening until her feet found places to rest. She scraped her hands and cut a knee in the process, but after that, the way was easy. Like a natural ladder, she was able to scale the rock wall upwards after Sael.

“I’m coming too!” Jhan warned.

“Like a woman!” Sael swore under his breath, but it traveled down to Jhan and she heard it clearly.

“Because I am one!” Jhan called back, “but you wouldn’t have stayed either.” She ducked her head down as small pebbles pelted her. “That isn’t going to stop me!”

“Your pardon, my Lady,” Sael mocked as he began to climb again, “It was an accident.”

Sael climbed slowly, so slowly that Jhan almost said something in complaint, until she recalled that he had a wounded arm. Its bandaged stiffness was probably hampering him. When cloth, stinking of dried blood, struck her face, Jhan yanked it away and let it fall with a curse.

“Your pardon again, my Lady!”

“I don’t know what you hope to accomplish by-”

“I think you hope to alert our captors, Jhan Dor, with all of your shouting,” Sael replied tightly, “and that is why I tried to leave you behind.”

Jhan gritted her teeth, face going hot. “The door we find is going to be locked, Sael. I think I can shout all I want to. It won’t matter!”

“Then why come?” Sael exploded, “Why not let me pursue my foolishness in peace?”

Jhan swallowed, but it wasn’t hard for her to admit it. “I can’t stand being alone with my memories, not in the darkness, even for a little while. I think you know what I’m talking about.”

“I am not so weak!” Sael retorted, but there was an edge to his voice that told Jhan that she had touched a painful nerve.

“My only defense is to keep busy, keep moving, and fill the time with distractions,” Jhan told him candidly, “I can’t do that sitting in the heart of a mountain. You do know what I mean? That’s why you’re even bothering with this, why you want me to keep talking to you. You see your memories against the darkness and the silence as clearly as I do.”

Sael didn’t reply, too stubborn, but his silence was another kind of admission. “Let us climb,” he said at last, gruff and short.

It was a long while before Sael spoke again. He grunted and Jhan heard him moving in a different manner than his steady climbing tread. “I’ve found a passage.”

The darkness was still complete and Jhan doubted that they had found anything other than just another room in their prison. When she caught up with Sael, hands encountering his boots, she heard

him breathing hard from the climb. His touch was light on her clothing, pulling on that rather than her arm as he guided her out of the hole and onto a flat, rock floor. The air was hot and smelled faintly of sulfur.

“Now what?” Jhan wondered helplessly.

“Find a wall and follow it,” Sael suggested. “We might find the door.”

Jhan heard Sael stand. She scrambled to her feet, snatching at his coat and twisting a hand hard into the back of it. “Don’t leave me behind!”

“Don’t you possess any shame?” Sael hissed in disgust.

“I’m terrified,” Jhan admitted as they began moving uncertainly forward. “Why deny it?”

“For your own honor’s sake-”

“Sael-,” Jhan began to shout angrily and then bit down on it, turning it into a whisper with effort. “I’m not one of your people.”

“You are denying honor?” Sael’s tone was incredulous.

“No,” Jhan replied evenly, “I’m denying that being afraid has anything to do with it.”

There was a silence from Sael that stretched and made Jhan anxious. The darkness was all too willing to jump into the void, their voices the barrier holding it at bay. It fueled Jhan’s fear. She almost decided to break the silence herself, apologize, shout some more, anything to bring form to the darkness around her, but Sael stopped and Jhan, surprised, bumped gently into his back.

“A wall,” Sael announced and Jhan released his coat to touch its warm smoothness. It was a relief to fill the nothingness with solidity; an anchor for their sanity. Sael’s footsteps continued and Jhan followed without complaint, just as eager as he was to search out the limits of their rock world.

“I don’t know how you can say such things,” Sael continued at last, as if nothing were more important than for him to understand.

“All right,” Jhan sighed, hiding her relief behind a tone of exasperation, “Tell me why I’m so shameless, without honor; whatever you think I am.”

“Your fear, your womanish crying-” Sael began.

Jhan cut him off. “Enough insults! Just explain it to me.”

“A man-”

“I’m not a man.”

Sael tried again. “*Anyone*, man, woman, even Ikhil, should strive to be as honorable as possible.”

“Why?”

“How can you ask?” Sael exploded.

“Because, I don’t understand what you mean.”

Sael explained in carefully measured words, as if Jhan were an idiot. "Honor is what brings us closer to the gods. It separates us from the beasts."

"Okay." Jhan accepted that. "Now, why does being afraid make me without honor?"

"Fear is shameful! Shame dishonors you!"

"Stop shouting and make sense!" Jhan seethed. "That isn't an explanation at all."

"Cowering in fear, when there are deeds to do, battles to fight, escapes to be made," Sael stressed the last, "is unacceptable. Surely you can see that?"

"I came with you, didn't I?" Jhan pointed out.

"Only because you feared staying behind more."

"True." Jhan chewed on her lower lip and then released it with a shrug, seeing the humor in it even in their dire situation. "Still, if there weren't people like me, then how would you prove your bravery, thereby enhancing your honor? There has to be damsels in distress for white knights to rescue and protect."

"What is a knight?" Sael asked, puzzled.

"A brave warrior," Jhan explained, "An honorable man."

"The weak are not worthy of protection," Sael shot back.

"Then whom do you protect?"

"A person shouldn't need to be protected," Sael clarified arrogantly.

"Then I think you're confusing honor with pride," Jhan replied bleakly. "Honor is about how you treat other people, Sael, not about how well you can cut someone to pieces with a sword and pretend that it doesn't make you sick. I may be frightened to the point of being paralyzed by it, but I'll always treat you and everyone else better than you've ever treated me. That makes me infinitely more honorable than you."

Sael was startled. "What have you to complain about me?"

"The bruises on the back of my neck, my arms, my legs, and, yes, I do seem to remember someone telling me how disgusting it was that I *let* someone mutilate me," Jhan reminded him coldly.

Sael chewed over her words as they continued to inch along and then he made a slight concession, "I was angry. I didn't realize that I had said that. I think you can hardly blame me for the rest. You might have killed me."

"So, you admit that I'm not weak?" Jhan caught him neatly, almost smiling in satisfaction. "You admit that I could hurt you?"

Sael wasn't about to do that, but the truth was there, hanging in the darkness between them.

"You're confusing me."

“Of course I am, because you’re the one not making any sense,” Jhan persisted. “If I’m strong enough to kill you, brave enough to let someone mutilate me to get what I want, and stupid enough to argue with you while we stumble in the dark with our lives in danger, then you can’t really claim that I’m without honor. By your standards, I’m full of honor!”

“A light,” Sael suddenly hissed.

“Just when I was winning...”

“It wasn’t a game,” Sael snarled back. “Be silent.”

Jhan hadn’t believed him, thinking that Sael was just trying to distract her from her barrage of uncomfortable truths, but, when she peered around his shoulder, she saw a very dim light as well. Swallowing in a suddenly dry throat, she forgot about everything except the fear of the unknown.

The light grew stronger, revealing that they weren’t in a room. They were walking along a narrow corridor of black stone that curved slowly to the left. With the end hidden from them, it was a tense filled few moments until they rounded the turn and found themselves on the threshold of a great hall.

Sael pushed Jhan back. “Bandits!”

But Jhan was muttering in confusion, “There wasn’t a door. What kind of prison doesn’t have a door to lock in the prisoners?”

Sael ignored her. “I saw only three of them. The hall is very large. If we keep to the shadows, we might be able to slip past them.”

Jhan leaned around Sael to look for herself, despite his attempt to stop her. She saw three very odd looking people on the far end of the hall. Guards? Jhan doubted it. They were young, without weapons, and unconcerned about the many openings Jhan saw leading out of the hall on all sides.

“A prison, without a door or a guard, isn’t a prison,” Jhan said, answering her own question. “So, if we aren’t prisoners, what are we?”

“You are speaking madness!” Sael swore under his breath and used his weight to shove her back.

Jhan stumbled a little, scowling. “You should listen to me, I’ve had a lot of experience being a prisoner. Besides, what’s your plan anyhow? I don’t see light coming from any of those openings. Are we going to wander in the dark and try to find our way out of this mountain by feel?”

“This is why fear is shameful to us.” Sael’s voice was cold and accusing. “Your fear makes you too much of a coward to even try to escape!”

Jhan turned her hands into fists. “Really? I think it helps me see sense where someone without it might get us both killed forcing us to try the impossible!”

Sael grabbed Jhan’s arm as if to do just that, but then released her as he whirled in surprise. A bright light suddenly filled their passageway and a cool voice announced, “We are ready for you now.”

Sael drew a very tense breath. "I don't even have my sword," he whispered, and Jhan knew then that he was afraid too. It made him seem so very young, everything up until then false bravado, but he squared his shoulders and he was the first to walk out of the passageway. It was Jhan who followed hesitantly behind.

The hall had smooth walls lit by flickering torches. That uncertain light gave everything a shadowy, red appearance. It accented the strangeness of the scene up ahead. Like the living room of someone's home, there was an oval table made out of stone, chairs about it, and a white, fur rug sprawled out to carpet the stone floor. Plates, cups, silverware, and platters of food were set out as if the three standing near were presiding over a banquet.

"Please, be seated and partake of what you will." The young woman graciously motioned to the table. She was tall, wearing a red robe that clung to her spare frame like sheerest silk. Her feet were bare, white, and unconcerned with the rough floor as she walked around the table to greet them. Bald, Jhan noticed first, without even eyebrows or eyelashes. Her crystal eyes reminded her of Ixien, and her emotionless stare reinforced that impression.

The other two stood quietly, but were obviously tense and expectant. One looked perfectly normal; a blond haired man with lively brown eyes, an overlarge nose, and a lanky body so like the woman's, that Jhan surmised that they were brother and sister. He wore a tan leather shirt and a darker tan pair of pants tucked into boots strapped with leather thongs.

The last person was startling. Broad and crouching, Jhan had at first thought that he was wearing a reddish- brown fur, but then realized that the fur was a part of the man. It hung in a wild mane about his head and covered his arms and legs in a shaggy pelt. Like a lion, Jhan thought, shivering at the sharp, almond shaped eyes, the wide nostrils, and the long feline shape of his head. Aside from a woolen vest and some patchwork leggings, the man's thick pelt of fur was his only clothing.

Sael was too proud to let an enemy see his fear. His voice was steady and firm as he demanded, "What do you want from us?"

"Nothing, at the moment," the woman assured him. "We apologize for your unexpected journey, but we've long ago discovered that few wish to come here willingly."

"Where are the others?"

"There aren't any others," the woman replied. "We only required the two of you."

That sounded ominous and Jhan felt her fear begin to rise up like a wave, threatening to overwhelm her. Sael was reacting in the opposite manner, standing straighter, fists clenching and unclenching as if he were preparing to attack.

The woman flicked eyes over them both critically and then she stepped back and away from the

table. “We don’t mean you any harm. Our hospitality is sincere.”

The normal looking man stepped forward now, pulling out a stone chair. He was all congeniality. “Come, sit! You must be starving. We’ll explain things to you while you refresh yourselves.” He waved a good natured, dismissive hand at the woman. “Don’t mind my dour sister, or our strange appearance, we’re really quite harmless.”

When Jhan and Sael didn’t make any move to comply, the lion-man said mournfully, “Little one afraid of Minyah.” His voice was deep, almost as animal like as his appearance. He came towards Jhan, half of his steps on all fours. He moved smoothly despite that, closing the distance between them quickly. Jhan saw that his hands and feet were almost paws, tipped with sharp looking claws.

That was too much for Jhan. She touched her face and retreated, remembering the damage that another warped beast had dealt her. Sael jerked his head around to glare at her, as if he thought she might be trying to abandon him. When he saw her terror, he stepped between her and the lion-man instinctively.

“Minyah,” the woman admonished, putting a stop to the confrontation. “Give them peace until they understand more.”

Minyah obeyed with a sorrowful shake of his mane, turning to go back to his place. He sounded like a small, repentant child as he said, “Sorry.”

“Yes, well, that is Minyah, of course,” the young man introduced with a nod. His casualness gave the proceedings a surreal quality. “I am Togo,” he motioned to the woman, “and that is Tagara. We welcome you to our home.”

“We were kidnapped, Demon,” Sael reminded him through gritted teeth, “That is not a thing that merits *welcoming*.”

Togo’s innocent expression was disarming. “Demon? What is that? I’m afraid that I’m not very knowledgeable about your people; none of us are. We only know what we find out from our infrequent visitors.”

Jhan had flinched at Sael’s superstitious use of the word *demon*, but looking about at the bare rock and then at the feast on the table, it was hard to explain how they could have fresh vegetables and baked pastries in such an inhospitable place. “I don’t understand any of this,” she said numbly. “What is it that you want from us?”

“As I’ve already said,” Tagara reiterated, “nothing, for now.”

They stood staring at one another so long that Jhan could feel the tension in the air building. Sael was prepared to stand forever, not willing to concede to anything their captors wished. Jhan was of another mind. It seemed incredible to her, but, for once, her fear was taking a back seat to her starved

body. The food was calling out to her. Jhan couldn't ignore it any longer.

Togo's face was innocent. Tagara's face was bland, but un-threatening. Minyah was giving them a look a puppy might wear when it wanted to be petted. What did it matter? Jhan gave an inner shrug and sat down at the table, pulling a tray of meat towards her with a wary eye on her three captors.

"What are you doing?" Sael was incredulous.

"Eating," Jhan replied around a mouthful of meat, astonished by her own daring. "I don't think they went to all of this trouble to poison us." She glanced back at Sael's angry face as she took a long drink from a mug of clear water. "They don't want to explain anything until we do this much, so we might as well, Sael. Come on, you'll be able to fight them better on a full stomach."

Sael slowly came to the table, but he didn't sit down. His skin was very pale and his eyes never left the three people watching him in return. "I don't know how you can sit there and ignore--"

"I'm not ignoring anything," Jhan sighed. "I just can't do anything about it and neither can you. Eat something. You're beginning to look as thin as I am."

Sael was unwilling to lower his scarf in front of strangers, but his hunger and thirst were telling on him as well. He compromised by opening the bottom of his scarf and tucking food under it into his mouth. His motions were nervous and snatching, his guard never wavering for an instant.

"This is bold," Sael growled accusingly. "I'm starting to believe that your fear is an act."

Jhan shook her head as she stuffed a pastry into her mouth, half chewed, and then swallowed the sugary confection appreciatively. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm still terrified. I've just never felt this hungry before," she admitted, and then thoughtfully. "I feel different. I feel stronger, as if this food were actually doing me some good."

"What are you saying? Sael wondered impatiently, not wanting to discuss such things in their situation, but curious despite himself.

Jhan haltingly tried to explain, not really understanding it herself. "I can eat and eat and never gain an ounce. It's like throwing twigs on a roaring forest fire. This food is sticking though. I can feel it making me stronger as soon as I eat it."

Jhan reached for a third pastry and then a roasted animal leg in a thick stew. Sael scowled disapprovingly, wanting the meal over so that he could confront their enemies again and receive some answers. "You are eating as much as a whole band of warriors!"

"Like a pig, we would say where I come from," Jhan surprised herself with a burp. "Excuse me," she mumbled around another bite of food, "I don't know what's wrong. I've never been able to eat this much before and keep it down."

"You were dying," Togo broke in at last. He stepped forward and sat down at the table opposite

them, folding his hands together on the table top nervously. “Your body was eating of itself to your destruction and your heart was failing. Selaya healed you.”

“Healed me?” Jhan felt herself go pale. She pushed the food away from her as her stomach churned. Her fear was coming back full force. “You have someone with Power here?” The agony of days spent being tortured, and then healed to be tortured again by Dagara’s pet healer, came back to Jhan in a rush.

Sael sensed something in Jhan, perhaps her violent inner upheaval, as she tried to stand. He put a hand on her shoulder and bore down to keep her in her seat. His eyes never left Togo's. “I think it’s time you explained to us what is going on and what you want from us. I won’t be able to hold Jhan Dor if he becomes more frightened.”

It was a threat, and one Togo took seriously. “We don’t wish you to be afraid. I will speak, I think.” He looked back at his companions and they both nodded. “Yes, well, I suppose I should tell you about us and how we came to look as we do.”

“Who is Selaya?” Sael asked, not caring about that at all. “She is your Lady? She orders you?”

Togo was flustered, something in his mind, rehearsed perhaps, becoming confused. “Selaya is our mother,” he explained after a moment of regrouping his thoughts. “She has great abilities.”

“Why did she have us taken?” Sael demanded.

“To help her.”

Sael scowled and glanced down at Jhan, his hand still hard on her shoulder. “What does a Lady, with great abilities, need with an Ekhal and a little Ikhil? We aren’t warriors.”

“It isn’t a battle we need you to fight,” Tagara told them.

“Good,” Sael retorted bitterly, “because Your Lady neglected to heal my arm.” He pulled back the sleeve of his coat and revealed his bruised and purpling forearm with its neat row of stitches.

“It wasn’t life threatening,” Togo explained apologetically, “Selaya needs her strength for other things. She creates the heat in this place and makes food for us to eat. There wouldn’t be any air without her help.”

Jhan dropped a roll she had been clenching in one hand. It was mangled dough. “She created all of this with Power?”

Togo nodded, but misunderstood. “She has internal power to operate. This is within her parameters of function.”

“That means nothing to me!” Sael exclaimed with a shake of his head. “What language are you speaking?”

Jhan was shaken out of her horror by words she had never thought to hear again. It seemed out of

the realm of possibility, but Jhan found herself asking the questions almost breathlessly. “Parameters? Function? Internal power? Is this Selaya a machine, Togo?”

“What is *machine*?” Togo wondered.

Jhan rephrased the question. “Is Selaya made of metal?”

“I’ve never seen her,” Togo admitted and motioned to the wall behind them. It was perfectly smooth, but for a very small, round hole two feet from the floor. “She is trapped within the rock and has been for many lives of men.”

Jhan was standing up, going very pale. Sael let her, too confused to remember that she could be dangerous. “What is this *machine*?” Sael demanded. “Is it a type of demon?”

Jhan clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking, eyes on the mysterious hole. “Can Selaya speak to us?”

“No,” Togo replied regretfully. “She gave those parts of herself to us. Now she is only capable of speaking to us through our inner mainframes.”

Jhan went cold, eyes going wide. “You aren’t... alive?”

“We live,” Togo corrected, “We are more biochemical than Selaya, being made from others.”

“Others?” Jhan repeated, dazed.

Togo took a breath, but then let it out and looked at Sael. “If you will allow me to explain about ourselves, it will help you to understand Selaya’s need for you.”

Sael gave a short nod. “Do so, but give me an explanation that makes sense!”

“I will try,” Togo promised and then began carefully, “Selaya came from elsewhere. She is able to manipulate the God’s creation at a cellular level, to recreate it as she would have it, and to move through it by making spaces nonexistent. A radiation burst from a dying star damaged her and threw her from her course. She appeared within this rock and has been unable to escape. Men, mining for special rock, discovered her and promised to release her if she would do all that they asked.”

Togo motioned to the large room and the darkened doorways in every direction as he continued bitterly, “She mined this entire mountain for them, but, when she was done, they left, leaving her in darkness and solitude. In desperation, she sent her sensors out and was able to lure others down into the mountain. They served her for what she could create for them, but they also refused to release her. In anger, she committed *the Crime*, spinning her sensors into their flesh, using her ability to recreate until she made us, her children; a mixture of Selaya and bio- matter. We serve her and are her at the same time.”

“Why didn’t you release her?” Jhan wondered distantly as she tried to come to terms with Togo’s startling revelations.

Togo looked pained. “Selaya thought that she should serve a sentence for her taking of sentient life and she had made us mere children. Only now are we old enough to serve her properly and, only now, has she decided that her sentence is over.”

“That still doesn’t answer-” Jhan began to repeat, but Tagara was the one to answer, Togo overcome by shame.

“We did not wish our mother to leave us.” Tagara explained. “We ignored her pleas.”

“Until we grew old enough to find this life confining and stagnant,” Togo interjected, regaining his composure with difficulty. “We all grew to wish for freedom and, in doing so, understood what we had done to our mother in our selfishness.”

“This rock is a vein through the mountain, different from all else,” Tagara explained as she pointed to a gray discoloration in the stone wall. “Selaya is unable to work it. It is too hard and its properties bind her. The miners carved the hole to speak with her and they built a door to quell her suspicions of their true intent, but it took them years of chipping away at the stone.”

“There’s a door?” Jhan was very confused now, her head beginning to ache. “Do I have to ask why you just don’t use the door?”

“They never meant for it to work,” Tagara replied angrily, “It isn’t completed.”

“What is our part in this?” Sael broke in impatiently. “Your words mean nothing to me! I only understand that you are all demons and that your Selaya is your demon-mistress!”

Togo opened his mouth and then closed it, not sure how to reply to that. Jhan sat down again and rubbed at her face wearily. “Sael, calm down a moment,” she told him, “It doesn’t do any good shouting insults. Let them tell us the rest of it.”

“Nothing we have can chip this stone,” Tagara told them. “The miners took all of their tools and their skills with them. If we spent years in the attempt, we might be able to finish the door, but we don’t want to use our lives in this manner. Instead, we intend to use a concerted effort to break the door free all at once.”

Jhan held up her very small hands in exasperation. “With these?”

“Especially with those,” Tagara replied. “In the opening there is a lever, a releasing mechanism for the door. The properties of the stone make it impossible for us to come in contact with it. We are too much a part of Selaya. If you operate the mechanism, it will cause the great door to pivot open, hopefully breaking through the rest of the unfinished stone.”

“It sounds too simple.” Jhan grumbled, wishing with all of her heart that none of this was happening. “I can’t believe that you haven’t already tried it.”

They exchanged looks. Togo replied haltingly, “Since we are a part of Selaya, not bound by the

rock, she can send us short distances. We were able to observe travelers going through the mountains and to choose from them easily. Very few had the dimensions needed to do the task.”

“And those that did?” Jhan persisted.

“The miners didn’t wish Selaya to be released,” Tagara replied coldly when Togo faltered, “but they did look to a time when Selaya might die and thought to plunder her corpse. They made the mechanism for themselves; creating a special key that would reach through the narrow opening.”

“And they took that with them,” Jhan guessed sourly.

“Yes,” Tagara continued. “They also created traps within the opening. They are deadly.”

Jhan’s face went tight and pale. She stood, striding purposefully over to the opening. Leaning down with a hand on the rock, she felt the metal buttons of her cloak cling. “Magnetic,” she muttered absently. “Machines definitely don’t like that!”

The opening was very small. Looking at it critically, Jhan almost doubted that she could get her small arm into it. Black stains covered the opening and the floor beneath it, turning the food in her stomach. “So, who did you murder attempting this? Children?”

“Women, mostly,” Togo replied and his voice shook, “Some young men. Selaya can be cruel.”

“You brought them!” Jhan exclaimed as she turned back to them accusingly.

“We are a part of her,” Togo reminded Jhan.

“And you think that I’m just going to stick my arm in there, do you?” Jhan seethed and strode away from the hole. “Well, I’m not! I’m leaving!”

“Where will you go?” Togo asked quietly. “We are at the heart of the mountain. Selaya will not let you go.”

“We are leaving,” Sael repeated for Jhan. “We will not release your demon mistress. Better to die more honorably trying to escape!”

“Wait!” Togo called anxiously. “She can give you anything you desire!”

“My heart’s desire is dead!” Sael retorted angrily, “I require nothing else!”

It was Jhan who paused and turned, face full of pain and a hope she couldn’t kill. “What are you saying?”

“She moves through matter. She recreates matter. She controls many things.” Togo was like a fisherman pulling his line, sinking his hook deep within Jhan. “She could make you a man again. Is that what you desire? She could kill the cruel people who did that to you. She could give you almost anything you wish.”

Jhan’s face twisted into a snarl. “Did she tell you that or did you peek under my clothes while you were kidnapping me?”

“Selaya healed you,” Togo reminded her. “She knows everything about your body.”

“But nothing about my mind, I see,” Jhan replied, ignoring Sael’s tug on her cloak. “I don’t want to be a man, Togo! What I want is to go home. Can she do that?”

Togo’s eyes unfocused for just an instant and then he nodded. “She can do almost anything,” he repeated. Which wasn’t a promise, Jhan noticed, and it certainly wasn’t enough to risk her life on. She turned and found Sael already gone.

Anxiously, Jhan chose the nearest corridor and plunged into darkness. She blinked her eyes reflexively, as if that could bring sight back to them, and her hand felt anxiously along the rough wall. While she held her other hand before her to warn her of obstacles, she shouted, “Sael!”

There was a tense pause and then, “Here,” Sael said directly in front of Jhan.

Jhan’s hand touched Sael briefly before she snatched it back.

“It is good that you followed,” Sael continued. “Promises from demons, the stories say, are as insubstantial as mist.”

“Selaya isn’t a demon,” Jhan replied tensely, “but I suppose that doesn’t matter. Machines don’t have good reputations in stories either.”

They were silent, considering their situation, both knowing that it was hopeless. Sael spoke it aloud, as if it needed to be said and faced. “We have little hope of finding our way out. Without light, or supplies, we won’t last long.”

“I’m sorry,” Jhan replied, as if that needed saying too, “I won’t put my hand in that hole.”

“I didn’t ask.” Sael was offended.

Jhan heard Sael moving about, cloth rustling, and then he groped for her hand. Jhan flinched, drawing back, but not before Sael had placed the end of his scarf into it. “What’s-,” Jhan began, but Sael spoke over her, impatient.

“If you will not touch me,” Sael said, “then hold onto my scarf. It will keep us together without wasting breath and energy on talking.”

Jhan fingered the long length of silk and then wrapped a bit around her hand to feel more secure. “I’m sorry,” she found herself saying again, “I can’t help being afraid of you.”

Sael’s reply was surprising and calm, as if they had all the time in the world to discuss it, “Perhaps, if we keshun and get it from between us...”

“What?” Jhan almost released the scarf in shock.

“It is an inconvenient place,” Sael agreed, purposefully misunderstanding, “but this fear you have will never be put to rest otherwise. We can be quick about it, and one sided, so that my oath to Obahn is not disturbed.”

"That is- I can't believe what you're suggesting!"

"You fear my needs overpowering you and hurting you," Sael replied, as if he were talking about relieving an itch. "Satisfy the need that you think that I have, in your own way, and it will not be something to be feared any longer. It is reasonable."

"No, it isn't!" Jhan exploded, incredulous.

"How can we hope to escape if you fear me so much?"

"It isn't just about keshuning!" Jhan choked on a sob, shuddered, and tried to speak through rising panic. "I thought, after what you said happened to you, that you would understand!"

"I overcame my attack long ago because I am a man," Sael replied stiffly. "You can do as much, despite what you are."

"I can't!"

"Then stay here with your fear!" Sael pulled the scarf out of Jhan's hand and she heard him begin to walk away.

"This is ridiculous!" Jhan screamed after him and tried to follow, hands outstretched before her. "Only a man would even consider having sex in the middle of an escape!"

Jhan bumped full force into Sael's chest and his words were full of relish as he struck his point home. "You are the one thinking of it, not I, Ikhil. I think you are the one being ridiculous."

Jhan felt her face go hot with anger, knowing that Sael was right. She wished that it helped, but it didn't. The thing inside of her that feared him was a reflex born of torture. Nothing could erase it and there wasn't any way to explain that to Sael.

Jhan found the end of Sael's scarf determinedly. He took that as a concession and allowed it. "Now," he said grimly, "perhaps we can get back to the business of escaping."

They walked with only the sound of their footsteps in their ears and the feel of the rock wall and the scarf between them. Enfolded in the darkness, it was as if they were walking in deepest space; a void without an end. After an hour of it, despair sapped at their heels and Jhan felt it snatching at hers, slowing her down. It sang a song of defeat, urging her to stop, sit down, and just give up. It made the scarf slide through her fingers, a useless lifeline that was only holding back the inevitable moment of failure.

"Stop it!" Sael halted, shouting, and his voice echoed wildly all about them. He tugged on the scarf, almost pulling it from Jhan's fingers. "I feel you falling back from me! There are demons behind us and a maze of darkness before us, yet you still indulge yourself in hating me!"

Jhan had flinched, trembling at his outburst. "I don't hate you," she blurted out, surprised at his conclusion. "I'm just-" afraid, she was going to repeat to him yet again, but he took that moment to

attack her, barreling into her and sending them both to the hard stone floor. His fist cracked into Jhan's face. It dazed her and she tasted blood from a bitten tongue. When another fist went into her side, she reacted without thought, falling back on the long hours of Vek's training.

Jhan's knees came up, feet sliding under the space Sael foolishly gave her between his body and hers. Like springs, she used them like a wedge to shove him off, rolling as he expelled all of his air and fell onto his back. She found him by that noise and wrapped her hand around his larynx. He wasn't a warrior, but he was enough of a healer to know what would happen if she squeezed. Sael lay still, panting.

"What now?" Jhan snarled furiously.

Sael leaned up close to Jhan to emphasize his words. "Now, you rape me."

Jhan felt the shock of his words throughout her body. "I'm not a rapist!"

"And neither am I!" Sael shouted back. "Yet you fear that from me when you can so easily kill me! We can't afford it! If you will not trust me, then we might as well kill one or the other of us and go on alone!"

Jhan ached from his blows, her face and side throbbing. She wanted to hate him then, but she knew that he could have hit harder and broken bone. Besides, his demonstration was having the desired effect. A small part of her fear was retreating, seeing some reason in what Sael was trying to say. He hadn't let her beat him, she knew, she had overpowered him fairly.

Jhan released Sael and sat back on her heels. He sat up with a groan. "Have I hurt you?" Jhan asked worriedly.

"As much as I have you," Sael replied tightly. "It will mend."

Jhan rubbed her hands over her face and then rubbed her eyes wearily. She felt more of the fear slip away painlessly. She felt about, found Sael's hand, and took his rough, calloused fingers in hers. She stood, tugging on him to signal that he should get up as well. When they were both on their feet, Jhan released him in favor of the scarf, but Sael understood.

They walked without saying anything else and Jhan felt better for a small while, until the darkness seeped back into her soul and the weight of the mountain began pressing down on her spirit. The tunnel didn't turn or end, just sliced through the rock in an endless hallway without hint of light or even a drift of air to let them know if they were going in the right direction.

"We're going to die," Jhan said aloud as another, interminable hour dragged by. She had counted five hours, keeping the time by silently reciting the seconds in a rhythmic drone.

Sael stopped walking and Jhan bumped into his back. "We will rest," he announced and sat down as if she had said nothing.

“We are going to die, aren’t we?” Jhan prodded.

“How will it help for me to admit to such a thing?”

“I like to face facts.”

“You like to talk too much,” Seal retorted glumly and she heard him settling against the stone as if trying to get comfortable.

Jhan gingerly sat as well, cross legged. “I can’t keep things bottled up inside of me,” Jhan told him, “There isn’t enough room.”

There was a silence and then Sael caught the joke about her size and chuckled wearily. “You are maddening!”

“You aren’t telling me anything new,” Jhan said, and then more intensely, “Tell me something new, Sael. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Sael growled, “Men don’t share such confidences,” but he relented in the next moment, knowing how little it mattered in that place. “I’m thinking that this tunnel doesn’t go where we want it to. I feel that we are traveling downwards. I know that there isn’t any hope. I’m also thinking of my people and their customs. They never admit defeat. I’m thinking, in that, I will hold true. I will walk until I can’t walk any longer and then, maybe, I will crawl. What are you thinking, Jhan Dor?”

Sael’s voice had challenge in it, but Jhan wasn’t a man to take it up. “I’m just tired,” she replied offhandedly, “and hating that I’m going to die this way.”

“Hmm, well, I am not ready to speak about dying yet.” Sael yawned. “Try and sleep. I don’t think we need to keep watch. Those demons, strangely, didn’t seem willing to force us to do their bidding.”

Jhan put her chin on her upraised knees as she heard Sael settle down, perhaps pillowing his head on an arm to cushion it against the rock. She didn’t want to deal with more recriminations, so she held silent, pretending to sleep as well until she heard his breathing even out and fall into a gentle rhythm.

“I’m just as stubborn as you are,” Jhan muttered to break the silence, “but maybe in a way you might not like. I’m not ready to die yet, either, and, now that I realize how hopeless this really is, I think that I’m willing to risk death to avoid certain death.”

Mind made up, Jhan lay down on the hard rock floor, curling up in a tight ball with her hood for a pillow. It was harder than she thought, to let go and sleep, even in such a void. She kept listening beyond Sael’s breathing and gentle movements; waiting to hear something. What that was, she didn’t know. When sleep finally claimed her, her nervousness transferred into her dreams, sending her into fragments of memory that contorted and twisted in a flickering landscape of unreality.

CHAPTER NINE

(Tenebrous Dreams)

Someone was holding her, Jhan realized, as she slowly came out of sleep. A voice was speaking raggedly as a calloused hand brushed at the unseen tears on her face. "I will not let them have you, Jhan Dor! Awake! Please, awake from this horror! On my life, I swear I will not let them have you!"

"Sael?" Jhan's mind collected together as if something had blown it into scattered fragments. She was cold, full of sweat drying on her skin, and sore in every muscle. Even her jaws ached from clenching her teeth.

"At last!" Sael sounded as if he were close to fainting with relief. His grip tightened on Jhan and she felt herself shifted into the man's lap so that she was sitting up against him.

"What- What are you doing!" Jhan tried to push away, but she was too limp, too confused to do anything but struggle awkwardly.

Sael refused to relinquish his grip on Jhan. His voice was ragged and anxious as he told her, "You spoke in your sleep. You described such-such horror! I tried to wake you, but you were a prisoner of your dream, shaking and seeming to have a fit. The demons- the demons must be able to attack you somehow, while you sleep. They must be trying to force you to go back and help them."

Jhan stopped struggling, the blood draining from her face. "What did I say?"

Jhan could hear Sael swallow audibly and then he stammered, "Sh-shamefull things; cruel, inhuman. Only- only things demons could conjure in a man's mind."

Jhan groped for memory, but found nothing but an unsettling collage of images that were already slipping away. "Tell me."

Jhan could feel Sael shaking his head. "If you don't remember, best not to ever know!"

"But I do remember," Jhan persisted, chilled to the bone. "I just don't know which part I dreamed about."

"You are wrong!" Sael exclaimed. "This- this could not have happened!"

"I won't know until you tell me."

It came out in a rush of words, as if Sael couldn't hold them in any longer, and his voice was heavy with revulsion. "You screamed out against- against someone who was cutting your leg open from knee to ankle; cracking bones, splitting them, tying them together! You wept about someone torturing you in a cell, doing unspeakable things; a bloated monster beyond imagining! You spoke of men who- who,

but that surely couldn't have happened!" Sael was shouting now, denying it with all of his strength into Jhan's face. "Anyone would have died-died a hundred times over!" Sael began shaking like a leaf. "I don't wish such dreams! Gods keep them away from me. Keep them away!"

It was like being cradled in a storm, Jhan thought, as Sael tried to deal with what he had heard Jhan say. She let him go on, words tumbling meaningless over her grim calmness. When he quieted at last, she sighed and leaned back against him, her fear of him gone completely for the moment.

"I will go back and I will kill those demons for doing such a thing," Sael finally said, tight and fierce. "I swear that I won't let them have you again!"

"Sael, they didn't do anything to me," Jhan told him, "Those things really did happen to me, and worse; much worse."

"No!" Sael protested and his voice caught on a sob.

"Yes," Jhan insisted firmly, "Yes, they did Sael. I live with those memories, but they like to get into my dreams to torment me some times. There's nothing you or I can do about it. "

"Forgive me!" Sael begged, "The things that I said earlier- I was mocking you-disgusted by your fear. I- How could I have known?"

"You couldn't have and I'm not blaming you." Jhan finally found the strength and the will to sit up, pushing firmly away from Sael. She ached in a pulsing beat that made her catch her breath. "I can be very infuriating, I know, but at least now you can see why it's so difficult for me to see past it. It's like a whirlpool of pain, trying to suck me in. It makes it hard to think about anything else."

Jhan heard Sael stand up, as if he were eager to get moving and leave the nightmares behind them, but he couldn't help asking questions; an attempt to have Jhan deny that such horrible men could live in the world. "The one you spoke of, the large man who tended your cell. Did he truly do such- such-"

"Yes," Jhan whispered, and then dully, "They all had orders not to rape me, but they were most inventive about skirting the letter of that order; that man better than most. He slept with me at night, you see, after everyone else had done with me."

"I would kill a man like that!" Sael exclaimed shakily.

"I did," Jhan shuddered, remembering it and not wanting to. "He was drunk one night, sloppy, and unaware until the guard came to get me the next morning. They let me kill him. It was the happiest day I remember in all that time."

"Stop!" Sael groaned. "I can't hear any more!"

"Neither can I," Jhan agreed.

Jhan stood as well. Both of them were breathing hard as they tried to deal with their emotions and then Sael asked, tentatively, "How did you survive it?"

Jhan's shrug was more of a flinch. "The man who commanded my torture had Power, a lot of it. He also had a healer with Power. Together, they kept me alive."

"Why?" That one word encompassed a lot and Sael knew it, giving Jhan time to think of an answer that would at least explain some of it.

"Simple revenge, at first," Jhan replied at last, "but then he thought to make me into a weapon against his enemies. He and his soldiers were men who enjoyed doing what they did to me. In the end, I think they forgot the reason for it. They didn't need one."

"I would have gone mad, even died!" Sael choked.

Jhan nodded, forgetting that he couldn't see it and then replied truthfully, "I did go mad and I did die. It didn't make any difference. He was that strong."

Jhan paused, gathering her resolve, and then continued in what she hoped was a reasonable voice. "I think you know now what I see in the darkness and why I can't endure it any longer."

"What are you saying?"

Jhan chewed on her lip, released it, and then plowed on. "I said that I wouldn't stick my hand in that hole, but that was simple fear. Now that I've had time to think, time to begin to see that there are worse things to be afraid of--"

"You can't mean that?" Sael tossed aside compassion for her in an instant of outrage. "Would you do the bidding of our enemies?"

"No, but they won't let us go otherwise. I don't see any way around it."

Sael's breathing came harsh and quick. "You don't have any guarantee that they'll let us go afterward."

"I suppose not." Jhan wished that she could see his face. It was hard to reason with the dark, "but this course we are taking now, you've already said it's hopeless."

"It may be hopeless, but I'll keep my honor," Sael retorted, clearly angry now.

"Honor again," Jhan sighed. "We'll, I think we can turn that on its head. I'll be the one and risk my life to save both of us, okay?"

"And where would my honor be if I allowed that?"

"Sael!" Jhan's voice echoed its exasperation down the passageway. "I can't take this darkness any longer and I don't want to die in it at the bottom of a mountain. I'm going back to our captors and I'm going to take a chance that I'll succeed."

"I don't see that it's much of a chance. You might die," Sael seethed.

"At least it'll be in the light and not here, drowning in darkness until we starve or die of thirst."

Jhan shrugged dejectedly to herself. "If I fail, they won't be able to use you. Maybe they'll let you go."

“Why should I let you do this?” Sael demanded.

“Let me?” Jhan was caustic. “You’ve already admitted that I can kill you, Sael. I’ll do as I please, I think.”

“Finally, a bit of bravery,” Sael replied bitterly, “but in the wrong cause.”

Jhan held her breath, letting the silence and the darkness gather close about them both and long enough to make them both uncomfortable. When she finally let out that breath, she said very simply, “Could you endure to have one of my dreams?”

Sael wasn’t a liar, but Jhan could tell that he struggled with it. “No,” he admitted quietly.

“Would you do anything not to have them?” Jhan persisted.

Again Sael struggled, knowing where her questioning was leading and not wanting to concede to her. “I- I begged the gods. You were just waking up. You must have heard...”

“I did,” Jhan acknowledged tersely, “and if I thought my God could do something about it, I would be crying to Him too. That’s to the point. Nobody can help me except myself. I’ll do anything not to have those dreams, Sael, but as long as we walk in the dark, without any distractions and only our own company, they’ll keep coming back. I’m also opposed to dying and I don’t see any other escape. Take either explanation that will convince you or go on by yourself. I’m not going to follow you.”

Jhan turned, even though she wasn’t really as brave as her words. She made certain her footsteps sounded loudly on the stone as she took three steps away from Sael back the way they had come. That was all he allowed her before he closed the distance between them and snatched at her cloak. He found her hand and slapped the end of his scarf into it.

“I won’t be told what to do by an Ikhlil,” Sael swore. “If you want to kill yourself, I will go to watch. If your death releases me, then all the better.”

His words were rough, but Jhan could hear his angry concern for her. She might have smiled, but she was too aware that she was about to gamble in a very dangerous game and that the odds might not be any better than walking the passageway until they died.

“Well, it’s a long way back,” Jhan sighed, “Do you want to lead?”

There was a flash of light before Sael could reply and a stomach wrenching disorientation. Jhan blinked and lifted her hands to her smarting eyes. When she lowered them again, she gasped. They were back in the torchlit hall, standing before their three captors.

It was Togo who stepped forward with hands raised in a placating fashion. “Don’t be frightened. Selaya brought you here.”

Sael had fallen to one knee, as pale as milk. “What can we do against such demons?”

Jhan was hugging herself, mentally checking to make sure that she was all in one piece, while her

eyes flicked wildly about the hall. It was as if they'd never left. The food was still on the table, steaming hot, as if someone had just served it. Tagara was still standing in her red dress, face as remote as ever. Minyah was crouching on the floor, every muscle tight and face anxious.

Jhan walked over to the table and poured cool water from a glass pitcher into a silver goblet. Sipping it agitatedly, her hand shook on the stem. She counted the sips she took, taking her time until her heart stopped its mad pounding. "Seems to me," she said at last, "that if Selaya can mine an entire mountain, change living beings into part machine, and transport bodies from one place to another, she must be able to get free of that rock herself. What kind of game are you playing?"

Togo was quick to correct her. "Selaya's memory and interface are shielded from the stone. It is her metal body that can't be moved and the stone around her that can't be worked. We haven't lied. She is trapped, and will remain so unless you help her."

Jhan lowered her glass and turned to them. "Something that simple, brings down a thing so powerful. She shrugged her shoulders in defeat, but it turned into more of a flinch. "I'm going to try and free her."

"We know," Togo said guiltily, "I followed you. Since I am connected to Selaya, she knew when you had made your decision."

Jhan felt anger wash through her. She flicked a look at Sael and saw him getting to his feet, just as outraged as she was that their confidences had been overheard.

"So, you expected us to give up?" Jhan bit out accusingly.

"They expected *you* to give up!" Sael corrected, furious, "You've fallen into their trap and dragged me in after you!"

"There isn't any way out of this mountain without the help of Selaya," Tagara told them coldly. "It was only a matter of time until you realized it as well."

"Inevitable," Jhan agreed and rubbed at her tired eyes. She lowered her hands after a moment and straightened. "Let's get this over with."

Jhan walked over to the hole in the wall. She was still shaking, sweat beading on her skin. She was too aware of everyone going silent and still behind her, not even Sael taking the moment to argue one last time. She almost wished he would, giving her some argument that would make enough sense to dissuade her.

The hole was low. Jhan bit her lip as she was forced to kneel on the black stains on the floor. Trying to peer into the hole, she saw something flicker, a firefly type light that wasn't steady enough to let her see her way.

"You will need to stand by your companion," Tagara told Sael, "That is why we brought you."

“What’s going to happen?” Sael demanded.

“The door might break under the stresses.”

“Might?” Sael echoed suspiciously.

“You must assist your companion,” Tagara insisted. “We knew one so small might not have the strength we needed. There are possibilities...”

Jhan didn’t expect Sael to obey Tagara. He was angry, his pride and honor sullied by Jhan’s refusal to die escaping. Tagara’s evasions and demands were probably the last straw, she thought. So, it was to Jhan’s surprise, when footsteps approached and Sael put a hand on her shoulder.

“Get it over with, as you said,” Sael growled to hide his nervousness.

Jhan nodded jerkily, swallowed, and then reached into the opening. Her arm just fit. Searching with her fingers, she found three levers to her right. “Which one?” she called out.

“We don’t know,” Tagara replied.

“Don’t know?” Jhan choked on a sob and swallowed hard again. Sweat began running down the sides of her face. “I suppose one opens the door and the other two set off the traps,” she surmised shakily. “Do you know which levers the other *victims* tried?”

“No.” Tagara’s voice was maddeningly calm.

Jhan leaned her forehead against the stone. It was warm, like a live thing, but it didn’t comfort her. “For future reference,” she shouted angrily, “I’m pulling the second lever!” and she did just that before her nerve failed her.

It was wrong and Jhan knew it in the next instant. She screamed as the stone ground and clamped onto her arm, moving it inexorably into the rock like a beast trying to swallow her whole. “Sael!”

Sael didn’t try and pull Jhan back. Instead, he raised a knife. Jhan’s widened, panicked eyes, had a split-second of time to recognize it as having come from the table and to realize that Sael was taking hold of her arm with the intention of using that knife to cut it off!

“No!” Jhan shrieked and twisted her trapped hand to try and free herself. Her extra joints allowed her hand to move at an impossible angle. Her fingers touched another lever farther back than the first three. She grabbed it desperately and hung on.

“Pull me back!” Jhan shouted at Sael. “I have another lever!”

He would have to drop the knife, Sael knew, and the chance to save her would be gone. He saw the knowledge in her eyes and Jhan nodded fiercely, confirming her decision. Sael respected it. He dropped the knife, wrapped both arms about her slim waist, and pulled backwards with all of his might.

Jhan felt skin leave her arm and bones smash together, but her arm moved backwards one inch, two, and then the last inch to pull the lever. There was an audible click even above Jhan’s screaming in

pain. The rock paused, grinding to a halt, and then it began rolling backwards and dropping sideways at the same time.

Freed unexpectedly, Sael was taken unaware. His strength yanked Jhan from the hole. They both fell backwards and rolled as blood from Jhan's mangled arm splattered all about them. They huddled where they stopped, Jhan cradling her arm and moaning over the pain, even as she looked up to see what her sacrifice had accomplished.

The stone broke under the relentless pivot of the door mechanism. Stones, as large as Jhan's head, fell down and shattered right where she and Sael had been crouching near the hole. Slowly, with a shudder of rock, the door swung open.

It was hard to describe the scene. Jhan was confused at first, panting in pain as she sat up, eyes trying to adjust to the glitter of lights and the bizarre twisting and fluted turnings of an alien machine. When the machine cracked open like an egg and a fluid spilled out onto the floor, she scrambled backwards into Sael who was muttering brokenly in some sort of prayer of protection.

A metal dragon, Jhan thought in frightened awe, as a thing pulled itself out of the machine and stepping onto the safe, non- magnetic rock. Careful, so very careful not to get near it, as if it yet feared getting as trapped as the rest of its body, the thing stepped through the door and into the hall.

Not a dragon, Jhan corrected herself, but something imitating a creature she had never seen before. It was silver metallic, smooth as if molded from a single piece of material. It stood nearly fifteen feet tall and was easily five feet wide. It had something of a face, but with a snout and spines like a reptile. Its arms were long, resting on the ground with long fingers hooked with claws. Its rear legs were bipedal but chunky and turned backwards like a birds legs. It so reminded Jhan of a reptile that she expected to see a tail, but it was a machine and didn't need one to balance.

"Mother!" Togo exclaimed and began to step forward.

It was like seeing the center of a star and then a void; deepest darkness. It sucked Selaya into it and then she was gone. They all stood gaping, not understanding, and then Tagara, Minyah, and Togo rushed into the space Selaya had vacated, exclaiming and crying.

"So much for gratitude," Jhan began to say and then felt the agony of her arm stop as suddenly as Selaya's disappearance. She looked down and found her clothing ripped, but her skin unmarked and her bones not crushed. "Well, that's something."

"I am in your debt." Sael's voice was shaky, but filled with resolve. "You have saved my life. Ask anything of me you will, Jhan Dor."

"You're either very brave or just hard headed," Jhan sighed, feeling none too steady. "How you can even think of your honor and customs at a time like this...", but then she understood. At least she had

some idea of what Selaya had been. Sael had none. By falling back on solid custom and denying the *demon* he'd just seen hatch into the world, he was retaining his sanity.

"Ask," Sael insisted.

Jhan turned her face away from the crying children of Selaya and regarded Sael with a pinched expression. "All right, I'll join your madness for a moment. Since we're still stuck at the bottom of a mountain and still likely to die, I'd rather do that dying as a woman. For repayment, I ask that you consider me a woman from now on. Forget all about that *he* and *Ikhil* talk! Forget all about that manly honor and shameful, shameless business! I am a woman!"

Sael was too far in shock to protest. He simply inclined his head, his eyes dazed. Those eyes went topsy-turvy as Jhan's stomach tried to empty itself into her lap. She seemed to do a complete flip and then land sprawling into a bank of snow.

Jhan sat up with a cry, arms flailing and snow flying in all directions. When she saw Obahn standing uncomfortably close with his sword drawn, she froze, choking back another scream. She was lucky that the man was a trained warrior. He was holding himself still, waiting until he understood what was going on.

Images splattered across Jhan's vision as she tried to orient herself; baku and imala huddled in a group, munching grain from their feed bags and ears alert to the newcomers, the hide tent, erected in the shelter of the evergreens, Zerain stock still in the opening of the tent, scarf hiding any astonished expression she might have had while smoke from her braziers was doing a dance about her head. It was almost impossible to grasp the enormity of having been transported from the heart of a mountain to the bottom of it in the blink of an eye, yet it was clear that they weren't on the mountain any longer. The camp was well past the tree line.

Sael was the first to recover. He walked forward resolutely and kneeled at his lord's feet. His bare face was hollow and his eyes were dark and strained, as if he wasn't sure whether Obahn would greet him or take off his head. Obahn's hand was tight on his sword, not giving him the smallest clue.

Ixien stepped from the tent, edging around Zerain. His face registered some astonishment. "We thought that you were dead," he said simply.

"Or fled together," Obahn added, his voice heavy with insinuation.

Sael's face went angry and red, but he said nothing. Jhan remembered that he was supposed to be under a command of silence. It was up to her to explain things. Warily, Jhan gathered together her thoughts as she slowly stood up. It was hard to speak through her numbed shock, but she managed to choke out their story briefly. She left out many things. Obahn didn't need to know them, she felt, and she wasn't in any shape to relate a longer story coherently. She could see that Obahn suspected, but he

was still too unnerved to pursue it further by questioning her.

When Jhan ended, her words coming to a stammering halt, she could see that Obahn's anger with Sael was visibly mollified by her account, yet he didn't give the Ekhal leave to stand and his sword remained out and ready. His attention shifted to the children of Selaya instead, as bewildered as to what they were as Sael had been. When he spoke, his words were slow and cautious; a man speaking to the preternatural. "Do you have any special powers, like your mother?"

"I can affect the flow of the air," Togo told him with a self-deprecating shrug. He was shivering in the cold, looking very human and defenseless as he motioned to Minyah and Tagara, "Minyah can shape stone. Tagara is able to make heat and light. We are harmless," he assured Obahn, misunderstanding the reason for his question, "All of our other powers came from Selaya. Now that she is gone..."

Obahn was disappointed, having expected such creatures to possess more spectacular powers. It was clear from his tone that he was losing some of his trepidation and replacing it with irritation, "Heat and light I can always use. Your other abilities are useless to me. Do you intend to go our way?"

"Our mother has left us and we are unable to live by ourselves," Togo explained, and then anxiously, "If you would allow us to follow you, until we find a new home--"

"That has a price," Obahn growled, cutting his plea off unsympathetically, "I need warriors. If you follow me, you must swear to obey me in all things and to fight by my side. If you refuse to swear, you must find your own way."

"We don't have any other options," Togo admitted, but he was uncomfortable with what Obahn wanted. "We must swear to you if we are to live."

They were being forced to enter Obahn's service, none of them looking pleased about it. It was too apparent that they weren't warriors and Obahn must have been desperate to want them. It stirred up the embers of Jhan's depression and killed the small elation she had felt at escaping certain death. She remembered her own unwilling bondage, asking bleakly, "Where's Ahlen?"

"Sleeping," Zerain replied in a small voice as she edged behind her husband's protective sword.

"He has been sunk in grief, thinking that you were dead," Obahn told Jhan absently, his eyes and thoughts never leaving the children of Selaya. His brows were drawn together, as if he still hadn't made up his mind to accept them, despite their promise.

Waiting tensely, Togo was wrapping his arms about himself, shivering and hunkering down to keep his heart warm. Minyah was comfortable in his fur, eyes roving their surroundings; everything new and exciting for him. Tagara was as straight and stately as ever, seemingly unruffled by her sudden expulsion from the only home she'd ever known. Bare footed still, and in her silk dress, she was

unaffected by the cold. In fact, the snow was melting under her feet in a steaming puddle.

Obahn stared at the sight, amazed. Tagara was unconsciously proving that her power was far greater than her brothers and, perhaps, something to be reckoned with. It was obvious that Obahn was considering whether he could control her, and that power, with only a simple oath between them. He didn't arrive at an easy answer, but stirred at last saying, "I accept your oaths. Enter my tent."

The children of Selaya were caught off guard by his abrupt decision. They blinked, glanced at each other, and then smiled in relief as they began going into the tent. Tagara was the last to enter. She caught her breath in shock and alarm when Ixien took hold of her arm purposefully. He neither flinched nor drew away from her heat.

"I am of the Fire people," Ixien told her calmly, "Heat doesn't harm us."

Tagara looked Ixien up and down, noting how different he was from the others. "I have never had anyone touch me before," she told him and her voice trembled, "not even my brothers could manage it."

Ixien withdrew his hand, but his face was, for once, filled with some energy of emotion Jhan couldn't identify. It was almost a look of someone who had been searching for something and then had found it unexpectedly. Surprise, maybe, or more closely, awe. He followed Tagara into the tent, beginning to speak with her softly. Zerain hesitated and then gathered her courage to go in after them, not about to show fear in front of her husband.

Jhan wanted to follow them. She was shivering badly. The cold had wrapped about her with a vengeance and, though not nearly as severe as on the mountain top, it had sharp teeth. Still, not even that bite could force her to pass Obahn and Sael. They stood between her and shelter; an angry barrier.

Obahn stared down at Sael, eyes narrowed as he appeared to measure every last inch of the young man. Sael was as rigid as a stone under that regard, everything about him demanding a return to his place at Obahn's side. Finally, Obahn relented, sheathing his sword as if he regretted not being able to use it for violence. He spoke brusquely, "Your arm is unbound and dirty, Ekhal. Clean your wound before it festers. I don't have any use for a sick Bhakali."

Sael rose slowly and went into the tent, as if he had expected to be killed and couldn't quite believe that nothing had happened. Knowing Obahn, Jhan was finding it hard to believe herself.

Obahn turned his glare on Jhan next. "Again and again you astound me, Ikhil."

"I astound myself," Jhan replied dryly.

"Once again, there are debts between us," Obahn continued angrily, "You saved the life of my Bhakali."

Jhan shrugged and felt twinges of strained muscles. It made her frown and look surer of herself

than she felt. "I've already asked for my repayment," she told him, "I asked that I be treated as a woman from now on." Jhan rushed on furiously as Obahn's face twisted into the beginnings of disgust, "I don't care about your customs or your honor, or I do, at least as far as this is concerned. I won't explain my reasoning, nobody ever listens to it anyway. It's just my decision, whether you like it or not."

Jhan wasn't making any sense, even to herself, but Obahn gave another of his expressive grunts, silencing her. "I won't argue such lunacy now," he replied dismissively, "Too much has weighted my mind that I must sort out and decide upon."

"I don't want an argument," Jhan told him defiantly, crossing her arms hard across her breast. "I want what Sael owes me."

Jhan could see that Obahn was grinding his teeth, but then his face smoothed out as he said evenly, "As a woman you would belong to Ahlen; unmarried and defiled. Under our laws, straying from his protection would mean that any man could have you and do as they pleased." He glared at her in challenge. "Is this the life that you want?"

Jhan's hands had balled into fists, but she didn't hesitate, "I am a woman. It isn't a choice. As for belonging to Ahlen, I don't. If any man thinks he can *have me* because of it, just let him try!"

"I can't allow you to be a woman if you refuse to act or speak like one!" Obahn retorted, but he was more amused than angry now. Jhan could see why. In his mind, she had just defeated herself.

"You can't-" Jhan began in protest, but Obahn cut her off.

"I can do anything," Obahn snapped threateningly, "I am a Hyjar." He calmed himself with an effort as he continued, "Submit to man's rule or be a man. There isn't a middle way."

Obahn left Jhan out in the snow, going into the tent to deal with his other problems. Jhan glared at the tent flap that fell closed behind him, her body burning from Obahn's easy condescension and effortless manipulation. He had taken away the concession Jhan had won from Sael. Back to square one, Jhan thought, as if the journey over the mountain had never occurred; her sacrifices amounting to nothing.

Ahlen ducked through the tent flap, distracting Jhan from her angry regard as his eyes searched her face wildly. He looked pinched and haunted, as if he couldn't believe that she was really there. "I thought-"

Jhan shook herself, trying to regain some self-possession, saying, "You thought that I was dead. I've already heard."

"I would never have forgiven myself!" Ahlen exclaimed in anguish.

"Good," Jhan replied tightly, "If I had died, I would have like that a great deal!"

Ahlen swallowed, tried to speak, stopped, and then took a deep breath to stammer, "I don't know if you were in any condition to remember, but I promised you, once we reached the lowlands, that you would be free to choose whether to follow me or not. I won't break that promise."

"Where would I go?" Jhan spat back, bending her fingers like claws and longing to rend him with them. "Should I just walk away? Starve to death? Freeze to death? Try to climb back over the mountains? Just shut- up, Ahlen, and let me at least have the comfort that comes from not having any choice in the inevitable!"

Jhan brushed angrily past Ahlen, leaving him dumbstruck by her outburst. She stamped into the tent, face furious, and then stood abruptly still as welcome warmth enveloped her and the smell of cooking food filled her nostrils. Jhan would never have believed that she would have come to miss that reeking patchwork of hide, but, after such a long time in darkness and danger, it was comforting to settle into a nest of furs by a brazier and see Zerain going competently about her duties once more.

Jhan's eyes adjusted slowly to the dimness of the tent. She could just make out Tagara, seated among furs and blankets with her two brothers, rivaling the braziers with her warmth. Ixien sat next to her, still speaking with her eagerly and avidly fixated on the nimbus of yellow light that seem to hover over her skin.

Sael hadn't put on his scarf again, but he had already turned a shoulder to them and fallen into exhausted sleep in a corner. Jhan's own eyes were just as heavy, but she wanted to eat first.

Zerain spooned a thick soup into bowls and handed them around, clearly still anxious about the children of Selaya. They, for their part, tasted the food with interest and then nodded in satisfaction to each other as they began to eat. That seemed to relax Zerain, but her hand was still shaking slightly when she handed Jhan a bowl.

Ahlen came in at last, but his face was closed. He moved away to the darker side of the tent after taking his share of the food from Zerain. Jhan was glad. She didn't want to face him just then. Her despair was too keen and he was only the salt rubbing in her wounds.

Obahn was staring thoughtfully at Sael while he sat, leaning against a saddle, and chewing over a piece of jerky. Jhan finished her third bowl of food before he finally stirred. From under some blankets, he took out Sael's ornate scabbard and sword. Jhan wondered why he had kept it if he had thought that Sael was dead or gone. Obahn's flat expression didn't give any clue as to the answer, as he rose and quietly went to place it by Sael's sleeping body. He backed away just as quietly and called Zerain to him as he sought his own blankets.

Zerain gave Jhan an angry tilt of her head. "Now I don't have time to clean! Did your demons starve you?"

“They aren’t demons-” Jhan began and then didn’t bother. Zerain was already turning her back and walking away. Jhan scraped the pot for the last of the food, ate it, and then cleaned the bowls and pot with water from a flask and a few clean rags. As she finished, her stomach seemed as empty as if she had never eaten.

Was something wrong? Jhan had never been able to eat so much before and not had it come out in several uncomfortable places. Selaya had healed her, but how? Dagara Ku Ni had been a sadistic artist, refining Jhan with a compulsive exactitude. She knew the delicate balances that he had created to keep her bones from collapsing while retaining an inhuman flexibility and strength. She knew, with painful familiarity, the consuming engine he had made out of her body to keep it light. If Selaya had turned that engine off and had healed her shrunken, inadequate heart, what were the consequences going to be?

Jhan sighed, not wanting to face the answer. Instead, she determined to control this new part of her that seemed insatiable. It was such an odd turn of events that, instead of striving to eat enough and remain healthy, she was now going to be reduced to starving herself. She wanted to laugh. That astonished her until she felt tears starting at her eyes. Jhan realized then that it was hysteria and not humor.

Minyah and Togo went to asleep, curled up together like puppies. Tagara and Ixien were still talking, but in such low tones that Jhan couldn’t hear any words. That pleased her. She didn’t want any disturbances as she made up her bed as far away from everyone as she could, trying to shut out everything long enough to fall asleep.

The indigo sky swirled like ink stirred into water. Jhan marveled at it, standing on a brown field of frozen grass before a lake that reflected the sky in its mind startling shade of bluish purple. The lake was as flat as cold glass and the silence was as deep as the bottom of the mountain.

“A good place to rest,” Jhan approved appreciatively.

“I’m glad. I made it just for you.”

That disembodied voice came from all about Jhan, startling her and making her angry. “Who are you?” she demanded, hands clenching. “Why can’t I be alone even in my dreams?”

“Ah, come now! You don’t really want to be alone.”

Jhan turned in a circle, eyes searching. The brown grass stretched in a lazy, rolling tundra devoid of even a tree or a bush. “At least show yourself.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Understand what?”

The voice sighed. "Your mind is too small to grasp what I am. When you've reached your destination, I can accommodate your senses and your curiosity."

Jhan crossed her arms over her breast and glared at the indigo sky. She let the silence hang. It was her dream, she thought. If she concentrated hard enough, she might be able to make it what she wanted. When the silence continued, she began to relax, thinking that she had succeeded.

"You are obstinate;" the voice chuckled, "That is good."

"What do you want?" Jhan growled, conceding defeat grudgingly.

"To see how you are doing."

"Why?"

"Why?" the voice echoed reflectively.

"Why?" Jhan persisted.

"Now is not the time for such revelations."

"Then go away!" Jhan shouted. It was an impotent sound, falling flat in the vastness.

"What life have you lived that you don't even have questions for me? Don't you even want to know about this place?"

"I do have questions!" Jhan retorted, "You're not answering them!"

"Oh, those!" the voice was dismissive, haughty. "Anyone can ask the mundane."

Jhan hunched down into her crossed arms and stared at her feet. They were bare. She realized, with a start, that she was naked. That was unsettling, more unsettling than the bodiless voice.

"Here, this will ease you."

Suddenly, Jhan was wrapped in a robe of golden light. She staggered, her arms flying out as sleeves, as soft and as warm as a summer day, slid across her dream skin. She clenched her teeth and tried to regain her composure.

"This is the mind," the voice explained, "Your mind, my mind, millions of minds all thinking and dreaming worlds upon worlds. If you have the power, you can walk them and make them real. I've made this place for you, a haven within your mind. You had the power to begin it, but you made it dark, a cave to hide in. I made it a place of beauty, a place to heal. It's your place, now and always."

Jhan was too cynical. "What do you want?"

"I want you to survive; for you to reach me. That is all you need to know."

"That's not much." Jhan was awed by the golden robe despite herself. She smoothed her hands along its folds and shivered at the luxurious feel of it. "There must be more. Are you going to try and use me too? You'll have to stand in line."

"There is more," the voice admitted, "but all that is required of you now is that you survive. This

place will help you. It is much safer than wandering outside of your mind as you have been doing thus far. That leaves you open to attack. Bring who you will here and you will both be protected by the Power within you."

"Wandering out of my mind?" Jhan snorted, "Do you mean going crazy? I've been doing a lot of that lately."

The voice chuckled, highly amused. "You don't even know your own Power!"

"I don't want to!" Jhan shot back.

The voice didn't reply to that bit of childishness. It was gone, leaving Jhan alone in her indigo world once more. It was peaceful, and she did feel a great calm settle over her, as she slowly unclenched and let her hands fall to her sides. She forgot about the annoying voice and dismissed everything it had said. It was only a dream, she reasoned. It was better to think of nothing and to just drift slowly from one end of the lake to the other, enjoying the utter silence.

It felt wonderful to wake up and feel rested. Strangely at peace, Jhan crawled out of her blankets and left everyone sleeping to go outside. The weather had warmed enough to melt the snow, winter still uncertain of its grip. Dapples of sunlight cut through the branches of the evergreen trees and sparkled in the pools of water like diamonds. Jhan stretched out her hands to that light and found a small smile.

"You seem oddly happy this morning," Sael remarked. He came to join Jhan in the sunlight. He was wearing his scarf again, the charms jingling and glittering as he moved. At his side, he was wearing his sword, fingering the hilt thoughtfully.

"Why shouldn't I be? We escaped a mountain prison and I was saved from dying in the mountain pass," Jhan said. Her smile turned brittle; her peace broken.

"But, once again, you are a captive; Ahlen's prisoner," Sael found the need to point out grimly.

Jhan sneered at him, saying acidly, "Didn't you hear? Ahlen set me free! He said that I could go where I wished."

Sael's brows came down over his dark eyes. "He is a fool," was a simple enough thing to say, but it said a lot more without words. It told Jhan that Sael understood the hopelessness of her situation as clearly as she did.

"Yes, he is," Jhan agreed and tipped her face up to the light, her eyes closed and willing Sael to silence.

Sael let her have it, but only for a few minutes before remarking idly, "You look well. There is color to your face. It doesn't look so much like white death anymore. Perhaps, you should travel

mountain passes more often.”

Jhan opened her eyes and gave him a look, “A joke? I didn’t think your people were capable of it.”

“You don’t know my people at all, my Lady, if you are comparing them to me.”

Jhan scowled, noting the honorific. “Are you making a joke of me now?”

“I am repaying my debt,” Sael reminded her, bristling as if she were questioning his honor.

“Obahn didn’t think much of it,” Jhan told him angrily. “He said that, if I wanted to be a woman, I would have to become Ahlen’s property.”

Sael became thoughtful and then said in agreement, “A woman always belongs to someone; to her family first and then to her husband.” He shrugged, continuing as if perplexed, “You are unable to bear children. I fail to see why my Lord would insist on such a condition.”

“Maybe to remove temptation,” Jhan muttered accusingly, hugging herself as if the sun suddenly wasn’t enough to warm her.

“If Obahn wanted you, Lady, he would take you,” Sael warned her. “I think it is what you were, the part of you that you don’t wish me to speak of any longer, that holds him back.”

“Turns a lot of men cold,” Jhan agreed sourly, “but it doesn’t stop some people.”

“I think,” Sael mused, “that it’s more likely that Obahn wanted to shame you, or anger you, enough to forget about your wishes. He needs warriors, as he said before, not women.”

“He can call me anything he likes, Sael,” Jhan replied darkly, “but I’ll never change. I can’t be a warrior.” That was final and it put an end to their conversation as Jhan had meant it to.

In thoughtful silence, they went back into the tent. Tagara, Minyah, and Togo sat in a close huddle, eating the last of the grain that Zerain had overcooked, with obvious distaste. Ahlen was yawning by a brazier under a blanket and spooning his bowl of grain about, hoping such motions might make it more edible. Obahn was lacing his boots and humming under his breath. Zerain was moving slowly, doing her duties as if she were sleepwalking. It was obvious to Jhan that Obahn had kept Zerain up late last night with his needs.

Jhan took her own bowl of grain and took a cautious bite. “I’ve made worse,” she commented around her gritty mouthful.

Zerain turned her head towards Jhan with an angry jerk, though she didn’t bother expressing her anger in words. Instead, she spoke quietly to Obahn. Obahn nodded seriously to whatever she was saying and then grunted as he confronted Togo.

“We are low on supplies,” Obahn announced. “It took us longer than I expected to go through the mountains. Can any of you hunt?”

Minyah laughed and his animal face split into a feral grin. Even though he had normal looking

teeth, it was still bestial enough to make Jhan shiver. "Hunt! Yes, Minyah hunt!" he exclaimed happily.

Togo handed his empty bowl to Zerain as he stood. He made a shooing motion with one hand to Minyah. "Go get food then, brother," he told Minyah, "but be careful! Don't bring anything back too large!"

Minyah grinned wider and gave Togo an overlarge hug. "I be careful," he promised and then bounded out of the tent like a puppy let loose to play.

Togo sighed. "He may be awhile. He has the mind of a child. He distracts easily and this land is strange to him."

"He won't get lost?" Obahn wondered, clearly more concerned about the game that might be lost than Minyah.

"No," Togo assured him. "He has an animal's senses. He will be able to track us."

"He is proving to be useful," Obahn replied, pleased.

Togo enjoyed the approval. He grinned. Jhan flinched and felt her face go pale. Togo's teeth were sharp, as if he had taken the teeth Minyah should have had. Until then, he had seemed completely normal.

They finished eating and reluctantly went outside. Jhan put up her hood and pulled it down around her ears, burying her hands under her armpits to keep warm, while she waited for Sael and Ahlen to saddle the beasts and for Zerain to bring down the tent and pack it. Togo stood close to Jhan. She found herself, in her idleness, staring at him openly.

Togo glanced at Jhan, noticed her curious attention, and asked with a lopsided smile, "Do you have a question?"

Jhan tried to form her ignorance, fear, and distrust of him into a simple sentence. At last, all that she could think of to say was, "I don't understand what you are."

Togo had been expecting that question and his answer was ready, sounding as if he had related it many times. "We call ourselves brothers and sister, but we aren't, actually. We don't remember what we were before, but Selaya had explained to us that we were combined with several species..."

Togo suddenly bent and picked up a small brown worm and the dead leaf it clung to. He turned the leaf so that Jhan could see it and then placed it on his hand. "Separate," he continued, "until Selaya took us and brought us together. " Togo squeezed his hand and mangled worm and leaf together. He let it drop to the ground and then wiped his hand against his pant leg. "She threw her probes into the mix," he finished, "and we were born anew; her children."

Jhan had made a face at the casual death, but she understood a little better now, though not as completely as she would have wished. "So, you are made up of bits and pieces of the miners who

Selaya took revenge on,” Jhan summed up, hardly believing it. Repugnance colored her voice as she added, “and maybe a pet of theirs too.”

Togo touched the points of his own teeth pensively. “It would appear so, yes.”

Jhan could see that, though Togo might have told this tale often to the travelers he had kidnapped to help Selaya, it still seemed to disturb him that he was made up of murdered individuals. In his brief sorrow and discomfort, he looked very innocent and gentle. The world, Jhan felt, would eat him whole and grind him up without much trouble.

“We know,” Togo continued at last, “that we won’t find anyone like us, but we will be content with that as long as we find a good place to live with kind people to help us learn-”

Jhan felt nausea grip her and she put a hand to her stomach as a spasm passed through her. It was an emotional rather than physical upheaval, Jhan knew; the sure knowledge of just how much sympathy such creatures as the children of Selaya could expect. Allowing Togo to continue in his ignorance was worse than cruel and Jhan told him bitterly, “I’ve found that, around here, they don’t like people who are different. They shun them, or at the worst, try to kill them. I think, looking as you do, that you’ll have less success than I did trying to find a place to live.”

Togo looked hurt and uncertain, replying sadly, “We don’t have any choice but to try.”

“I didn’t have a choice either,” Jhan empathized.

Ahlen brought up the baku. Jhan took the reins of hers and mounted. From her vantage, she could see Sael leading the imala to Obahn and then looking pointedly at Tagara and Togo. Obahn gave an expressive grunt that vented his annoyance.

Jhan looked down at Togo, knowing what the problem was. “How are you going to keep up?” she wondered.

“That isn’t a worry,” Togo replied with a confident tone. “We are not bound by your limitations.”

Jhan started and her baku honked in alarm, flapping ears wildly. Togo was suddenly not there! Instead, Jhan was faced by a whirlwind in his place. It lifted easily into the air, bobbing like a mini tornado as it whipped at the branches of the evergreens and sent dead leaves skyward.

Tagara noted her brother’s action and nodded. She took a step, as if she were climbing an invisible stairway, and then burst into a bright, yellowish light. It sparked and pulsed as it rose a few feet from Togo, singing anything close enough to touch it.

“How are you doing that?” Jhan almost shrieked in astonishment.

The children of Selaya were silent, unable to answer her in that state. They simply bobbed patiently, waiting for direction and for everyone to calm down.

Ahlen was mouthing a feverish prayer, eyes sunken and shocked. He gripped the reins of his baku

as if he were keeping from fleeing by sheer force of will alone. Sael was fingering his charms and Zerain was huddled on her imala, about to faint. Ixien was standing off to one side, face clearly amazed and crystal eyes looking at Tagara as if he had seen a revelation.

Obahn alone was unruffled. He sat his imala with a straight back and flung back his head with a short bark of laughter. “Who will dare come against us now?”

They all considered them demons, Jhan thought, and therefore this bit of magic was easy for them to comprehend. Jhan was finding herself going cold and terror stricken, not understanding and unwilling to believe. Dagara’s Power had been to twist, warp, cloud the mind, and once to move Jhan from his fortress to Pekarín. He had held the Power of a star in his body. Jhan possessed the same measure of that Power within her. She tried to tell herself that those abilities were just as incomprehensible as what Togo and Tagara were doing now, but her mind wouldn’t make the leap. To change shape, in the blink of an eye, to such drastically different forms... Jhan needed it explained to her. Her mind had to have the logic of it or, she felt, she would start questioning her small grip on sanity.

Seeing that everyone’s distress wasn’t going to abate while they were near, Togo and Tagara bobbed further down the trail, burning and whipping the trees as they passed. They left behind silence, but for the stamping, nervousness of the beasts. Obahn was the first to break that silence.

“Are you cowards?” Obahn shouted to shake them all out of their shock. “They have oathed themselves to me! They will not harm you!”

Reluctantly, they began going down the trail as if Obahn’s words were a whip. His gold eyes swept over them, daring them to falter and face his temper. When he noticed Sael, standing with the reins of his imala in his hand and not making any attempt to get into his saddle, Obahn spurred his imala over to him, jaw clenching and eyes burning angrily.

“Are you too afraid to move, Ekhal?” Obahn taunted.

Sael looked pointedly at Obahn, jerking on his imala’s bit to keep the beast from nibbling irritably on his braid. Sael touched the place on his scarf where his mouth must have been. He tapped it expressively.

Obahn sighed and rubbed a thumb along the scars on one of his cheeks. “You will never carry these, Sael Ruon, while you insist on being Ekhal. They are the scars of a warrior. You have proved yourself to me, first by bringing me these powerful beings to join our company, and then by surviving great peril with bravery. Renounce the Ekhal, and be a true Bhakali to me. You have the heart if you stop denying it.”

Sael touched his lips once more. Obahn made an impatient sign, a flick of fingers. Sael’s spoke

then and his reply was measured and final. "A man is born Ekhal, my Lord. You want me to take wives, build a lodge, and be a sworn warrior to you, but my wives wouldn't have any children. They would be forced to leave me and my lodge would be empty. You would have a sworn warrior with as little standing among our people as a village stray. I've told you this before, and yet you still refuse to understand. I want what you are offering, the gods know it, but it is something that will never be."

Obahn's face nearly turned purple with his rage. Finally, he exploded, so loudly his imala jumped, "I command you to renounce the Ekhal!"

Sael mounted his imala and shrugged as if indifferent. His eyes though were pained. "Command it, my Lord, and I will have to obey, but command Zerain to be a man while you are giving such orders, and to father children as well! She will have just as much success following your command as I will!"

Obahn said nothing in return at first. With a tight rein, he moved his imala down the trail with Sael at his side. Jhan lagged behind them, Zerain and Ahlen only a little ahead of Obahn and Sael. Ixien was walking, moving steadily and lightly after Tagara with his eyes pointed skyward.

"I knew your father," Obahn replied at last, his voice as tight and as controlled as his hand on his imala, "I keep trying to see him in you. He saved my life more times than I can remember. I had hoped to make a man out of his son, since you are the only one he managed to father before his death."

Sael had stiffened at the mention of his father, a man he had said that he never wished to know. His voice was calm, though, and matter- of- fact. "Why bother? You know the end of my journey. You've never disguised your hate for me. Are you trying to distract me from my vow to Hagen?" He gave Obahn a keen look. "No, that goes along too well with what your plans are. Perhaps you are thinking that the Sun God will be offended by me and deny my request? Is that why you are trying to change me, my Lord?"

Obahn half drew his sword, acutely furious now. His hand trembled on the hilt and then he slammed it back into the scabbard. "My will is your law and you will not question me again!"

"My first oath was to Hagen," Sael reminded him quietly.

"You cannot have oaths with the dead!" Obahn shouted, shaking a fist at Sael.

"As if trying to call them back from the dead was better madness!" Sael shot back. "I will keep my oath to Hagen and I will keep it to you, my Lord, but don't test which one is the stronger."

"The Sun God will not hear a plea from an Ekhal!" Obahn exploded. "Don't you understand? You are a perversion against creation."

"So you say," Sael replied stiffly. "The Ekhal see it differently."

"You don't believe as they believe! I see that, Sael Ruon. Your doubts are in your eyes!"

"Hagen is my lord, even in death," Sael said, yet he was sounding doubtful. He went on, doggedly

persistent, “The Sun God will honor that bond between us. I don’t seek him as an Ekhal, though I know you think that.”

Obahn shook his head. “If you will not change, then I will not allow you to speak! I command you to be silent when we reach the temple. I will ask for Hagen’s appearance myself.”

Sael gave a bitter laugh. “I don’t think my honor, or my oath to you, will mean much to me then.”

“You will see how I deal with oath breakers, Ekhal!”

“With death?” Sael laughed again, but Obahn was spurring his imala ahead and didn’t hear it.

“You like making him angry,” Jhan remarked.

“I am a man,” Sael replied coolly.

“I wasn’t doubting that,” Jhan told him, “but even I know better than to mouth off to that one, Sael, and I’ve never been good at being quiet when I have something to say.”

“Not even now,” Sael snapped back and rode ahead after Obahn as if, despite everything, they were bound together with something that not even hate or harsh words could sunder.

“I hardly know what to do,” Ahlen suddenly said as he fell back even with Jhan. It was obvious that he was terrified, his eyes wide and his skin pale and glittering with sweat. “I am alone,” he continued, almost choking on the words, “a simple man lost among demons, barbarians, perverts, and strange creatures. Maybe it would be better if I left and tried to reach the Sun God by myself.”

Jhan scowled. “Are you including me in the *pervert* category or the *strange creature* one? I don’t think I appreciate either.”

Ahlen was contrite at once, but he didn’t lose his fearful expression. “Forgive me. I’m-I’m just afraid. We could go together, even take Ixien if we must.”

Jhan nodded to where Ixien was still walking ahead, staring up at Tagara. “He’s found the love of his life. I don’t think he would want to go anywhere with you. I don’t either, for that matter. Obahn and Sael might have strange reasons for seeking out your Sun God, and maybe Ixien too, but I think I have more of a chance of seeing my home again with them.”

Ahlen considered her for a long moment. “Are you afraid of the demons? Or are you afraid of what our companions might do? You always look so calm. As if- I don’t know, as if nothing matters or that nothing can touch you. “

Jhan stared, her mouth open a little in amazement. Finally, she shut her mouth and then sighed with a shake of her head. “I didn’t know that I looked calm. I’m always terrified, Ahlen. I just do what I have to do, despite things.”

“I’ve tried to be a man,” Ahlen admitted with downcast eyes, “but I’ve failed at that.”

“What do you want from me?” Jhan demanded suddenly, cutting through Ahlen’s self indulgence.

“I don’t owe you anything except hatred and contempt!”

Ahlen nodded dismally, agreeing, but his eyes were pleading with Jhan too. “I deserve that, and more, yet I think that I am going to have to follow you from now on. I don’t know what else to do. I can’t go on pretending that I’m not afraid and that I know what I’m doing among these people.”

“I’m powerless!” Jhan replied in disbelief. “Why would you want to follow me? I’m not even allowed to decide when I can get off of my baku and take a leak.”

Ahlen flinched at her crude words, saying nothing in return. He hunched inward on himself and pulled his baku in behind hers, as if he wanted to hide in its shadow. Disgusted, Jhan turned forward, not wanting to waste any more energy being angry at him. It was obvious that he wasn’t going to listen.

CHAPTER TEN

(In and Out of the Dream)

The land dipped downwards sharply and then bottomed out into a peat bog. The trees became thin and bare of branches, only a few tangled patches of thorny growth dotting the bleak landscape of drifting fog and half frozen earth. The scent of the peat was strong and the beast’s hooves slipped and sunk, their footing uncertain. The baku lowered their heads and watched their path carefully, but the imala weren’t so trail wise. They shied and shivered at every misstep.

They passed a wagon alongside the trail. Beside the remnants of a smoldering campfire, two men were working on the hoof of a heavy baku. A third man was holding the beast’s head. He alerted his companions to possible danger and they watched, frozen and wide eyed, at the strange company that passed them by.

Jhan turned in her saddle to stare back at them. It had been so long since she had seen anyone but her companions, that it had been easy to forget that there were other people outside of the narrow world her life had become. Her anguish must have been plain on her face when she turned back around. Sael was watching the men with a casual hand on his sword hilt, not really expecting trouble. When he saw Jhan’s face, he stiffened and pulled his imala back to ride beside her.

“What is it?” he asked.

The tears spilled over Jhan’s cold cheeks. She wiped at them with her gloved hands, trying to regain her composure. Obahn was looking back now as well, frowning.

“Leave her in peace, Ekhal.” Obahn stressed the word ‘her’. “She isn’t your woman, she is Ahlen Kantori’s. Beware, or he may take offense and challenge you.” He sounded mocking, but to the point.

Everyone looked at Ahlen, even Jhan, but he was swallowing and all amazement. “Mine?”

“She wishes to be a woman,” Obahn explained, his body and tone deceptively nonchalant as he gave this concession to Jhan unexpectedly. “That means she must belong to some man. Since you claimed her first, she must then belong to you, until you are challenged for her.”

“Challenged?” Ahlen echoed dumbly. “Jhan doesn’t belong to me. I-I let her free.”

“Is that so?” Obahn grew more serious, turning his gaze back to Jhan. The light caught his eyes and they turned a feral yellow color. “Well, Jhan Dor, if you still choose to be a woman, then you are now free for any man’s taking. I have warned you about that consequence of your decision. If you would like to oath to me, I could make you my concubine. My protection would be yours.”

Jhan was still weeping, but her face was stiff and her eyes dark, luminous, blue wells of anger. “I’ve learned that you don’t offer anything without a price, Lord Obahn.”

“Your fighting skill would be at my disposal, of course.”

“Of course,” Jhan repeated bitterly. “And if I don’t?”

Obahn acted as if he had all the time in the world, all of them riding in a silence punctuated only by a lone bird cry. “If you refuse,” he replied at last, “I’ll give you over to those men back there and tell them that you are a lone woman, a whore without a man, and free for their amusement. I have told you, and I will say it again, I don’t have any need of another woman in this company. I need a warrior.”

“I will take her.” Sael spoke up suddenly.

“What?” Ahlen was astonished.

Sael ignored him, repeating firmly to Obahn, “I will take her. You have agreed to her demand to be a woman and not an Ikhil. She will be my wife. That supersedes your offer to take her as a concubine.”

Obahn’s nostrils thinned and then flared, but his face was as flat as his voice, as if he weren’t sure how to react just yet. “I thought that you had made it clear that you couldn’t have any woman, Sael Ruon, or is it that *this* is the only kind of woman that you can keshun with?”

Sael’s eyes were distracted, not settling on anything as his jaw tensed. He seemed mortified by his own decision, but determined to carry it out all the same. “You were right,” he admitted, his voice betraying his dislike for saying those words. “I must not be Ekhal when I stand before the Sun God. I will make myself worthy. I will manage to-” he went shaky for only a second and then firmed his voice. “She will be my wife. I will manage it.”

Obahn let out an exasperated breath. “I may call her anything I wish, and so may you, but I think the Sun God will know the truth of it, Sael Ruon.”

Sael said nothing to that. Instead, he was looking at Jhan, his eyes going hard. "You don't have any say in the matter," he told her. "You are now my wife, unless Obahn or Ahlen wish to challenge it."

"I'm already married," Jhan bit out. She wiped at the tears on her face, sniffing and taking a shuddering breath.

"Not now," Sael contradicted her. "Not here."

"She doesn't want you!" Obahn retorted to Sael and then tried one last time to reason with Jhan. "Give over this foolishness, Jhan Dor, and none of this will be necessary."

"None of it *is* necessary!" Jhan shouted furiously and slammed her heels into her baku. It was startled into a gallop, its uneven stride remarkably fast on the treacherous bog. Jhan knew that she couldn't escape them. She could already hear hoof beats in pursuit. They would force her to do whatever madness they wished and she would be the victim she had always been.

The baku struggled into a patch of peat mixed with a hoof tangling collection of the rotting and petrifying remains of the ancient forest that must have once stood there. Jhan knew that she was in trouble instantly, attempting with her small hands to pull up the beast's head and bring it to a halt. Her motions only threw it off balance. It slid in the peat, stumbled, and then went down thrashing wildly. Jhan frantically shoved herself out of the saddle. Her body fell clear as they both hit the peat, but her right leg was too slow.

It was like lightning striking her brain. The pain flared and bolted through her, the heavy, adulterated peat hardly cushioning her at all as the full weight of the baku landed on fragile bones and joints. They bent and snapped like dry twigs, driving through flesh in a red mash of agony. When the beast rolled up and away, Jhan was a writhing, pitiful heap on the ground, panting and sobbing in a half faint as hands took hold of her and voices called and exclaimed in her ears.

"It's no use!" that was Sael, sad and final. "An injury like that will never heal."

"Scherial's sake, Sael, don't tell Obahn! He'll leave her behind!" That frantic voice was Ahlen's. He was begging, weeping. Maybe it was even his hands holding Jhan's arm so tight it was a new flash of pain intertwining with all the rest.

Someone wrapped the mangled thing that had been her leg and Jhan heard Obahn growl something abrupt and unintelligible. Sael's reply was clearer. "Bound and kept straight, perhaps, my Lord. She is my wife. I will tend her and not slow us down," and then, arguing, "It is my right. My oath to you does not concern a woman of my hearth. That is outside the matters of men. If you wish to challenge me for her, and you win, she will be yours to take or leave--"

There was a silence and then, "Good, he's leaving it up to you," Ahlen's voice again. "What would you have done if he had challenged you?"

“Died,” Sael replied coolly. “I’m not his equal with a sword.”

“You chanced that for Jhan?” Ahlen was incredulous with amazement.

Sael growled distractedly as he worked over Jhan’s leg, “He wouldn’t have challenged me, Ahlen. She is nothing now, broken as she is, and he won’t ask for her as a wife. He would have to keshun with her to keep her.”

“And you...”

“Let’s not speak of it,” Sael replied uncomfortably. “Help me get her off of the ground.”

“I should have told him that she was my wife,” Ahlen swore guiltily, “None of this would have happened!”

“You were a fool to deny the clear claim he gave you,” Sael agreed harshly, “but Obahn expected you to or he wouldn’t have begun the conversation.”

Jhan felt herself lifted and the voices jangled and clashed, becoming one with a swooping rush of hideous agony. She knew she shrieked and struggled. The blow she felt was hard and sure and obviously meant to take her out of her pain quickly. When merciful oblivion fell, she felt only thankful.

Jhan was lying on her back, looking at a soft indigo sky. It was warm and bright and the grass wasn’t cold. Jhan lazily draped an arm over her eyes, not wanting even the pleasant sight of the purple clouds to disturb her rest.

“Who are you?”

Jhan sat up slowly, languidly, not alarmed or anything other than mildly curious about the strange voice. She had a feeling that nothing could hurt her in that place. Someone had told her that, but she couldn’t remember who.

There was a woman seated cross legged before Jhan. Dressed in a black robe open to her navel, she had an oval, broad nosed face with a complexion the color of an almond skin. Her hair, a soft, woolly mass that hung well past her knees, sparkled with crystal pins and very small charms. Her warm, brown eyes were lined with Kohl and her finely arched brows were drawn in confusion and slight indignation. A silver nose ring twinkled in one nostril and a half moon necklace, studded with jewels, hung between large, pendulous breasts.

“Jhan,” Jhan replied after a long, contemplative moment. Lying flat and putting her arm over her eyes once more, she sighed, “I can’t even die in peace.”

“Die?” the woman had a high, bell like voice. She sounded younger than she appeared. “Have you brought me here to watch you die?”

"I've never wanted an audience before." Jhan began to lose some of her languidness, replacing it with annoyance and an unwelcome curiosity that she tried hard to ignore. "I shouldn't bother asking who you are. You are just a delusion."

"Delusion?"

"Or an echo?" Jhan retorted and turned sideways with her back to the woman.

"You are the one who brought me here," the woman told Jhan indignantly, "and now you're ignoring me and pretending to dream. What am I to make of that?"

"I didn't bring you here," Jhan couldn't help replying. She worried her lip. There wasn't any pain as she bit hard. It confirmed to her that she was dreaming all of this, yet the woman persisted in demanding her attention. She was refusing to be a passive part of the dream, as much as Jhan wanted her to be.

"Why am I here?" the woman demanded. "What do you wish of me?"

"I fell under a baku and shattered my leg... at least it felt like it shattered," Jhan told her, impatient to end this. "I just want to be alone and in a nice, painless place. The last thing I want is for someone to bother me."

"I was walking minds when you took hold of me and brought me here," the woman persisted, puzzled and angry at the same time. "Only a master could have accomplished that, yet you plead ignorance."

"I don't understand!" Jhan was exasperated at herself for making herself go through this madness. She sat up, propped on her elbows, and stared at the place where her right leg should have been. There was only a pulsing, ominous, red glow there instead. "I don't understand any of this," she said more quietly, disturbed.

"I can see that you don't," the woman agreed in amazement. She began the conversation anew. "I am Khirena Om Logi, daughter of King Lorian Shu Logi of Idolass. I am an apprentice of the Terenian art of walking minds. I am in my third year. In two more, I shall, hopefully, be a master."

"Why?" Jhan interrupted numbly.

Khirena raised an eyebrow, perplexed. "Why?"

"I've seen enough of the outside of people to know that I never want to see the inside," Jhan told her.

Khirena touched the half moon pendant between her brown breasts. "I want to become a priestess of Hunellan. They do great works among the people with their abilities. Walking minds allows you to help those who are in distress, to mingle minds in worship for the uplifting of the spirit-"

"To control people?"

Khirena's eyebrow arched even more. "That is against our beliefs."

"Do you have Power then?" Jhan asked, growing curious despite herself.

"No. Few do," Khirena replied, "but any mind can learn to walk. It is just a matter of discipline."

Jhan rubbed at her forehead. Her skin felt tingly and cool. "This world is turning out to be stranger than I ever imagined. All of this must work in some sort of scientific manner, but it's beginning to be easier just to call it magic and stop trying to make myself crazy figuring it out."

"Magic?" Khirena sniffed. "Are you one of the superstitious barbarians then to believe in such things?"

"No, just a poor person overwhelmed at the moment." Jhan shook her head sharply, scowling. "This is stupid. You're just a dream, after all. I wish I wasn't wasting my last moments with this nonsense."

"Last moments?" Khirena leaned towards her in concern. "You are dying then?"

Jhan shrugged, face going tight. "I don't know. I can't imagine surviving with a wound like that. I was filthy from head to toe. It's probably infected by now... gangrenous. I doubt they tried to cut my leg off to save me. Too primitive to know enough to even wash their hands..." Jhan was shivering, wondering what horror she might wake up to.

Khirena's reply was startling. "I can save you."

Jhan looked at her then and wondered how she could have dreamed up such a person. She wasn't like anyone Jhan had ever seen before. How could she have ever dreamed up that proud tilt of the nose? Where in her life had she ever seen such eyes, narrowed as if Khirena had spent a lifetime squinting at the sun, and glowing with a cinnamon color that was particularly unusual?

"I always try to give up," Jhan admitted quietly. "It's so much easier. Unfortunately, there is this deep core inside of me somewhere that never goes along with it. You must be the manifestation of that part of me."

"I wouldn't call that unfortunate."

"Live my life and you will," Jhan snapped.

"Do you wish me to save you?" Khirena retorted. "If not, then send me back whence I came from."

Jhan made an unintelligible growl and sat up completely, giving in to the insanity of it with a shrug of resignation. "All right, save me. I might as well play out this illusion. Maybe then I can get out of it and go back to resting in peace."

Without any preparation, Khirena reached out a hand and touched Jhan lightly on the arm. Her touch was cool. Jhan felt a sudden, too personal, connection with the woman. It made her draw back in

confusion.

“You have Power,” Khirena announced with a nod, as if something had been confirmed for her. “It is locked tight away from the physical world, but inside of your mind it can work safely within its bonds. Though I don’t have the Power to heal, I may be able to help you use yours to do it. Failing that, I can direct your mind, with my ability, to speed your healing enough to save your life. You must have sensed my ability. That is probably why you brought me into your mind.”

“Wait!” Jhan held both hands to her forehead now, trying to think clearly. “You made sense just then! You’re saying that my Power is bringing you inside of my mind?”

“Yes,” Khirena replied impatiently, as if it were obvious. She motioned about them. “This place is a construct of your mind, an illusion, but I am very real,” and then, curiously, “Am I the first person that you have contacted this way?”

Jhan shook her head, dazed, “No- No you’re not. I thought- I was convinced that I was dreaming.”

“It is a dream, of sorts,” Khirena replied. “It takes skill, learned skill, to walk within the mind and be aware. Without that skill, the mind forgets or wanders.”

“I did forget, but now it’s coming back to me.” Jhan clasped her knees tightly, grimacing and feeling as if her heart was breaking. If this was real- If Kile had really been there to speak with her... Jhan slammed her mind shut on that thought. She still couldn’t bear it. She drew a shuddering breath.

“Okay, help me,” Jhan said as she braced herself for whatever was about to happen, “Just get it over with so that I can leave this place.”

“This place is within you,” Khirena told her intently. “You can change it into anything you wish, make it into anyplace within memory, but the only way to leave it is to die.”

“A prison within a prison,” Jhan whispered bleakly.

“No,” Khirena corrected, astonished at Jhan’s ignorance, “the only place where a person can truly be free.”

Khirena took Jhan’s hand and spread it out, exposing her palm. “You will have to relax and let me take control,” she explained, expecting resistance to that.

“I know how to do that,” Jhan replied, trying not to think of all the times Dagara, Gyven, and Evian Perazii had violated her that way, for good and ill. “Just do it.”

“You are trusting,” Khirena wasn’t pleased. “I could mean to hurt you instead.”

Jhan laughed bitterly. “I’m dying! If you think I have another choice?”

Khirena didn’t reply, but her face went grim as her palm came against Jhan’s, spread fingered and firm. Something touched Jhan like an erotic embrace, though Khirena never moved closer. It was a hint of what Dagara Ku Ni had felt like when he had stripped Jhan’s mind and made it a puppet for his

whims. Jhan flinched and would have drawn back again, but she found that she was frozen into immobility. Staring at her hand, she saw a golden nimbus of energy shoot from Khirena to her through their touch.

The light seemed to burn, traveling along Jhan's nerves and then centering behind her eyes. The Power twitched and surged against its bonds, waiting for a mistake that would release it. Khirena was amazed at its strength and wisely left it alone, concentrating instead on bringing Jhan's own body to bear on the shattered leg.

"It won't work," Jhan protested.

"It will," Khirena assured her. "The mind is capable of far more than you imagine." She released Jhan's hand and stood, tall and proud. "Your leg will heal. Release me now and allow me to return to my own body."

"I'm not holding you," Jhan insisted wearily, mentally drained. "I didn't bring you here." Doubt about the reality of all that Khirena had said and done suddenly returned.

"Such a fool to have such Power," Khirena mused, and then, between one blink and the next, she was gone.

Jhan lay flat on the brown grass and stared up at the indigo sky. Calm settled about her. She wasn't afraid of dying now, though she couldn't say why. Khirena's odd appearance wasn't proof of anything, but Jhan wasn't about to discard everything she had said. Some of it made sense. Maybe the Power was flexing within her and causing things to happen she had only thought dream or madness. Maybe there was a chance that it could heal her if she only concentrated hard enough. It was a chance, and a chance that the small, desperate part of her that didn't want to die, grasped at with both hands.

There was the howling sound of a storm, a never ceasing rising and falling drone that was almost lulling. It made it hard for Jhan to wake up and open her eyes. She felt a pulsing throb that prickled pain; a warning against moving her right leg. She was sleeping on a sagging bed, covered in blankets and furs, yet hardly warm for all of that. Someone moved beside her, mumbled something reassuring, and pressed a cool, wet rag against Jhan's parched lips. She sucked at it greedily. When it was replaced by the rough edge of a cup, she drank something warm and acidic. Tea, she decided, before pulling the cover of sleep over her again.

"Jhan?"

Jhan opened her eyes to indigo skies once more. Someone was touching her face, flesh as solid and as warm as her own. It traced her cheek and then smoothed back her tumbled hair from her eyes. Jhan turned her head and saw Kile sitting beside her, face creased in longing and concern.

“Oh, my love!” Jhan sobbed and reached up to pull him into her arms. He came eagerly and they clung to each other like lost children, both of them weeping. Jhan pulled at his shirt, opening it and sliding inside to press herself against his skin. She clasped her arms about his great body. “I don’t care if this is real or not! I want to stay here with you forever!”

Kile tilted her chin up and kissed her lips, drew them into his mouth, and tasted her like a fine wine. His blue eyes were wet with tears and his square jawed face was clenched with emotion. His big hands moved over her, touching her tenderly, as if he needed to reassure himself of every inch of her.

“Jaross is beginning to doubt again,” Kile told Jhan breathlessly. “When we both saw you, he said it was a moment of shared madness. He wants to return to Pekarín. The mountains are very harsh and full of snow. He’s right that we will certainly lose our lives if we try and cross the higher peaks. I don’t care. I’ll go alone. This has to be real.”

Kile sat up and pulled Jhan across his lap so that she straddled him. He began tugging at the buttons of her cloak with one hand while his other pushed the hood back. His eyes never left hers, intense and full of his need for her, but the more clothing he took off the more there seemed to be. Finally, he took a harsh breath in confusion.

Jhan touched her clothing and felt how insubstantial they were. Her mind was creating the clothes and she knew why. Kelmus wasn’t dead within her yet and Kile’s strength and urgency, pressing hard between her legs, was frightening her. A dream could turn into a nightmare all too easily.

“My love,” Jhan sobbed in apology and burrowed against his chest to hide from his disappointment.

Kile recovered himself at once, held her lightly, and simply caressed her gently, saying, “I’m sorry. You’re frightened. I know better than to go so quickly. It’s just that it’s been so long. There might not be another chance. I might die in the mountains! Please let me be with you, Little Lady. If I never see you again, at least let my heart die happy.”

Jhan listened to that beating heart and found reassurance in it. Dream or not, madness or sanity, this was the man she trusted and loved above all else. She couldn’t feel the same need that was consuming him, but she could long to hold him, to have him as close as she possibly could. To let go of her fear and to allow him what he needed could satisfy both of their desires. She told herself that she had the power to make this a happy dream.

Jhan’s clothes were gone in an instant. Kile was all amazement, big hands cupping her small

breasts and head lowering to taste them. Jhan shivered, cradling his head while her fingers tangled in his golden curls. He was so very strong and so very large next to her, like a great redwood tree next to a tender sapling, yet he was so gentle, moving carefully. His tongue traced a line to her naval, and then farther below that, to do an intricate dance while his lips teased that counterfeit part of her; tingling flesh that was so like a woman's and, yet, not.

Jhan lay on her back and watched the purple clouds float over head while she marveled at the soft sensations that made her sigh in delight. Her skin didn't feel like skin. Kile's touch was more warmth and tingling pressure than the calloused caresses she was used to. He didn't stir up the overwhelming sensations in her, instead, everything had a soft edge to it, a faint hint of unreality intertwined with a sense that it was very real and very present. There was nothing to make Jhan afraid. In this place, nothing could hurt her.

Kile was a simple man, a warrior with a forthright, abrupt personality that never dallied on fantasy or conjecture. His needs, sexual and emotional, sprang from the same bedrock. He was making love to her, not simply satisfying his strong urges. To him they were one in the same, neither to be denied.

Jhan sat up and pulled at the buckle of Kile's pants, smiling and feeling unfettered by all of her troubles and emotional distress. She wanted to give, wanted to experience again something other than misery. Kile was right. There might never be another chance, waking or sleeping, mad or sane.

Kile was surprised and then eager. Jhan had never been one to initiate anything sexual. He kissed her deeply and then leaned back to let her do what she wanted. A lion, Jhan thought, as she made him toss back his head with a groan of pleasure, the indigo sun making his gold curls flash and sparkle oddly colored. She used her tongue, her lips, her hands, undressing him and throwing his clothes to the four winds until he was as naked as she was.

Kile was painfully aroused, a tower of a man straining to hold himself in check, to wait, not to frighten, and to make the moment last as long as possible. Jhan climbed onto him, pushing him back into the grass. He smiled into her eyes and then groaned and closed them as Jhan carefully brought them together.

Jhan waited, breathless, but there wasn't the usual pain, the usual, dangerous feeling of doing something her body wasn't meant to. This was like sinking into a steaming tub of water, a relaxing, throbbing pleasure that sang through her. They weren't joined simply physically either. Kile was inside of her mentally as well, a meshing of emotions. Kile's mind was extremely male, and Jhan felt the startling realization by him, and a strong sense of relief, that Jhan's mind was totally female.

Kile rolled, and his needs became overwhelming, urgent. Jhan knew this part of him all too well,

and had often been frightened by it, but now, through their intertwined minds, she was experiencing it as if it were a part of her too. It was animal, a mounting, rutting, instinctive thing, that caused Kile, and now Jhan, to forget everything, but the need to thrust as deep as possible and to end the pressure building up in Kile's body. When his orgasm exploded through them both, Jhan cried out as the sky whirled and shot with flashing lights.

They lay together afterward, Jhan cradled in the curve of Kile's arm. "This is a beautiful place," Kile sighed. "A dream I hope I never forget."

Jhan turned and pressed against him, her hand playing idly along his leg and then deliciously in a place that made him groan for respite. She relented, but moved to lie on his chest, looking into his face, suddenly serious. "I remember... Kile, do you still consider me a man?"

Kile's face went closed like a clam shutting. His golden brows drew down. "Why can't you ever be quiet?" he demanded. "It was perfect."

"Except for that," Jhan persisted. "We shouldn't keep secrets, Kile, and this place is as good as any to air them. If it is our last moment together, real or otherwise, we should know each other's heart, fully."

"You are a man," Kile admitted slowly, fearing Jhan's temper. "That's something that can't be denied. Your mind though, I felt it, I know that- This is all confusing to me. I don't even have words to describe it, but I know that you are a woman inside, just as you've always said. Experiencing that, and the-the physical closeness, it would be easy to forget the truth. It seems madness to persist in it, but despite everything, you were still born a Prince of Karana."

"You're ashamed of being with me."

"No!" Kile was taking Jhan into his arms again, cradling her close. "No, never that! I came to grips with being with you long ago, but there's still a gut feeling inside me that knows that I'm not a thekling. It tells me that what I'm doing is wrong and it doesn't know what I'm doing with you." Kile's eyes were intense as he weighted each word with emotion, "My heart knows why I'm with you, Jhan. I'm not a man of words, just actions. Surely you can see that I love you and that I only want you no matter what you are and no matter what my guts try to tell me?"

"No matter what I am?" Jhan stiffened, bitter.

"Jhan," Kile searched for words to calm her, but then said in defeat, "I think you're the one that can't accept what you are."

"I can't. It isn't what I really am, Kile!" Jhan exclaimed, a clenched fist striking her breast.

"But it is what you are," Kile insisted tenderly and kissed her scowling forehead. "You're a woman in almost every way that I can see, but you're also Jhanian Kevelt, a man. You will never be

able to escape that fact. I've accepted it. You must learn to stop being so angry with it and accept it too. Remember that I fell in love with you long before you were changed."

"Typical," Jhan sighed and relaxed against him again.

"Typical?" Kile repeated.

"It's typical that I should waste our last moments arguing with you."

"I knew about your temper, too, when I fell in love with you," Kile chuckled. "I wouldn't want it any other way."

They lay there while the indigo sun began to set and they watched it glitter across the lake. When Jhan felt herself fading, Kile's arms beginning to seem as insubstantial as mist, she heard him call out to her, angry, grief stricken, and determined. "I will find you, Jhan! I will! I swear it!"

"Is the pain bad?"

Jhan realized that she was staring up at the rafters of some house and that tears were slowly trailing down the sides of her face. She blinked, narrowed her eyes to focus, and slowly turned her head. Her neck felt stiff, her skin crusted with salt and dirt. Her mouth felt like a bad tasting, parched desert. She tried to swallow and then coughed dryly. The sharp movement jarred her leg and she felt an acute slice of pain travel all the way from her ankle to her groin. She gasped, choked, and then settled back with her eyes closed, trying to breathe deeply until the pain stopped.

"Foolish question." The voice belonged to Sael. He sounded tired, strained, and impatient. "Don't go back to sleep," he continued warningly. "My Lord Obahn's patience has worn out with the storm."

Jhan opened her eyes and turned her head again. Sael was sitting beside her in the bed with the blankets pulled over them both. Jhan digested this information slowly, mind working as if it were a rusty machine. Skin was touching hers; bare skin. Sael's leg, she realized, and it was an effort not to draw away and jar her leg again.

Sael's face was free of its scarf and his black hair was loose over his shoulders. He was naked, pale torso crisscrossed with scars and a bruise or two. A silver necklace glittered about his neck, simple, yet fine, and a silver bracelet, with a carving of a diving bird, adorned one wrist. His cool, broad fingers, touched Jhan's forehead. "The fever has broken. That's something."

Sael slid from the bed, a rude affair of covered evergreen boughs, and ducked under the hide that hung from the rafters. The hide was shielding the bed from the rest of the room, giving Jhan welcome privacy as she tried to collect her strength and come fully awake.

"She's awake?" It was Ahlen's anxious voice, "Thank Scherial... and you as well, Sael. You are a

remarkable healer.”

“Give her quiet,” Sael commanded, as if stopping Ahlen from approaching the bed. “She seems disoriented.”

Sael returned through the hide with a bowl of hot meat, in a thick sauce, and a cup of an herbal tea. He balanced awkwardly as he climbed onto the low bed, sat down, and pulled the blankets over him. He was wearing a twisted loincloth, Jhan had seen, but it still wasn’t enough to calm her rising trepidation.

Sael’s eyes were nervous, as if he didn’t dare meet Jhan’s eyes. “For warmth,” he explained as if reading her thoughts, and then, in tight, disjointed sentences, “We took shelter in this old shack when a storm came rushing down the mountains. We’ve been here three days. There are so many holes and the fireplace is broken. You needed more warmth than the braziers and even the demon Tagara could give this place. Body warmth is best.”

“My leg...” Jhan whispered through her cracked lips.

Sael frowned and gave a small shrug. “At first, I thought there was little hope. After I cleaned it off, I saw that it wasn’t shattered as I had thought. In fact,” he paused as if he could hardly believe his own words, “I was able to pull the bones back together easily despite the fact that you have more of them than a normal man- woman,” he corrected himself hurriedly. “I strapped your ankle and cut splints. A month, maybe, will see it right.”

Sael gestured with the cup and the bowl. “You need to eat and to drink. There are herbs in the drink that will ease the pain.”

Jhan felt too weak to sit up. Sael put the cup and bowl aside and lifted her up against his chest. He felt wiry and hard, his ribs as sharp as a washboard. Reaching around, he put the cup to Jhan’s lips. She drank, as helpless as a baby, and ate when he spoon fed her. Her leg throbbed with pain the entire time and Jhan caught herself breathing hard, every breath punctuated by a small, pitiful gasp.

Sael put the empty cup and bowl aside and gently lay Jhan down again. His hair brushed her face as he arranged a pillow of knotted clothing under her head. His hair was silky, but smelled of too many campfires and the wild air. He stretched out under the blankets beside her, propped up on one elbow.

“You must be getting better,” Sael observed. “You’re glaring.” He lay on his back and idly twisted a curl of his hair around one finger. It seemed such a feminine gesture. His black eyes, staring pensively at the ceiling, were vulnerable.

“Did you make me your wife while I slept?” Jhan whispered harshly, “or did you find that I wasn’t as much like a man as you had hoped?”

Sael’s finger paused in mid twist and then he released his hair and rolled onto his elbow again,

looking fierce and speaking hardly above a whisper. “Would you rather be keshuning in the dirt with those travelers we passed on the trail? I thought that, next to that, being a wife to an Ekhal would not seem so terrible a thing.”

“Am I your wife?” Jhan seethed, just as quiet.

Sael’s eyes hooded uncomfortably. “No, and I wouldn’t shout that too loudly. No one but you and I know it.”

“Obahn knows it,” Jhan contradicted him. “He knows you.”

“He’ll guess. He’ll suspect. Unless he wants to challenge me openly, he won’t say anything,” Sael muttered. “He’d rather have a Bhakali with a wife, any kind of wife, when he approaches Tsarianna, the Sun God, instead of an Ekhal oathed to him.”

“Do you really know what he wants?” Jhan demanded.

“Do you?” Sael shot back.

Jhan lost the strength to argue further. She sank into the evergreen boughs and let the pine scent ease her tension. She felt his skin touching hers again. She almost jerked away and then sighed irritably. “I suppose I can stop being afraid of you now.”

Sael didn’t say anything and Jhan felt alarmed again as she looked at him. Sael was chewing on his bottom lip. He worried it for a long moment and then said candidly, “I wasn’t inability that kept me from keshuning with you.”

“What are you saying?”

Sael was staring hard at his bracelet, turning it around and around his wrist. “You smell awful. There isn’t enough water to bathe. Everyone in this place stinks.”

Jhan blinked. “Are you saying that I stink too badly to be desirable?”

Sael’s shoulder twitched; a nervous shrug. “You don’t smell like a woman.”

“I don’t understand.”

Sael picked through his words, searching for the right explanation. “I’ve always been attracted to men, not only because of their appearance, but because of some scent, some part of them, that can’t be seen, that calls to me and tells me that I want them. No woman has ever had that for me. In you, I can sense it. There is something left of the man you use to be. It attracts me. It has been very hard not to give in to that desire. You are my wife. It is my right-”

Jhan felt herself go cold and wary. “Why didn’t you?”

Sael was confused. He stopped his agitated motions and pulled the blanket up tight around him as he sat up and leaned close. “I thought, as an Ikhil, that you were neither man nor woman, but my senses tell me the truth about you. I may call you my Lady all you wish, but the fact is that Jhan Dor never

was one. Calling you my wife is a sham and a breaking of my oath. I may only keshun with one man, Obahn. That is the Ekhal oath. This will only be an act for us. I refuse to dishonor myself to save your life.”

Jhan let out a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. “Good, I wouldn’t want you to either. Now, get out of bed. I don’t need you here any more.”

“I am your husband until Obahn finds out otherwise,” Sael told her. “I must sleep in your bed as Zerain sleeps in Obahn’s.”

Jhan bit back any more protests, knowing that they would be useless. “Then at least go to the other end of the bed. I don’t want you touching me.”

Sael gave her an angry glare. “You’ve been asleep for days. I have been forced to clean your messes and ply water and broth between your teeth. We both reek of sickness. You owe me more than your distrust.”

“I thought that you didn’t want thanks from me?” Jhan growled back, but then marginally relented. “I’m sorry. I can’t be glad, only bitter. Even finding myself alive doesn’t cheer me much. I do owe you my thanks, Sael, and a debt, I suppose, for saving me from Obahn’s schemes, but don’t expect me to be something I’m not. Keep remembering the dream you over heard when we sat under that mountain. It’s always with me. This journey is just a continuation of it.”

Sael had gone pale at the mention of that nightmare and he nodded stiffly, turning away. “Obahn will ride at dawn. I hope that you will be strong enough to ride with us. I can only help you so much, even though you are my wife. If there is a choice, my oath is clear. My place is at Obahn’s side.”

“You didn’t need to tell me that,” Jhan replied. “I didn’t expect anything else.”

The morning was bright and clear. The cracked windows of the house let in the light and Jhan blinked against it as Sael took down the hide curtain, wrapping it into a bundle before dropping it by Zerain. He helped Jhan dress, keeping his touches as light and as non-evasive as he could, and brought her the meat in dried herbs that Zerain had cooked.

Jhan sat up, feeling dizzy, as she balanced her meal in her lap. She winced at the dragging throb of her leg, bound awkward and stiff before her. The leg of her pants had been cut short of it, but the wrappings of cloth kept it from getting cold. Sael had worked on three pairs of socks, not bothering to attempt putting her boot onto her swollen foot. It looked weather proof, but the straight sticks that Sael had used as splints weren’t proof against pain.

Sael dressed himself, wrapping his scarf about his face, and left Jhan to go outside and saddle the

beasts. Ahlen was coming in from having taken care of the baku. He sat near Jhan to eat his own breakfast, but didn't speak, his eyes down cast as if in guilt.

Obahn was pulling on his boots, balancing easily from one foot to the other. He was staring straight at Jhan, eyes critical and appraising of her condition. Jhan knew that she was pale and bruised around the eyes. She felt drained and as fragile as a dried leaf. Still, she met Obahn's eyes steadily. He approved of it and nodded to her before stamping out of the old house.

Minyah was stretched out by the brazier, a contented smile on his face as his fur was idly scratched by his brother Togo. Jhan studied them both from under her eyelashes as she ate. She was still disturbed by Togo and Tagara's transformations and she couldn't help the shiver that went through her. Minyah was looking as alien as Ixien, but Togo was looking even more normal than usual. His clothes had acquired a film of dirt and his white-blond hair was tangled and uncombed. He still smiled easily though, and his brown eyes looked at everyone as if he couldn't get enough of their humanity.

Tagara and Ixien were conspicuously absent. Since the sun was out, Jhan surmised that they were already outside, Ixien drinking in the light. Jhan had never trusted Ixien and it seemed that Tagara had gravitated towards him immediately. Jhan wondered what Ixien could hope to gain from her. Jhan knew that he never did anything unless it was a part of his quest to reach the Sun God. He had discarded Jhan and Ahlen when he had found the more powerful Obahn. Was he now going to cast Obahn aside for the, obviously, more powerful children of Selaya?

Zerain, in her long veil, was a solid presence at their center, doing her duties with her usual quiet competence. Ahlen's eyes were on her as he slowly ate one mouthful after another of his breakfast.

Jhan knew that tenseness of a man's body too well. It brought her out of her thoughts and she spoke cruelly under her breath to drive Ahlen away, "Seen under her scarf yet?"

Ahlen's head whipped about and his face turned a stark red. "No," he said just as softly.

"She must take it off sometime," Jhan surmised. "Maybe she takes it off when she and Obahn, you know, keshun together?"

Jhan had hit a nerve. Ahlen's jaw clenched. "That isn't my business."

"They make it everyone's business when they just do it where anyone can--"

"How is your leg?" Ahlen bit out abruptly, raising his voice as if he were making idle conversation.

Jhan simmered. Ahlen wasn't going to allow her to make him angry. His guilt was stronger than his desire for Obahn's wife. "I don't know why you always ask me how I am. It's stupid. I'm obviously not all right."

"Has Sael taken good care of you?"

Jhan was puzzled by this new topic. She searched Ahlen's face, but saw nothing but concern for her. "Why?"

"He wouldn't let anyone near you," Ahlen explained tersely. "He said that you were his wife and that it was against custom for anyone but himself to be concerned for you. When I protested, he asked if I was challenging him for you."

"I'm not his wife," Jhan replied without thinking. She put her empty bowl aside and considered getting up.

"He says that you are," Ahlen's voice was heavy with innuendo and Jhan had a hard time not shouting back another denial. "I would have challenged him, if I thought that I could have won," Ahlen told her miserably, but then conceded, "Maybe its better this way, Jhan. Sael will keep you safer than I could have and, since he is a thekling and you are... what you are, it isn't a bad match."

"Look at me," Jhan demanded in a chill voice. Ahlen did, wide eyed and innocent. "What do you see? What do you see that you can so easily dismiss everything that I am? Why can't you see how I'm hurting? Don't you realize how degrading and humiliating this is for me? What would you think if I told you that you had to marry Sael? How would you feel if Sael was allowed to do whatever he pleased to you? Would you nod and thank me when I told you that it was a good match?"

Ahlen blinked, startled. "No," he replied slowly and then, earnestly, "Is it the same? You want to be a woman, but women don't choose Jhan. You confuse me, or maybe you're the one who's confused about your place? Sael seems kind to you and caring, as far as I have witnessed. I thought, as I said before, that you are both not whole men. What other arrangement could you hope for that would be better?"

"The one with my first husband," Jhan replied, her heart aching.

"You may never be able to return home." Ahlen was blunt in his innocence. "I don't think that you'll ever get back over the mountains without dying."

Jhan reached down with one hand and closed it about Ahlen's wind pipe, her muscles tensing like a vice. His eyes rolled up at her and his face turned red as his air was suddenly cut off. Jhan let him struggle; knowing that he was too panicked to strike out at her or to realize that she was too weak to hold him for long.

"I told you once," Jhan seethed, face trembling and dark with her fury, "that if I ever thought that I would not be able to return to my husband, that I would kill you, Ahlen Kantori. Are you trying to convince me that my worst fear is true, or are you just so glad that Sael is going to be ignoring you now for me, that you're babbling nonsense?"

Jhan released Ahlen and he gasped, rubbing at his neck in sick fear and relief. "Nonsense," he

managed to croak as he scrambled away and bolted through the door of the house.

“He’s just a boy,” Zerain said disapprovingly as she began packing. “He doesn’t know how hard life can be yet.”

“I don’t understand,” Togo piped up. He stood, facing Jhan in puzzlement, Minyah stretching like a great dog beside him. “Why did you hurt your companion?”

“I didn’t hurt him... much,” Jhan replied angrily. “Ahlen just doesn’t know when to leave me alone, that’s all. Besides, he’s not my companion, he’s my kidnapper. I didn’t come on this journey willingly.”

Togo became instantly concerned, his voice heavy with disbelief and dawning trepidation. “Was Ahlen the one who emasculated you? I thought him a boy, almost as naive as myself. I never thought-”

“No, he didn’t do it,” Jhan interrupted coolly, not wanting to talk about it, but Togo was too curious to let the matter drop.

“I am relieved, but, who did do it?” Togo persisted. “Was it someone else in this company? Why was it done? Why did Ahlen kidnap you? Where is he taking you? Why are you with these others and why are they all going to this sun deity? Was it Sael who emasculated you? If so, why, and why mate with you when you are obviously not able to breed- None of it makes any sense!”

“Now you’re sounding like Ixien,” Jhan retorted with a sharp shake of her head and a sharper edge to her voice. “I’m tired of explaining. Go out and ask Ahlen. He likes to talk. Maybe you can trade your stupidity back and forth and leave me alone!”

Togo flinched, realizing at last that his questions had been hurting Jhan. He began to apologize, but then fell silent at the hollow eyed look she gave him. As if deciding to take her advice, he quietly left the house, taking a puzzled Minyah with him.

Jhan glared at the rickety, closed door for some time and then tried once again to gather the courage to try and stand. Zerain for her part, glanced at the empty room and then took off her veil.

She was handsome, Jhan thought, but not beautiful. Her face was too high boned and arrogant for that. Her black eyes were sharp under level brows and her nose was so long and narrow that she appeared to be looking down it. Her hair was pulled tight from a widow’s peak and bound with a red scarf. Gold glittered in her ears, highlighted by her olive skin and her long, slender neck.

“We are of one lodge now,” Zerain explained at Jhan’s look. “Sael is oathed to Obahn and you are now his wife.” Her tone was mocking, her concession empty formality. She didn’t need to say that she knew that their marriage was a sham or that she felt disgusted by it.

Zerain cleaned her face and redid her hair, pulling it back and braiding it even tighter. When that was done, she replaced her scarf and pinned it in place. Returned to blankness, she lost the bit of

humanity her features had given her. Jhan forgot everything she had been about to say amidst a sudden revelation about herself. Zerain's veil made it easy to dismiss her, to ignore her, and to think of her as only an extension of Obahn; their cook and general housekeeper. Jhan wondered if her strangeness, her mutilation, and her diminutive stature had the same effect on Ahlen and everyone else. Were all of these things her veil, her cover over her humanity? Did it make everyone blind to her, making it easy to treat her badly?

"No," Jhan said aloud, scowling in anguish. "I won't think that! It isn't my fault!"

"What?" Zerain gave her that red wall and Jhan imagined the face behind it, arrogant and judgmental.

"Why do you hate me?" Jhan burst out.

"Hate you?" Zerain sniffed. "I don't bother with thinking about you that much."

"You do!" Jhan shot back, hands clenched. "You try and treat me as badly as they do!"

Zerain gave a small shrug. "You fight against your place. It makes the journey disruptive and harder than it must be for my Lord. With demons along, and an Ekhal to contend with, I dislike you for adding to Obahn's burdens."

"What do you consider my place?" Jhan wondered angrily.

"You are Ikhil," Zerain sounded as if it were obvious. "Even more than an Ekhal, you are for men's pleasure and nothing more. You can't have a lodge or a wife. You can't have children. You can't be a warrior, though you have managed to train to be one against custom. You are less than nothing. A woman's place is by her husband, holding his lodge and ruling for him there. We raise his children and we give him what pleasure he needs. Since you can't do any of those things, but one, you must do that one thing and stop battling against it. Be Sael's wife, if it pleases him and Obahn! Lie on your back and do what an Ikhil can to please. Stop fighting your place!"

"So that Obahn will stop looking at me, is what you really mean, isn't it?" Jhan cut to the heart of the matter. "You and Ahlen are too much alike."

"Are you through fighting?" Sael came to the bed, startling them both with his sudden appearance. He took hold of Jhan's elbow, berating her angrily, "Save your strength for the ride." and then at Zerain. "You have duties, Obahn's wife!"

Zerain took up a bag and left the house with a tilted veil that conveyed her insolence perfectly. Sael's face, wrapped in red scarves and glinting with charms and pins, seemed distant and impatient.

"Don't make an enemy out of Zerain," Sael warned.

"Too late, I already have," Jhan replied bitterly. "I don't get to make any decisions, remember? Not even about that."

Sael gritted his teeth as he held up a flask, deciding to ignore her. "Put this inside of your cloak to keep it from freezing. It is a drink that contains herbs and berries. One will help you heal and the other will dull the pain. Use it sparingly. I couldn't find much in this weather."

Jhan slipped the cord over her neck and placed the leather flask against her skin. It was cold and she shivered. Her mumbled, "Thank you." was sullen and bordering on disingenuous.

Sael went hard and his words were harsh; a warning. "I have helped you because you saved my life and because I am a fool sometimes. It must end here. I must remember why I am on this journey. I will allow you to shelter in my protection as my wife, but you must play the part in all seriousness or it will not work. You must stay quiet and modest. You must not speak with other men. I won't ask you to cover your face, but you must understand that you are mine and that what you do reflects on my honor. Obahn will expect me to punish you if you don't do all of these things. If I fail to keep you in order, he can command that I send you back to our people."

"Alone," Jhan guessed caustically.

"Of course, alone."

"And if he finds out that we haven't really been consummated?"

"He knows, I told you," Sael's tone became sharp, impatient.

"He ignores it," Jhan persisted.

"Yes."

Jhan glared. "Then why would he care whether I was a dutiful wife or not? It's interesting how everyone deludes themselves to make things easier for themselves. Ahlen did it, Zerain, and now you. I hate to disappoint all of you, but I intend to be, not just a bump in the road, but a boulder; a boulder that may grow so large, that you'll never be able to ignore me!"

"You won't be ignored," Sael agreed, "just left behind."

"Have you seen Zerain's face?" Jhan wondered suddenly.

Sael scowled, bewildered. "What does that-"

"Have you?"

"No."

"She just showed it to me," Jhan told him.

"Why would she-"

"To make a point," Jhan cut him off again. "She wanted to show me that she was everything that I wasn't. She was threatening me with her womanhood, challenging me. You're challenging me now, too, trying to threaten me with your manhood. Both of you want me to lie down, spread my legs, and shut up, but for different reasons. Well, neither of you are going to succeed. Say all you want. Threaten

all you want. I'm not going to let you take my humanity away. I'm going to confront you with it and make you realize that you're actually hurting someone by your decisions!"

"I told you," Sael threatened once more, "if you make trouble, Obahn will leave you behind."

Sael's face was as red as his scarf. Jhan was hollow eyed, but determined as she replied, "Then let him. I may be powerless and very weak, but I'm still a person. It's all I have left!"

"I hope it will comfort you when you are left in the wilderness!"

Jhan glared, defiant. "Maybe that would be better than having you for a husband."

Jhan had gone too far and she discovered it instantly. Sael uttered a furious, unintelligible growl as he jerked Jhan to her feet without any regard to her injury. When Jhan screamed out in pain and collapsed, Sael kept her from hitting the floor. His grip didn't loosen and he wasn't contrite as he hauled her away from the bed and out of the house.

Sael mostly carried Jhan to keep her leg off of the ground, but the pain was still unbearable and her head swam, darkness pricking at the corners of her eyes. She choked on her screams of pain, but bit back any cry of protest, knowing that, in Sael's mood, it would go unheard.

"Sael!" Ahlen came forward to help, angry and accusing. "What are you doing? Stop treating Jhan that way! Have you gone mad?"

Sael freed one arm long enough to shove Ahlen violently away, face growing whitely furious as he measured out each word. "I asked it before and I will ask it once again. Are you challenging me for my wife, Ahlen Kantori?"

Ahlen backed away fearfully, but his eyes were on Jhan as he touched the bruise on his throat. "Why let him do this?" he demanded of her. "You can so easily stop it."

Obahn, on his imala, was alert for the answer as well. Jhan ignored them, not having any choice but to go along as Sael forced her to her baku and put her in the saddle. He pressed her knee with his hand, his dark eyes demanding that she be reasonable. Jhan ignored him and set her chin away from all of them

Jhan couldn't tell them that she was too much of a coward to fight. She would when she knew nothing would happen in return, as with Ahlen, but to defy Sael or Obahn meant something else. They were warriors used to shedding blood for any reason. If she tried to stop them, she might win, momentarily, but then, she knew, she would have to kill them both or they would kill her. It was something Ahlen was still too naive to understand. Zerain knew and she nodded, once, in approval, as if Jhan had decided to do as Zerain wanted, and to cease making her husband's journey difficult.

Obahn grunted his disappointment, shrugging in disgust as he began riding down the trail. Togo turned into his air born form and floated ahead of him. Minyah loped on all fours behind. Tagara

walked beside Ixien while he sat astride the pack baku. The two were deep in talk as if nothing existed in the world but them.

Jhan urged her baku forward. Ahlen rode on one side while Sael rode on the other. Zerain stayed with them for only a moment and then trotted up ahead to be by her husband. Jhan was glad. It was hard enough to deal with one veiled person, let alone two.

It wasn't long before Jhan found it necessary to drink from the flask. The liquid was biting, minty to a nauseating degree, and had an under hint of berry. She made a face, coughing as she capped the flask and put it back under her clothes. Jhan counted the minutes until the shooting pain of her leg receded to an aching throb that was only slightly more bearable. The world receded along with the pain, fading into a white haze as if a mist had settled over the land. The reins fell from Jhan's suddenly slack hand and the baku obediently stopped.

"What's wrong?" Ahlen's voice echoed and almost didn't make any sense to Jhan. "Something's wrong with Jhan! If you've hurt her, you despicable pervert, I will challenge you!"

"Bravery at last, but not necessary," Sael replied irritably. "It's a drug to dull the pain." He took the reins of Jhan's baku and made a tisk noise to get the beast moving again. "She took too much. She didn't give me a chance to explain the proper dose."

"Stop talking as if I weren't here!" Jhan grumbled, but her words didn't come out right and they ignored her, talking heatedly across her. Their words pulsed and echoed like her pain and she couldn't follow the thread of their meaning. At last, she gave up and simply tried to stay in the saddle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

(Breath of the Dead)

They rode through the bog, frozen and half frozen water mixed with the muddy peat. The beasts's hooves made tiresome smacking noises with every step and the tree branches hung low and bare, obstacles to constantly duck and avoid. The drug wore off, and Jhan rationed herself to only occasional sips when the pain became too much to bear another moment. That was more than she liked, but she didn't think that she could have kept on riding otherwise.

The weather stayed barely above freezing, a bright sun mocking them with promised warmth that never came. Sael wrapped a blanket around Jhan when he saw her shivering and helped her put on her

gloves when her fingers wouldn't curl about the pommel of the saddle any longer. His help was automatic and impatient. Jhan could see his tense regard of the trees all around them and his silent wish to be doing anything but taking care of her. Ahlen was the direct opposite, longing to help, but constrained by Sael's sharp warnings.

There were tumbled stones half hidden among the trees and sunken deep in the bog. Jhan's eyes passed them by for a time, thinking that they were just rocky outcroppings. When they passed closer to one, she saw then that it was the broken wall of some fortress, the bare bones of the rest hidden in winter frosted vines. When they came on a great, stone floor, still above the muck and shielded from the cold wind by one stubborn wall, Obahn decided to make camp.

There wasn't enough level foundation for the tent. Jhan huddled miserably in the open, a chill breeze fingering through all of her clothes, until Zerain lit the braziers and stretched out the furs and blankets. Then Jhan settled close to the fire, with Sael's help, and tried to keep from moaning until the stabbing pains of her leg receded.

Ixien curled up and went to sleep. Tagara paced the confines of their camp, a glowing, red nimbus all about her. She seemed lost in thought. Again, Jhan wondered what she and Ixien had talked about. She couldn't imagine the Caefu falling in love or even becoming infatuated by Tagara. He was too cold a being and seemed far removed from such Human traits.

Tagara didn't act as innocent as Togo and Minyah, but was she smart enough not to be used by Ixien? Jhan almost considered warning her, but then held her tongue. She didn't know anything, only suspected, and she didn't really know Tagara. Perhaps she and Ixien were two of a kind, remote, cold, and maybe not above commiserating on a plan that didn't include the rest of them. If they were planning on leaving on their own, Jhan wasn't about to dissuade them. She wished all of them would go, in fact, leaving her with only Ahlen again; a man so dependent and naive that she didn't have much fear of him anymore.

Some animal squealed and Jhan saw Minyah come loping into camp with a fat creature dripping blood in his claws. Zerain took it, without comment or surprise, and began carving it up expertly. Minyah sat back on his haunches and licked his fingers clean like a fastidious cat. It nauseated Jhan, and she turned away, only to come face to face with Togo. He was sitting almost touching her, hands outstretched to the flames of the brazier.

"Don't be afraid of him," Togo told her gently. "He's really just a child. He wouldn't hurt anyone."

"And you?"

Togo smiled deprecatingly. "I suppose, as abilities go, I have the least of them. Making air move from place to place isn't much to threaten someone with."

“How do you- I mean,” Jhan tried to gather her thoughts and frame a question around the inexplicable. “How do you do it?”

Togo tapped his breast. “There is a part of a machine inside of each of us that allows us to form matter and molecules as we wish in respect to our own ability. If you are capable of understanding higher level physics I can attempt to explain-”

“Wait,” Jhan held up a hand and then clenched both of her hands together. “You’re saying that you are able to create wind by using machinery inside of you? Do you change into air when you float?”

“No,” Togo replied. “I form the air around me to lift me up. Tagara can do the same with fire, but Minyah can only travel as you do. Still, he doesn’t do too badly on four feet.”

Jhan felt an easing of tension inside of her. She gave a short, nervous laugh. “I couldn’t explain it, you see. I was beginning to believe in magic.”

“Magic?” Togo was intrigued. “Is that what you call the power you have inside of you? Selaya sensed it in you, but couldn’t explain what it was to us.”

Jhan was confused again. She didn’t want to be. “I want to be logical about this,” Jhan struggled. “I don’t really know what the Power is all about. I’ve been told that you have to be born with it, but I wasn’t. The person who mutilated me gave me the ability unintentionally. Most have just bits of it, abilities like yours that deal mainly with one thing. I have an ability that is so limitless that it’s too destructive to even use. That’s why it’s locked up inside of me.”

“Superstition,” Zerain snorted over the meat she was just beginning to grill. “Such things cannot be.”

“I thought so too,” Jhan replied quietly, not wanting the others to hear. Sael and Obahn were dealing with the imala and Ahlen was feeding the baku. “I’ve had to rethink a lot of things, though. My list of what’s possible keeps growing by leaps and bounds. What the Power is, a mental trick to tap into power outside of myself, or something powerful within me, I can’t say. I don’t think I’m ready to call it magic just yet.”

Togo smiled pensively. “It’s good to speak with others after so long isolated in the mountains. Selaya didn’t speak often and my brother and sister could only trade back and forth the same knowledge until it grew stale.” He glanced towards Obahn and Sael. “I see that there are different ways to learn, if we are to be accepted, and skills to learn if we are to survive, but it is good to be free.”

“A custom you should know,” Zerain warned, “is the one of not speaking to and sitting near another man’s wife. I wear a veil for protection, but Sael’s wife is open to shame.”

Togo didn’t understand, as innocent as Ahlen, but he quietly moved himself away. Jhan glared at Zerain. “That wasn’t necessary! You don’t mind speaking to or having men around you and I don’t see

Obahn taking offense.”

“No one would dare challenge Obahn for me and he knows it well,” Zerain replied stiffly. “You are another matter. Sael isn’t strong enough, or careful enough, of your honor. If you are shamed, Obahn is shamed as well, since your husband is oathed to him.”

“I don’t care about your customs,” Jhan seethed. “I’ll talk to anyone I want to.”

“And have Sael kill them?” Zerain replied pointedly.

Ahlen had sat down a few feet away, taking out his flute from deep inside a bag. He caressed it gently and smoothed fingers over the holes. He hadn’t played since his private concert for Jhan. Out of guilt? Jhan thought so, but Ahlen seemed to need the comfort enough to forgo it for now. He began to play, low and sweet. Everyone looked around, startled, as he wove a beautiful, haunting tune that floated among the ruins and sounded wholly unearthly in its perfection.

Jhan forgot her anger, and her throbbing leg to listen, remembering a warm house, and a warmer bed, and loving arms around her. Togo had tears in his eyes and Tagara was staring with longing. Minyah was smiling happily, head cocked sideways like an attentive hound. Ixien stood with wide eyes, pale body poised as if he wanted to run into the bog. He looked as unearthly as the music, the moonlight flitting over his glass-like hair. Obahn was crouched with a bundle in his hands, in the process of unloading and checking supplies. He had his eyes half closed, but they glinting yellow in the firelight, and he seemed to be humming to the music under his breath.

“Such a beautiful boy,” Zerain murmured.

Jhan broke from the music, wiping at the tears in her eyes, to see Zerain standing with one hand raised to her veiled face in awe. “Be careful of your honor, Zerain,” Jhan warned mockingly, half choking on her own emotion. Zerain flinched, but turned away, saying nothing.

Sael knelt by Jhan and began unlacing the bindings around her leg. He alone was unmoved by the music. When he met Jhan’s eyes, he shrugged. “I’ve never been able to hear music as everyone else does. It’s just noise to me, irritating mostly.”

“Tin ear,” Jhan surmised absently.

Sael grunted appreciatively. “Tin ear, yes; I will remember that.”

“My husband-,” Jhan stumbled and choked, trying again. “My husband wasn’t one for music either.”

Sael’s eyes turned hard. “I am your husband.”

Jhan lowered her voice, but nobody was listening, too wrapped up in the music. “Keep repeating it all you like, it won’t make it true.”

“Denying it will only reward you with death,” Sael replied, harsh and unsympathetic. “If that is

what you truly wish, I will tell Obahn at once and he can deal with you as he sees fit.”

“Go ahead.”

Sael’s eyes were level on Jhan’s as their wills clashed. When Jhan refused to be intimidated, Sael was the one to back down, shifting his attention to her bared leg to cover his discomfiture. Jhan found herself staring at it as well. The leg was swollen and the skin there was mottled with ugly, dark colors. Touching it gingerly, Sael checked to make certain the bones were still together. Satisfied, he began bandaging it with expert fingers.

“I respect your defense of your honor,” Sael grudgingly said at last, “yet, the battles you choose to fight make little sense to me.”

“Give an inch and you lose a mile,” Jhan replied.

“Such odd sayings,” Sael remarked as he twitched the blankets and furs back over Jhan’s leg. “They sound wise, but you are certainly not. You have only to endure a veil of words to be under my protection, and yet you won’t even bend so far.”

“Would you?”

Sael didn’t even pause to consider. “No, of course not, but then, I wouldn’t have begun such madness in the first place. If someone had made me an Ikhil, I would have killed myself. I wouldn’t have pretended that my life was worth something afterwards or forgotten the man I had been enough to think that I should be a woman.”

“Then you find me... what? Disgusting?”

“No,” Sael replied and he struggled with that. “I’m not sure what I think. You are brave and you saved my life. There is a warrior in you, despite your words, and I owe you this attempt to save your life. I won’t go further, though. I’ve done enough, I think, and you must agree. Now, it is all up to you. I won’t tell Obahn, but you mustn’t shame me either. If you don’t wish to accept this arrangement, you must go to Obahn and tell him so.”

“And if I don’t, but I still refuse to do as you say?”

Sael gritted his teeth, looking very disturbed, and then he said evenly, “I know that you have the ability to kill me, but I will be forced to be the man, to be your husband, and to punish you and put you in your place. It isn’t something I relish, but my honor before my Lord, however I feel about Obahn, will force me to it.”

Jhan trembled, but she kept her gaze steady. “Is that what your people think is right; beating up women who don’t do as you say?”

“Everyone has a place, even Ekhal,” Sael replied. “Survival of our people depends on everyone staying in those places. The different, the rebellious, are not tolerated.”

“Like you?” Jhan stung him as painful as any wasp. She saw him flinch, as Zerain had flinched, caught out of his thoughts.

“I received my punishment for breaking the laws,” Sael agreed, “My Lord Hagen was taken from me.”

“That’s not what I meant-” Jhan began, but she had touched a raw nerve, and Sael had already made it clear that his patience was long gone. In a white fury, Sael struck Jhan, open hand cracking audibly on the side of her face.

Jhan cried out from surprise as much as pain as she was flung sideways by the blow. Her leg was jarred violently against the rough stone of the foundation and her head spun as the pain erupted and whipped through her senses, leaving her moaning and close to unconsciousness. As Sael stood over her, tense and ready to avoid her response, Jhan could only curl up around her pain and try to shield herself with her arms from any more blows.

The music stopped. “Why did you do that!” Togo was demanding dazedly at the same time that Ahlen began shouting, “What are you doing!”

“My wife forgets her place,” Sael announced loudly, tone warning against anyone interfering as his hand touched his sword hilt.

“I won’t stand by anymore and let you do this to her!” Ahlen’s voice cracked, spoiling his righteous indignation. “I promised Jhan that I wouldn’t let anyone hurt her! I’m going to- I’m not a warrior, but I do challenge-”

“Silence,” Obahn barked as he took hold of Ahlen’s arm in an iron grip. “Sael will only kill you. Jhan Dor is his now and it is well past time for you to call a challenge.”

“I don’t care! I-” Ahlen stopped, panting, his anger, fear, and helplessness clear on his face. He knew that there was nothing he could do. Groaning his frustration, he turned away, back stiff, but shoulders slumped as he hugged his chest as if to comfort himself. Then, without warning, he uttered a strangled cry of rage, whipped back around, and simply charged Sael.

Sael sidestepped him as easily as if it had been a dance step and punched Ahlen full on the chin. Ahlen dropped to the ground like a sack of grain, head lolling and unconscious.

“It seems there is a man in you after all Sael,” Obahn observed with obvious pleasure as he looked down at Ahlen’s unconscious body. “I began to doubt the truthfulness of your marriage when you allowed Jhan to shame you with these other men.”

“I am new to it, that’s all,” Sael replied stiffly, rubbing the knuckles he had skinned on Ahlen’s chin.

“I have found,” Obahn continued, staring pointedly at Jhan, “that keshuning quiets rebellious

spirits."

It was an open challenge, Obahn testing Sael. Sael couldn't ignore it. His honor wouldn't allow it. He nodded, took up a thick blanket, and hooked a hand around Jhan's waist. Hauling her up, he carried her as if she were a rag doll.

Going to a shadow covered corner of the foundation, hidden by a tumble of stone from the half fallen walls, Sael threw the blanket onto the cold, filthy, stone floor. Putting Jhan down on top of it, he threw himself on top of her with one hand closing about her injured leg.

"What about your oath?" Jhan managed to hiss through her pain. The world was spinning, a red haze clouding her sight and a roaring beginning in her ears that told her she was about to faint.

Sael leaned down so that his body was pressed hard between Jhan's legs and his mouth was very close to her ear. "If you speak, I will squeeze my hand. If you persist, I will twist until your leg breaks again."

With his free hand, Sael pulled her cloak and sweaters aside, laying her breasts bare. He stared at them, milk pale shadows in the moonlight, but stare was all he did as his hand began pulling at her pants next. That hand was warm and fumbling crudely, callouses smarting against Jhan's sensitive skin like sandpaper. He managed to pull her pants down to her knees without releasing her broken leg; his surety of safety.

"What did you feel like after you were raped by those warriors?"

Sael froze at Jhan's angry, sobbing question, and then his lips, so close to her ear, bit her viciously in retaliation. Jhan shrieked, short and sharp, before Sael's free hand slapped over her mouth. Jhan panted against his broad fingers, moaning loud enough for anyone to hear.

"Good," Sael approved softly.

Sael lay quietly, warm breath against her neck, for some moments. His anger seemed to have passed and Jhan saw, as she stared up at him fearfully, that he was listening to the voices of their companions. Obahn's rose and fell, punctuated by laughter.

"Sounds as if he gave her a good ride," Obahn chuckled.

"Are they-?" Ahlen's voice was almost a squeak.

"What else, Kantori? Are you such a boy?"

Sael was strangely satisfied. He began to rise off of Jhan, as if he were intending to leave her. That motion brought his face very close to her just as he took a deep breath. That breath was followed by another, deeper breath, as if Sael had captured a peculiar scent and was trying to identify it.

Sael's hand left Jhan's mouth, but she didn't say anything, becoming frightened as that hand smoothed along her ear and then grabbed a mound of her hair. Sael brought it close to his flaring

nostrils, as if it were intoxicating him somehow. He made some decision then, all in an instant, as he thrust himself back onto her, pushing his weight against her pelvis.

Sael was hard and painful against Jhan. Everything within her shuddered and retreated, absolutely certain that at any moment Sael was going to forget oaths and honor and that she didn't want to be *present* when it happened. The man was pulling at his clothes. The moonlight shown on Sael's bare hips and the strong curve of his lower back, as his hot belly pressed against Jhan's cold skin.

She braced herself, biting her lip and sobbing, as she considered whether another broken leg would be worth it to stop him, but, when Sael began grinding himself against her pelvis, he acted uncertain, as if he weren't sure that he wanted to violate her. He groaned, wild, confused; a long, pent up, lust demanding a consummation he was stubbornly denying it.

It was disgusting, animal, the way Sael was grinding against her. Jhan remembered her dream of Kile; his love, his tenderness, and his passion. He was light and love. This was darkness and degradation; pain and humiliation. When Sael began to kiss Jhan's bites and then to push his full weight onto her, Jhan knew that he had lost his indecision. She sobbed and braced herself, shutting her eyes tight.

The sudden, tingling pleasure was totally unexpected. "No!" Jhan whispered, horrified, but she groaned at the same time, unable to stop herself from grabbing onto Sael, meeting his movements, as the pleasure surmounted the pain and began to sing through her entire body. It demanded release, consummation of some kind, as it rose to a fevered pitch, almost more than Jhan could bear.

Jhan took hold of Sael's bare hips, shocking even herself with her need for him to do more. She found herself groaning, ready to plead with him, curse him, overpower him if she had to before the tingling tightening of muscle and nerves killed her. When Sael thrust himself up and away from her, she tried to pull him back, desperate.

Sael retreated, shoving her roughly. "Where is your fear?" Sael panted, but it was obvious that he was the one who was afraid.

Jhan lay back sobbing, arms outstretched and gripping the stone. Slowly, agonizingly, the tingling receded and the shuddering, overwhelming pleasure died an aching death that left Jhan exhausted and feeling dried up and ready to blow away.

Jhan didn't know how she was able to speak through the throbbing of her blood behind her eyes, but she couldn't go on another second with Sael thinking that she had willingly... She swallowed and spoke in a brittle voice. "The man who tortured me, who made me what I am, liked to see how far he could take me in pain and humiliation. There are pleasures a body wants that you can't deny it even if it kills you. He made me feel that kind of pleasure. It is beyond my control even when I hate- despise-

even when I'm being raped!" Jhan collapsed in tears, her hands coming up to hide her face.

Sael was silent for some time and then he uttered one, explosive curse under his breath and said haltingly, "There is something about you; a scent that I can't describe. That scent made me lose control. I only wanted to pretend, to make Obahn think that we were keshuning. I needed you to moan and to cry out to make him believe." Sael looked down at himself and then pulled at the blanket to clean his lower body in disgust. "I reacted like a green boy. I've never done such a thing before. I don't know if this has saved my honor or imperiled it more. I thought that you said that you did not feel the need for such things?"

"I don't, not until someone..." Jhan bit off the rest, hating that part of her body, Sael, and the world itself, just then.

Sael pulled up his pants and belted them before continuing, his hands shaking, "I didn't want to use you that way, but you didn't leave me any choice. Obahn challenged me to be a man."

"And are you?" Jhan lashed back vehemently.

"Yes, but now he will think he has proof of it."

Sael stood, looked down at her with a sigh of regret, and then left her there.

Jhan heard Obahn laugh. "Did you quiet her tempers?"

"I did," Sael grumbled and then, "Tend to her Zerain."

Jhan didn't move as she listened to Zerain's footsteps approach. The woman had a glowing ember to see by and a bowl of food. She paused when she saw Jhan stretched out flat on the ground with her clothes mostly off of her.

"Will you need cloth and water to clean with?" Zerain asked in a voice devoid of compassion.

"Go away," Jhan breathed and kept her face averted as her tears made warm trails over her freezing cheeks.

"As you will," Zerain replied stiffly, "but you had best cover up or Sael will have a dead wife come morning." She started to leave, paused, and then thought better of whatever parting shot she had been about to impart as she walked away again.

Jhan slowly sat up and jerkily pulled her clothes back on. She didn't know what she would have done if Zerain had said one word more. Her hands were tense for violence. She forced herself to eat the food Zerain had left behind and to pull the blanket up around herself, trying not to think about Sael's musky scent that was so strongly on it. Common sense begged her to return to the warm brazier, but Jhan couldn't find the will. She wiped at the tears on her face and leaned her back against the freezing stone wall.

Jhan wanted to hate Sael, but he hadn't done anything but make her feel humiliated and a puppet

for desires she couldn't control. He hadn't intended anything other than a lewd play to fool Obahn. Jhan had been the one to turn it into something else. She felt her face burn and she ducked it into the circle of her arms, leaning her forehead against her raised knee. She sat that way for a long hour, trying to gather back the remnants of her self possession with little success.

It was much easier, in the end, to simply lie down on the cold stone and play a macabre game with death. She did everything she could to keep warm and then closed her eyes to wait and see who would be the winner when morning light came. She needed that test; a decision freely made to reassure herself that, in the end, the final decision was still hers.

Jhan awoke, warm and languid. It was still dark. She was on her back, staring up through bare tree limbs at a full moon and wisps of smoke that were making white trails in the air. She sat up, moaning a little at the pain of her leg. She gripped it with her hands, rubbed at the knee, and bent over it until the pain receded to a dull throb. Only then did she look up and see that Tagara was standing very close, eyes on some distant point and seeming deep in thought.

"I could burn him for you," Tagara suggested without changing her expression as she looked down at Jhan.

"Sael?"

"All of them, if you wish." Tagara clarified. "They seem little better than animals."

"Except for Ixien," Jhan replied.

"Yes, he is different."

"Not to me." Jhan pulled the blanket about her even though Tagara's warmth made it unnecessary. "Or do you think a lack of passion makes someone's cruelty better somehow?"

"He has not been cruel to me."

Jhan saw the tense line furrow Tagara's brow. She knew then that Tagara was feeling lost in this strange land and that Ixien had become a lifeline for her. Jhan decided that she wouldn't be the one to take that away from her.

"Why did you keep me warm?" Jhan wondered, changing the subject.

"That one, Sael, he was very cruel to you." Tagara crouched all in one smooth motion and gave Jhan a disturbing view of her clear eyes. "He treated you better under the mountain. Here, he used you as if you were nothing and then left you to die in the cold."

"He didn't leave me," Jhan found herself defending him, not sure why. "He must have thought that

I would have better sense than to stay here and freeze.”

Tagara made a disgusted sound. “They filled their bellies, talked, and then slept without even looking around for you. Only I came to see and to protect you when I found you cold and hardly breathing. You were the one to free Selaya. You are owed more than this.”

“Sael thought that Zerain was taking care of me,” Jhan persisted, suddenly afraid for him. “He’s been protecting me from Obahn, Tagara.”

Tagara was struggling with a great emotion and it was a long moment before Jhan realized that it was fear. Her stiff features trembled. “Are all men in this land like that?”

“Like what?”

“Beasts who seek to chain you to their will?” Tagara demanded.

“I seem to run into more than my share,” Jhan told her bitterly, “but I would like to believe that they are the exception. Customs dictate almost everything in this land, Tagara. The good men have a tough time stepping outside of them. Sael wants to be kind. He wants to help me. So does Ahlen,” she admitted reluctantly, “but they have harsh punishments for not thinking as everyone else does; death being one of them.”

“Ixien isn’t like them,” Tagara stated again with a gleam in her eye.

Jhan fell silent on that point, not wanting to continue. Her pelvis ached and her face felt as if a bruise was on the cheek that Sael had slapped. Abused and humiliated, she wasn’t ready to keep on defending mankind in general to Tagara.

“I thought-” Sael’s worried voice came from the darkness. Tagara straightened and her usually bland expression turned furious as she glowed white hot and turned. Sael exclaimed and Jhan reached out automatically to grab Tagara’s leg in an attempt to stop her from hurting the Ekhal.

Jhan knew her mistake instantly. Her hand felt as if she had reached into an electric arc. Tagara’s heat hit Jhan’s flesh, sizzling through her and racing straight to her heart. Death was within a heartbeat. Like an overblown circuit, Jhan’s mind was blasted open, neurons misfiring wildly. Her Power surged against the seams of a failing mental door, parted it a crack, and then carved an agonizing path through Jhan’s veins back towards Tagara.

“No!” Jhan acted without thought, instinct taking over to escape the pain and the imminent destruction she knew was coming. She threw herself backwards into the one solid wall, feeling her head smack the stone sickeningly. Lights shot and mingled with the flaring agony of her mind as darkness took her down into its embrace.

Jhan moaned as consciousness came on her, not as a gentle, slow waking, but as a quick realization that every point in her body was throbbing with pain.

“Are you back from the dead?”

Jhan opened her eyes. She was lying by a brazier, morning sunlight giving everything a golden glow. Beside her, Sael was rolling a blanket and tying it neatly with leather cords.

“I don’t feel as if I’m alive,” Jhan’s voice sounded weak in her own ears.

“Dead or alive, I was about to strap you onto your baku.”

“Not even a proper burial?” Jhan wondered caustically.

Sael tucked the blanket roll under his arm, black eyes finally looking into Jhan's. Ignoring her bitter humor, he said, “I thank you, once again, for my life. I don’t know why it happened, but I do know that Tagara meant to burn me.”

Memory was a jumble of confusing images for Jhan. She frowned, her head pounding fiercely, as she tried to put it all into some sort of order. “Tagara was taking care of me,” she recalled slowly. “She was angry at you, at all of you, I think, but mostly at you. She thought that I deserved better.”

“I was on watch when I saw her light,” Sael told Jhan, suddenly guilty. “I was trying to be the man with Obahn, I admit, and I didn’t look to see if Zerain had brought you back into camp as I had commanded. When I realized that you might still be where I had left you, and confronted by that demon woman, I hurried to help you. Tagara must have thought-”

Jhan scowled, understanding. “She must have thought that you had come back to force me to my wifely duty again,” she finished for him bitterly. “After your first performance, I would have thought so too.”

Sael lashed back, brutally honest, “I could have had you, then and there, and I didn’t! It wasn’t for lack of desire, or ability. That you know well now. I chose not to take my rightful pleasure with you and you should be more grateful to me for it. I have been without for three years, my *wife*. It was not an easy thing to accomplish.”

“You must think that matters to me,” Jhan replied as she shakily managed to sit up. Looking about, she finally noticed that everything and everyone was gone, but for the brazier, her blankets, Sael’s imala, and her baku. “Where is everyone?” she asked, startled.

“They have already left,” Sael replied impatiently. “Obahn commanded me to stay and deal with you. Since he didn’t specify what should be done, I took the liberty to interpret his meaning as a command to help you recover enough to travel. Can you travel?”

Jhan looked down at the hand that had grabbed Tagara. It was red, but not burned as she had

thought. She turned that hand into a fist and then opened and closed it gingerly, not understanding why it wasn't charred to the bone.

Sael was looking as well. "Tagara was flung away from you," he told her. "She screamed and was in pain for some time. She told us that some force had leapt from you and had tried to kill her. She was hysterical until Ixien took her aside and spoke with her. She told us that there was a force within you that rivaled any power that Selaya had possessed."

Jhan looked within herself, testing her barriers. They were firm and cool to her mental touch. The Power throbbed behind them, but wasn't in any danger of suddenly escaping. "Tagara generates her heat by electricity, I think. It shook me when I touched her."

Sael's face was uncomprehending. Jhan struggled to explain and calm his fear. "Don't worry about it. It's something that I can't ever use consciously. It's locked up inside of me where even I can't touch it. Tagara... How can I explain? She gave me such a shock, that it let that lock slip for an instant. It was an instant long enough to protect me from getting burned by her, I guess, but not long enough to hurt anyone."

Sael was still confused. He straightened and stared down at her, clearly agitated. "Again, I find that you are not the weakling that you pretend. I want to call you a coward, for not using the abilities that you so obviously possess, but then how would I explain why you risked yourself to save me?" He paused and then asked tentatively, "Why did you save me?"

"You are a crude, barbaric member of a society that I never want to get to know," Jhan told him furiously, "but under all of the degrading things you've put me through, even I can see that you're trying your best, in the only narrow way you can, to help me."

"Was that an insult or a compliment?" Sael wondered with a scowl.

"A statement of sad truth," Jhan replied. "Now get me up and on my baku before I faint again." She glared at him, adding, "or if I'm too far gone, at least give me a good burial."

"You are a remarkable healer," Sael replied thoughtfully. "Your broken leg looks set well and the swelling has already gone down. Your head should have been split by that wall, but I found only a small knot on your scalp." He paused and then went on in a lower voice, "I also found dark bruises where I had pushed against you. It isn't proper for a husband to harm a wife that way. I ask your forgiveness."

Jhan saw that Sael was sincere. She didn't know what to say, hard words poised on her tongue. Finally, she calmed herself enough to be coherent. "Slapping, dragging, and verbal abuse is okay, but hurting me while you're trying to fake a rape isn't?"

"Being with one's wife isn't rape," Sael replied stiffly, "but yes, that sort of violence is not lawful

among my people. A woman's ability to bear children might be harmed by such acts."

Jhan was outraged, but not surprised. "I see. So, it isn't concern for the violence, but the fact that you might not get any babies because of it. Does that really make some sort of sick sense to you or your people?"

Sael glared and then his jaw tensed as if he were fighting with himself. At last, he reached down and pulled Jhan to her feet. As she leaned unsteadily and unwillingly against him he replied, "Not to me, if you must know. None of my people's customs has ever made sense to me. That has always been my problem, you see."

Sael's grip was firm as he began to help Jhan towards the baku. "I think I do see," Jhan admitted, feeling her anger seep out of her despite herself. It shouldn't have. Sael had hurt her enough to fuel it. It was his uncomfortable admission, when he hadn't needed to say anything, that won him respite from her condemnation.

Mounting her baku made Jhan's head spin. She took a sip of the medicine still hanging about her neck, and leaned over the warmth of the beast as she waited for blessed relief from the pain. Sael finished packing and then mounted his imala, taking Jhan's reins and leading her baku at a quick and less than gentle walk.

"Did you think you were going to die?" Jhan asked suddenly.

Sael looked back at her, puzzled. "When?"

Jhan felt the medicine taking affect. It was loosening her tongue and she wasn't sure herself why she wanted to know the answer to her question. She found herself clarifying it without consideration. "When Tagara was going to burn you. Did you think that you were going to die?"

"I thanked you for saving my life," Sael reminded Jhan as he turned his shoulder to her once again.

"I thought that you wanted to die."

Sael chuckled darkly. "In my own way, and in my own time. It will be my choice, not the choice of some demon from under a mountain."

"Last night, I wanted to choose as well," Jhan told him. She curled her hands in the baku's fur and rested her chin against its strong neck. She rolled with its motion and only the saddle kept her from falling off.

"When you touched Tagara," Sael was asking, misunderstanding, "you were trying to kill yourself?"

"No," Jhan replied. "I meant... before she showed up. You told me once that I had a choice. It was a final choice, but still a choice. After using me like you did, after treating me as if I weren't a human being, I felt that I had to be sure."

“Sure of what?” Sael sounded concerned.

“Of my choice,” Jhan persisted, irritable at his lack of understanding. “I decided to stay in the cold. I didn’t care about the consequences. Being in control of that final decision was more important to me. I guess that I went a little out of my mind. When Tagara came and saved me, she told me that she wanted to burn all of you. I was forced to argue, to verbally defend you. I was too good at it. In the end, I convinced myself that you were just a product of your cruel society. I created an excuse for your abuse. I still feel pretty sick about it.”

“In my youth,” Sael said, as if he were very old, “I tried to understand the customs of my people and to follow them. I dreamed of being a warrior and redeeming my mother’s dishonor. I wanted to go into battle and do great deeds.” Sael shrugged bitterly, hands twisting in the reins of his baku, “When I was told that those customs caused my mother to be raped...,”

Sael paused, gathering strength to explain, and then continued tightly, “You see, women are not allowed out alone at night, but my mother had a sick friend. She went only to deliver medicine. The warrior who raped her followed custom. By being alone at night, my mother had, to him, obviously been offering herself up for any man. When she proved pregnant with me, he followed another custom that allowed him to reject her as a whore of the street. Dishonored, she was cast from her family; another custom. She followed yet another when she killed herself after rearing me to manhood.”

“Because of custom, I was born, Jhan Dor, but it has never done me much good otherwise. I would cast it away, if I could, but I was raised by Ekhal. All we have is our honor. Without families, or the hope of ever having a lodge, it gives our lives meaning and foundation. It’s in my blood and bones. That I bent it as I have to accommodate you... You must understand the long nights I have spent trying to justify it.”

“Sael...,” Jhan shook her head, not knowing where to begin. “I just want to finish this journey, alive, I hope, and then return to my real husband. Keep your honor and your help, if it hurts you so much. Just leave me alone, in fact, and let me concentrate on enduring. You, Ahlen, Ixien... all of you keep tearing at me and then putting me back together when you feel guilty about it. Obahn, well, I don’t know what he wants, but I have withstood a great deal worse. He can try keshuning with me, if he thinks he’ll survive it, and, if he wants to get angry enough to leave me behind, I’ll deal with that too.” Jhan continued, stressing her next words vehemently. “If you don’t understand me, I think you can live with it, just stop trying to sort out your life by trying to see yourself in me.”

Sael’s eyes were sharp and burning. “Why did you say that?”

“Isn’t it true?” Jhan persisted doggedly. “I’m a man, in your way of thinking, who wants to be a woman. The exact opposite of what you want... or is it? I was told that I was refusing to accept myself

for what I was. Maybe you are too?" Jhan's voice caught and then she went on in exasperation, "You keep looking for approval from Obahn. I don't think that you took me as your wife just to save my life. I think that you're making some sort of last ditch effort to be a man."

"For Hagen," Sael surprisingly agreed in a quiet voice. "Obahn spoke the truth when he said that the Sun God might take offense at me and not show himself. It weighed on my mind, his words, and I thought to make myself more worthy. I have not truly been Ekhal for three years. If I showed the Sun God a wife, and my determination to join Hagen as a warrior brother, I thought that he might forgive my life of before."

"It wasn't just an act last night, was it?" Jhan wondered, sickened by sudden comprehension. "You were trying to make me your wife, weren't you? What stopped you?"

"I told you... my oath to Obahn and to Hagen."

Jhan shook her head. It made her dizzy, the drug numbing her sense of balance. It took her a moment to gather back the thread of her thoughts. "Hagen is dead and Obahn gave you his permission to have me." Jhan sat up a little with an effort to see Sael's face more clearly. The man was pale, eyes intent on her and wide in alarm as if she had trapped him. "I think, when it came down to it, I was more of a woman than you had bargained for."

Sael closed his eyes and turned his face away. "I am a man."

"Certainly," Jhan agreed with a sigh, "but an Ekhal man. When you finally realized what you had to do... well, that part of me isn't."

"Stop!" Sael shouted and his imala jumped. He reined it in tightly, jaw clenching. "I don't partake in such a foul practice! That you speak of this..."

"You're not going to fall back on your custom of *men don't speak of themselves*, are you?" Jhan made a mocking tisking noise. "I've never met a woman who blathered on about themselves half as much as you do."

"What point is there to any of this?" Sael exploded.

Jhan wondered at it herself and then found it strangely clear to her. "I suppose I just long for a little honesty. If you're going to abuse me, at least don't bother making up these pat lies as if it will make me feel better. The truth; you were going to rape me and, no, you didn't stop because of some concern for me. I think I realized it after you left me there with my clothes pulled half off of me for Zerain to gawk at. I really wanted to believe you, but life has taught me differently."

Jhan twisted a hand into the baku's black fur and tried to hold her concentration for a few seconds more. "You didn't stay to save me just now, for my sake, either. You still need me to be your wife."

Sael sighed gustily and shrugged. It wasn't indifference, but acknowledgment. "When I left you in

the cold last night, how did you find the strength to try and kill yourself?"

It was Jhan's turn to be confused and put off guard. She frowned, considering the question until Sael repeated it and pulled his imala back to ride even with her. "I wasn't trying to kill myself," Jhan replied at last. "I was being crazy, desperate to take back some control. I chose to not call out, crawl back into camp, or even tell Zerain I needed her help. It felt good to know that, as small as that power was, it was mine to wield."

"You would have died."

"You mean if Tagara hadn't found me?" Jhan thought it over. "No, it wasn't that cold and I did have a blanket. I think I knew that when I decided to do it, but it didn't matter. I could pretend enough to make it seem real. I asked you how you had felt when those men had raped you. Do you know why?"

"You wanted to shame me?" Sael growled.

"To make you realize how I was feeling," Jhan corrected him. "I don't know why, but people here seem totally incapable of sympathizing or empathizing with anyone, least of all me. I have a place. I shouldn't think. I shouldn't speak. I shouldn't ever imagine of being or doing anything other than what I'm told. That seems perfectly sane and agreeable to all of you. Can't you remember how you felt? Was it small, helpless, humiliated? Did you want to kill them or kill yourself?"

"I wanted to kill them," Sael picked that out carefully.

"You would," Jhan replied, "but dig deeper. Didn't you feel as if you didn't exist anymore? Didn't you feel as if you weren't human? Didn't any part of you convince yourself that it would be better just to turn your mind off and leave them with an empty shell, never to return?"

Sael didn't want to reply, but it came from his lips, short and sharp as if against his will. "Yes."

"I thought that it would be better to die," Jhan continued unrelentingly. "I found out, long ago, that I was wrong. Life can be terrible beyond imagining, but it's never bad enough to want to end it. No, I didn't want to die last night, but I was willing to use it to remember what it's like to be alive. You, all of you, keep making me forget."

"I don't-"

"Listen," Jhan cut him off.

"Listen to what?" Sael's hand had gone to his sword hilt, alert, until he saw that she wasn't talking about danger.

"Just listen," Jhan prompted him. "Most people don't bother. Look around too. Use your eyes for more than staking out a spot to pee in. The world is really amazing and beautiful. It's full of good people and indescribable good feelings. If you even experience a few moments of it, it's worth living

for. I learned that and you, Sael Ruon, can't even imagine what horrors I've been through."

Jhan stretched out on her baku's neck again, half closing her eyes in exhaustion as Sael replied angrily, "You don't understand honor or duty."

"Or love?" Jhan cut in. "You are attempting to kill yourself, to join the man you loved, aren't you?"

"He was my Lord," Sael corrected stubbornly.

"And you loved him," Jhan persisted. "It's pretty transparent. I don't think you're going to fool this *Sun God* with this act of yours any more than you're fooling me... or Obahn, for that matter. I don't think you really want to die, anyway."

"You are so wise," Sael retorted, "Tell me why?"

"What's stopping you from killing yourself now?" Jhan pointed out. "Why travel so far to get a god's permission?"

Sael didn't reply. Jhan pursued him, cruel. "You keep asking about my courage to kill myself or to endure what was done to me. None of that takes courage," Jhan told him bleakly. "It takes courage to live. Enduring what you do to me is not a choice at all. If you were to ask me, I think you are simply not a coward enough to kill yourself for Hagen."

"It's out of my hands," Sael replied at last, bleak. "What I want doesn't matter anymore. I oathed myself to Obahn and I swore to give myself over to death when we reached the temple. I must endure it and, as you said, there isn't any choice in it at all."

"For honor," Jhan retorted.

"Yes."

"You will use me to do something you don't want to do any longer?"

"I will do what I must to make myself worthy," Sael replied. "All of your words are wasted breath. You must be my wife. I must be a warrior. The Sun God must believe that I want to join Hagen as only his sworn brother, not as an Ekhal."

"And if there isn't a Sun God?" Jhan lashed out. "What if your temple has only pandering priests without an ounce of power to give you what you want?"

Sael hadn't even considered that. It was obvious. Still, he squared his shoulders and moved his imala ahead of her baku. "That will be for Obahn to say. He hates me enough. I don't think I will leave the temple alive either way. You will be free of me then. Keep your patience and only do your duty for my protection, Jhan. It can't be such an impossible thing for you to bear after all else you've told me about?"

"I only want something to be left of me when I am set free," Jhan replied bleakly and closed her

eyes. “My love is still alive. I would do anything to reach him.”

“And if he were dead?” Sael wondered. Jhan bit her lip and it was her turn to say nothing. Sael grunted, not needing an answer. “It’s easy for you to talk and talk, but reality, when you are faced with it, makes it different? Maybe, when the time comes, I will know the answer to what I should do. That answer may be that I can’t live without Hagen.”

They caught up with the others just as the sun began to weaken, the weather turning colder. They saw Ahlen first, lagging well behind the others and turned in the saddle of his baku to stare back down the trail. Sitting up wearily, Jhan could see a great, purpling bruise on Ahlen’s chin

Jhan remembered that Ahlen had tried to save her from Sael. She didn’t know how she should feel about that. On the one hand, she was grateful, on the other, it was his actions that had caused all of her grief to begin with. The scale was still too heavily weighed against him for her to even acknowledge his sacrifice. Instead, she pressed her lips into a thin line and said nothing when they came even with him.

Ahlen seemed not to notice Jhan’s snub, instead he was staring at Jhan’s neck with a look torn between anger and embarrassment. “Are you all right?”

Jhan raised a hand to her neck and felt the bites Sael had put there; a mark for anyone to see that would lead them to believe that Sael had done something other than be afraid of her last night. She kept her silence, the answer too obvious to bother with speaking it aloud.

Ahlen made a decision and pulled his baku sideways to block their path. “Do you wish to challenge me again?” Sael demanded angrily. “This time I will use my sword instead of my fist, Ahlen Kantori.”

Jhan could see that Ahlen was afraid of Sael, but he still continued to block their way, eyes intent on Jhan. When he spoke, his words were foolish and childish from start to finish. “There is a village to the West of here,” he told her in a rush. “A traveler told us that it was a good, decent place; kind to travelers. I will give you what I have- that I won’t need for my offering to the priests. You can be free of this, free of me, free of Sael, now.”

Jhan didn’t even feel of flicker of hope. Sael didn’t allow it. He reached out and gripped her arm possessively as he confronted Ahlen in a deadly tone. “What will she do in this town, Ahlen Kantori; a woman; alone? They will take all that she has and use her as they like. You are naive to think otherwise.”

“I will go with her,” Ahlen offered indignantly. “I will make sure that she settles with someone

who will take care of her.”

“Until they discover that she was once a man?”

“How will they know that?” Ahlen exploded. “Can you tell?”

“Yes, I can,” Sael replied, meeting Ahlen’s innuendo with his own.

“In bed, perhaps, since you have known both, pervert,” Ahlen shot back, voice going rough and embarrassed, “but not to look at.”

Sael considered Jhan, but Jhan had gone cold and distant. “It is hard to tell what she is, she is so filthy with mud and stench, but I think you are right that the eye is easily fooled. Still, who would want her? Why would anyone want to take care of her and defend her?”

Jhan knew the answer to that and she didn’t need to hear them argue it out. She jerked her baku so that it shouldered aside Ahlen’s smaller beast, and rode ahead, giving them both her stiff back. It was only a moment before she was passing Togo and Minyah, on foot strangely, and covered in mud up to their knees. Togo gave her a weary, toothy smile as she passed him with a curious look. Minyah was only a step ahead of his brother, shaggy body moving on all fours like some grotesque werewolf.

Tagara was bobbing along in the sky, flames bright yellow like the sun. Ixien was riding the pack baku. He gave Jhan a cold stare as she approached. “Once again, you manage to avoid your demise,” he said. “It was not wise to try and harm, Tagara. She is angry with you.”

“I didn’t try to harm her,” Jhan replied, loud enough, she hoped, for the ball of fire to hear. “Her power sent such a jolt to my mind that I couldn’t control what happened afterward. Tell her that I’m sorry. She tried to help me and that’s not the way I wanted to repay her kindness.”

“You purposefully knocked yourself unconscious. I saw it,” Ixien continued, crystal eyes making Jhan feel like a curious bug he was studying. “What would have happened if you had not?”

Jhan hoped that she was returning Ixien’s cold look, but inside she was shaking at the memory of how close she had come to killing all of them. “The Power in me can destroy the world if it’s used,” she replied. “Don’t try, like Ahlen did, to include me in whatever plan you have because of it.”

“I have my own abilities,” Ixien told her without blinking. “It will suffice for what I have planned.”

“Which is?”

Ixien simply stared until Jhan grew uncomfortable. At least when he treated her as less than human it was understandable, Jhan thought, since he wasn’t human either, but his coldness reminded her too sharply of Dagara Ku Ni. She was forced to ride further ahead to escape him and the memories he stirred up in her.

Zerain and Obahn were riding side by side. They were silent. Jhan rarely ever heard them speak to

each other unless it was to ask for or receive orders. In their silence, they heard the hooves of her baku and turned, though Jhan had tried to settle into the wide space between them and Ixien to be alone.

“You don’t look well, Ikhil,” Obahn noted. The scars on his face stood out sharply and Jhan realized that he was unpleasantly surprised at her return.

“Did you expect Sael to kill me?” Jhan wondered.

Obahn tilted his head as if she was challenging him and he only waited for more confirmation of it. It was a clear warning. “I expected you to be dead after touching a fire demon, smashing your head against stone, and shattering your leg. I expected you to die of the cold, at the hands of the Okarins, under that mountain, or at least from the weakness you seem always plagued with. What are you made of, wife of Sael Ruon, that you are able to drag that pathetic body after me as if you were a plague to torment me?”

It might have been the dulling effect of the drug, but Jhan’s tongue was quicker than her sense of danger or common sense, rising even above her fear of Obahn. “Do I torment you? I thought that I was helping by making Sael respectable.”

“That’s in his own mind,” Obahn replied, voice dangerous. “For my own part, you have failed to fulfill any of my expectations or wishes. If you were a real woman... but you are not, and you have become a burden that I do not need.”

“Why did you allow Sael to marry me then?”

Obahn raised an eyebrow in contempt. “You don’t know our laws or customs. They are complicated. Ekhal and Ikhil,” he shook his head and his rough mane of hair rippled like a lion’s mane. “What does it matter who you marry? Who you keshun with? Let Sael pretend that you are a woman and that he can have children from you, if it will keep him quiet. He is never returning to our people to be challenged for it. I certainly don’t intend to challenge him. I need his blade. I need his sacrifice if I am to see my son again. He can play this game all the way to the Sun God, if those two things remain mine.”

Obahn showed Jhan his sharp teeth, his beast grin both threatening and sure of his own power over her. “You can play the game too, as long as you keep your strength, but I am Hyjar of my people and of my lodge. Sael is my Bhakali. What’s his, is mine as well, to use as I please and when I please. Once again, I warn you about this choice of being a woman.”

“Do you think that frightens me?” Jhan replied, knowing that Obahn intended just that. “If you want to stick your-,” she used the foul word she had heard Kile’s brothers burn her with, what seemed like, ages ago. It burned her tongue to say it now, and her face went cold and pale, “-into the place where I used to be a man, go ahead, Lord Obahn! I don’t know of many men who would find that

exciting, but obviously you have some particular perversion that I wasn't aware of--

Obahn's imala was reined sharply and Jhan's baku came up close enough for Obahn to reach over and twist both fists into Jhan's clothes. He lifted her from the saddle and slammed her down over his lap, straddling him as he brought her face to face with himself, his scars white against the red fury of his skin.

"Who are you to say such things to me?" Obahn's voice was surprisingly low, a base growl in the back of his throat. "You are a piece of fluff, a wisp of air and darkness, a bag of sticks and thin blood. Your face mocks beauty. Your form mocks womanhood. You crawl from manhood and spread your legs for an Ekhal. What are you to say anything to me? You should be dead, by your own hand, rather than living as a gelded prince protesting men's use of you. I will do as I please with you, until you give over this shame and take back your manhood."

Jhan was trembling, but trying not to. Tears trickled down her cheeks, despite herself, and her lips trembled as she replied, sharp and tight, "I can't ever have that back, Lord Obahn, even if I wanted it. The person who cut me, cooked those parts of me in front of my eyes and then ate them for his dinner!"

It was her weapon, Jhan knew, the pure truth. She thrust those words straight into Obahn's gut and she saw his golden eyes go wide and glassy, mouth falling slack as the red of his white fury gave way to a sallow, greenish pallor. She knew then that he would never be able to look at her again without the mental image she had just given him overshadowing her. If he had ever desired her, or had meant more than false threats with his innuendoes, that was dead and blown away now.

With one, violent thrust, Obahn sent Jhan flying off of his lap and tumbling to the ground. She managed to hit the ground without smashing her broken leg, both hands cradling it as it sent a shock of pain up to her groin. She looked up, panting through pain and saw Obahn wiping at his mouth as if he had almost vomited. Jhan didn't expect sympathy and she wasn't disappointed.

"You are without honor," Obahn grated. "You should be dead! Coward! You are a coward to live as you are! I would not want such a-a creature to fight by my side. Stay a woman and worship at men's alters for what you have lost," he meant it in the crudest fashion. "Be a wife to an Ekhal, and stay away from me from this moment on, or I will slay you in my disgust!"

Obahn rode forward at a gallop. Zerain looked down at Jhan, cold and haughty, and then she chuckled as she rode after her husband. Sael dismounted and kneeled by Jhan, angry and jaw working. Ahlen sat his baku anxiously, not understanding what had happened and afraid to interfere. Ixien rode by uncaring. The Children of Selaya stopped and stared in confusion.

"Obahn must not have found you as desirable as I do," Sael muttered as he checked Jhan's injured leg with rough motions.

“Did you think he was going to do it right there in the saddle with me?” Jhan panted and then groaned as Sael tightened a binding.

“He might have,” Sael replied. “My people are not ashamed of showing virility.”

“It’s all you seem to think about, besides your honor.”

Sael blinked, amazed, as if Jhan had shown some unexpected innocence. “We are men alone and on a long journey,” he told her as he finished with her leg and straightened, looking down at her with a frown. “There is only one available woman and she is married to my lord Obahn. It is natural that there should be... tensions, even attempts to have someone like you to ease our needs. Are you so ignorant of how strong those needs can be?”

Jhan glared back at him and then at Ahlen, but Ahlen was pale and ashamed, not meeting her eyes. “Do you want to try and have me too, Ahlen Kantori?” Jhan taunted him. “Are you all nothing but animals?”

Sael flinched, but her words only made him angry. “You’ve told me that you don’t feel such desires. We are not so blessed by the gods.”

“No, we are not,” Ahlen agreed quietly and his eyes were on the trail up ahead, perhaps looking for sight of a red veil.

“Enough!” Jhan exclaimed, “Spare me! At least I’m not the one you’re interested in Ahlen.”

“No,” Ahlen agreed again with a long, quiet exhalation of breath.

“And I don’t think I have to worry about Obahn now either.”

Jhan’s baku had been standing patiently, flicking long ears in interest. Sael took up the reins and led it over to Jhan. “Why is my Lord not interested any longer?” he wondered. “He is a man of strong desires. They are not so easily extinguished.”

Jhan grinned and Sael frowned at the unpleasant sight, knowing that it was only an outward sign of Jhan’s inner hysteria. “I gave him something else to think about.” Her grin grew wider, her eyes reminding him of the secret they shared. “If you like, I can tell it to you. It might help you keep your oath.”

Sael met her haunted eyes and swallowed, bending and helping her up. “I don’t think I need such help any longer. Your darkness is like Tagara’s fire, my wife, too all consuming to taste more than once.”

Jhan moaned, feeling dizzy and hearing a rush in her ears, as Sael put in her in the saddle of her baku. She wished that she were back on the ground so that she could refuse to move. She should have been happy, since all of the men around her had turned their backs on her. She was safe, for the moment, from that kind of assault, yet Jhan could only think of the long ride ahead and the myriad

chances there would be for other cruelties.

The pain of her leg and the numbing effect of the drug, were conspiring to make Jhan too bold. If she weren't careful, she thought, she would make even Sael angry enough to kill her, but, even then, she couldn't help one last parting shot at Sael's straight, assured back.

"That's all right. You weren't very good any way."

Ahlen, riding beside her, gasped, but Sael didn't even turn around. "Have you had so many men that you would know?"

Jhan almost laughed, but she was afraid she would cry instead and stifled it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

(Under a Red Veil)

Over the next four days, the land climbed steadily out of the bog, the trees becoming dormant sticks of wood that marched, row on row, up and down a hilly terrain, bare of even one green leaf to block out a gray sky and a milky sun. The lack of color was depressing, and everyone rode in a sullen silence that stretched on far too long.

For Jhan, that silence was a haven. Everyone seemed lost in their own thoughts, ignoring her. Even when the trees stood too close together to pitch the tent, and they were forced to huddle about smoking campfires for warmth, Jhan was still mercifully ignored, just another warm body in a press of blankets and furs.

Ahlen was lost in constant contemplation of Zerain. Zerain, for her part, seemed oblivious of that regard. Togo was silent out of apprehension, perhaps wondering if all the land outside of his mountain home was so bleak. Minyah kept close, as if caught up in his brother's mood. Tagara and Ixien kept their own close council, but they were the ones everyone huddled about when the chill of night fell. Obahn turned inward on himself, and his eyes were always on the distances. Sael was the only one who seemed impatient, often pacing about the camp in agitation.

This was bearable, Jhan thought. In the silence she could rest, both mentally and physically. Obahn kept away from her, Ahlen didn't plague her with his guilt, and Sael had given up his pretense of being her husband for the time being. The others were satellites in distant orbits, easily ignored. Even Jhan's dreams were giving her peace, her indigo world empty, healing, and welcoming every night. If only it

would go on, Jhan wished with all of her might, but she knew that she had never been that lucky.

Jhan wanted to wash. The dirt, salt of sweat, and her own stench was becoming more than she could bear. When they made camp by a frozen stream, she waited until everyone had settled after dinner, to take one of Zerain's small iron pots to the water. Crouching, she slammed the pot at the ice until it broke through. The noise she made was loud, so she wasn't surprised when Ahlen crouched beside her.

In the darkness of a waning moon, it was hard to make out any expression on Ahlen's face. His mood flowed from him though, communicating itself to Jhan through his tense posture and the unevenness of his breathing. When he dipped a hand through the hole in the ice, and brought out water to splash onto his face, Jhan started. She heard him splutter and swear.

"Is something wrong?" Jhan's tone was mocking, "Did you see an outline of Zerain's face again?"

Ahlen groaned, soft and deep, as if Jhan had tortured him with her words. "Sael was right, you don't know anything about- about- You don't feel anything, do you? Not the urges or the heat; the all consuming *need*. Of course not, your voice is so light. You were never a man. You can't have been. I might as well be speaking to a woman, so deep is your ignorance of what I am feeling."

It stung, his words, and Jhan didn't know why. After a moment of intense anger, she realized why. He was taunting her, almost making her defend Jhanian Kevelt's manhood, his certain virility, and his unquestionable place in the heaving testosterone world Ahlen was so easily dismissing her from. Jhan made a conscious effort to be still, to keep silent, and to only mentally shrug away any emotional response. It almost made her feel powerful to do it, almost.

"I don't think you knew anything about it until you met Zerain, am I right?" Jhan finally replied after careful consideration.

Ahlen gave his usual honest response, but it was steeped in anguish. "No, I didn't."

Jhan chewed on her bottom lip as she slowly filled her pot with water. Her gloved hands were protected, but the space between her sweaters and the leather chilled as it brushed the ice. She put the pot beside her and sat down, her healing leg beginning to ache. She rubbed at the knee, wanting Ahlen to grow weary of her silence and go away. Instead, it seemed to invite him to be more open with her, the darkness making her as receptive and un-judgmental as a confessional.

"She-Zerain, I don't understand her," Ahlen confessed. "She goes on about honor and her duty to Obahn, but.... You are more like a woman. You have been-," Ahlen stumbled, not sure how his words

would be received, “You are a man’s wife, and have been before. What does she want, Jhan? Why does she flaunt herself to me. She smiles under that veil, I feel it, and she looks at me until I burn for her!”

“We are not friends,” Jhan reminded him, her voice sharp.

That caught Ahlen off guard, but not enough to desist. “This feeling I have for her,” he continued, as if Jhan had said nothing, “sometimes I think I’m going to die if I don’t do something about it! How do I stop her from taunting me?”

“Will you go away and leave me alone after I answer that?” Jhan demanded.

Ahlen replied without hesitation, “Yes.”

“Well, that’s worth a little advice then.” Jhan considered the problem for only a moment and then she told him matter- of- factly. “Zerain thinks she can flirt with you because Obahn would kill you if you actually tried anything with her. Some women like the power of being safe, yet being able to make men want them at the same time. Take her up on her offer, but don’t let Obahn catch you. You’ll frighten her. She’ll leave you alone.”

“That seems reasonable,” Ahlen agreed and stood up, as if determined to carry out Jhan’s suggestion at once. “Thank you, Jhan,” he said it absently as he walked back into the darkness.

Jhan sighed as silence settled once more, but then started and uttered a crude curse as a voice cut through it almost at once, “Are you a sage now, my wife?”

Sael crouched down in the exact place Ahlen had vacated.

“Can’t I be alone for just a little while?” Jhan demanded caustically. “Is it so hard for all of you to live your lives without spending each day of it trying to make me miserable?”

“I overheard you giving Ahlen bad advice,” Sael told her, ignoring her plea. “Did you do it out of ignorance or are you trying to get him killed by Obahn?”

“No, I wasn’t trying to get him killed,” Jhan replied irritably, “but I don’t think it would bother me too much if he did.”

“Are you becoming so hard?” Sael picked up something, a rock perhaps, and threw it at the frozen water. It skittered and bounced across to the other side. “You could easily kill him yourself.”

“I could easily kill you too,” Jhan pointed out, “but I don’t. I know you’ll never understand that, but I don’t consider it the same as not caring whether Ahlen manages to do it himself.”

Sael reached out and ran a finger along Jhan’s cheek. She jerked back from it, angry and alarmed. “What were you doing out here, my wife?” he wondered, changing the subject abruptly. “Were you going to wash?”

“Wash, in this frozen water?” Jhan’s voice was tight and distrustful. “I was going to take some back and heat it up on the fire to at least clean my face. What’s that to you? Are you intending to jump

me again?"

"Jump you?" Sael spoke the words carefully, intrigued by the turn of phrase. "Your speech is always so colorful," he murmured ruefully.

"You didn't answer the question!" Jhan shot back at him.

"I am weary of all of this," Sael said in way of reply and she heard him straighten, his shadow staring off into the darkness. "Three years is too long for any man. When even a mud covered Ikhil, stinking like a three day old dead imala, moves me... it is too long. This journey to the Sun God, is seeming more and more like madness. Obahn forbids me too much. I'm beginning to fear that he will change his mind entirely and never allow me to enter the temple."

Jhan understood then. "So, you came out here to be alone too, and to, what? Were you going to kill yourself now?"

Sael didn't reply, but his stiff form was reply enough. Jhan gathered up her metal pot, but she didn't stand. Her leg was beginning to ache too much to accomplish it easily and she felt a strange sympathy for Sael. A part of her argued that he had tried to violate her and to degrade her as surely as any of her enemies, but a smaller part knew his utter despair too well to simply turn away. She knew his mistake and she found that she couldn't leave him in silence.

"You aren't sure, are you?" Jhan asked him. "If you were, you wouldn't have come to sit by me. You would have gone somewhere else. Wait until you are sure, Sael. Be absolutely sure. It's a final step. It can wait a year if you've already waited this long."

Jhan held her breath, but Sael still didn't reply. The cold began to creep up from the ground and she shivered. Finally, she thought she had waited long enough. "Help me up, at least, and get me back to the fire before you decide to kill yourself. I don't think I can hop back that far."

There was a sharp, strained laugh from Sael. He leaned down and picked Jhan up as easily as if she were a child. "As you will, my wife. Let us carry on this charade a little longer, and let them think I have ravished you, in all your filth, by the river side. It will be better than challenging Ahlen for talking with you in the dark."

"You would do that?" Jhan wondered bitterly, "Even when no one saw it?"

Jhan tried to push at Sael, make him drop her, anything to avoid his touch, but he had a firm grip and he ignored her. "My honor is in my own keeping," Sael replied tightly, "It doesn't require witnesses for me to be shamed."

"Then why not do it?" Jhan wondered, "Is it because you know I want him dead?"

"No," Sael replied, "Ahlen is a child. I'm allowed to ignore the rudeness of children who don't know any better than to be foolish."

Sael carried Jhan back into camp and placed her by the fire. Before he left her there, he paused to give her a sudden, devouring kiss while his calloused hand lewdly squeezed one of her breasts to the point of pain.

Everyone was staring. Jhan's fury made her white hot. She swung and hit Sael, open handed; forgetting fear and consequences. The sound cracked in the silence. Sael's returning blow was instant, but lighter than hers. His hand was cupped as it caught Jhan in the face. Jhan gasped at the shock of it all the same and cradled her stinging cheek.

Sael strode away, satisfied, to crouch by the fire. Obahn stared at him with raised eyebrows, as if Sael had become a stranger to him, and then looked at Jhan with deep disgust. "Even though you are Ekhal," Obahn said aside to Sael, "I can't understand how you can keshun with that creature!"

Sael grunted, eyes downcast, as he pretended to fiddle with a strap on a bridle. "She has her charms where a man can't see," he assured Obahn with a twitch of his lips, perhaps enjoying making his lord uncomfortable.

Jhan still had the iron pot clenched in one hand. She was tempted to throw it at Sael with all of her strength, but she knew where that would lead. Instead, she forced her shaking hand to put it on the fire to warm. Staring sullenly into it, she felt tears gathering in her eyes as she gingerly nursed her aching cheek.

Obahn was several long minutes coming to a decision and then he spoke his mind to Sael as if it were being dragged out of him unwillingly. "I ask that you rid yourself of that *thing*, Sael Ruon. I can't stand the sight of it any longer. I give you leave to keshun with Zerain."

Sael went pale, the offer startling and obviously frightening to him. Jhan almost smiled. She couldn't have planned a better revenge. When Sael spoke slowly and carefully, Jhan fully expected him to reveal his lies. Instead, Sael wove new ones. "You have named Jhan Dor a woman, my Lord. By law I have taken her as my wife. She satisfies me in ways that Zerain couldn't hope to match. If you wish her yourself, to understand what I am speaking of--"

"Silence!" Obahn exclaimed, face going dark and gold eyes glittering in the firelight. "You suggest that I Keshun with that stinking, filthy-? Keep your wife, my Bhakali! Keep it away from my sight!"

"My Lord," Sael nodded stiffly, but Jhan saw his relief from under her eyelashes.

Jhan came to a sudden decision. Feeling in danger once more, she fished the pot off of the fire with a stick and emptied the water onto the ground. Her filth and stink was a defense, she knew, and one she wasn't going to give up just yet.

Jhan felt Obahn watching her again and she wondered if Sael's words had intrigued him rather than repelled him. Was he wondering what *charms* she could possess that would make even an Ekhal

want her? Yes, it was much better to be utterly repellent, she thought, than to give any of them the slightest encouragement by even cleaning her face.

“You struck one another,” Togo whispered behind the concealment of Jhan’s back. Jhan didn’t look around, knowing that he was afraid of Sael. “Why commit such violence? I thought that you were mates, or at the very least, companions.”

“Forced companions,” Jhan replied just as quietly. She bent her head so that the shadow of her hood hid her face. “I don’t feel like explaining.”

“Tagara was right,” Togo lamented.

“About all of them being cruel?”

“Yes,” Togo admitted. “She said that we should leave. She didn’t think that we should learn such a terrible way of living.”

“I agree.”

“I want to understand.”

“I do too, Togo,” Jhan sighed. “I wasn’t raised with their customs either. I’m just as much in the dark as you are.”

“The way they treat you... and the way Obahn keeps Zerain,” Togo groped for a way to express his confusion. “Is this the way of men and women?”

“Don’t you know?” Jhan asked him and felt angry again. “You are a man, or are you? Are you too much of a machine to feel this lust they keep justifying themselves with?”

“No, I am not. I do feel it as well. It is very painful,” Togo grew even quieter and Jhan struggled to hear him, “but it is confusing too. I thought these others would teach me how to satisfy it, to procreate. Instead, they seem just as confused as I am. You are not a woman, but you wish to be treated like one. Someone emasculated you to look like one. Sael doesn’t wish to mate with women, yet he does with you. Zerain is a woman and she is handed from man to man as if she were non-sentient.”

“Non-sentient?” Jhan mused over the words. “That hardly describes being treated like dirt, but she hasn’t been handed to anyone yet.”

“Yet, she was with Ahlen not some time ago and now Obahn seeks to hand her to Sael. If I ask, would they give her to me?”

Jhan caught her breath, going hot and then cold. “Say that again, Togo. Did you say that Ahlen was *with* Zerain?”

“In the trees,” Togo replied, puzzled, “You sound strange. Is this wrong? I saw them when I went out to pass waste. They were procreating. Will Obahn grow angry?”

Jhan made a face at his graphic words, but her eyes were scanning the figures around her

anxiously. Tagara and Ixien were apart from everyone, as usual. Minyah had curled up in front of the fire. Zerain was sitting half in and half out of the darkness like a statue, eyes intent on Obahn as if she was only waiting for his next order and his offer to Sael hadn't bothered her in the least. Ahlen wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"I wouldn't tell that to anyone else, Togo," Jhan replied at last, "That isn't acceptable behavior and, yes, Obahn would be very angry."

Togo was even more perplexed. "Why is this different? Why is Ahlen not allowed to have the woman if others are?"

"Zerain belongs to Obahn," Jhan explained, "only he can say who she *procreates* with."

"I didn't think that mating and engendering offspring could be so complicated," Togo muttered. "How am I ever going to learn to do it?"

Jhan closed her lips tightly together and inched away. The last person Togo needed to ask about that was an emasculated, barren, and mentally scarred individual who feared all men.

Jhan winced, realizing that she had just denigrated herself. How long could a person stand to be verbally cut to pieces, again and again, before they began to believe it? Jhan pushed it all from her mind with an effort, and sat, watching for Ahlen's return.

Jhan had a dream that night. She held her son in her arms, wisp of black hair and eyes as blue as her own. He was a marvel of milky skin and newborn scent and she held him close and soothed his crying....

Jhan started awake, arms empty and cold. There was a pain in her stomach, a gnawing sense of loss that almost made it impossible to move. Her dream might as well have been a nightmare. The only son her body would ever have was being reared by Thaos Kevelt in Karana, safely away from what remained of his father. She remembered that decision so long ago, given as a matter of course and without anyone asking her. She couldn't blame them. How could anyone explain to a one year old that his father had been changed into a woman who didn't even remember him? Jhan hadn't been in any shape to rear a child in any case, and, she supposed, she never would. It hadn't only been her body that Dagara Ku Ni had destroyed, but any part of her that could have nurtured and thought of anything other

than simply convincing herself to live another day.

Jhan sat up and bleakly looked around, trying to orient herself and dissipate the last of the dream, and the heavy depression it had caused, from her mind. Her companions weren't very much help in accomplishing that.

Ahlen must have come back into camp after Jhan had fallen asleep. She saw him pacing nervously, eyes haunted. Sael was tending the beasts, face set in annoyance for some unknown reason. Zerain was up and finishing with breakfast, Obahn sitting nearby with his legs stretched out towards the fire.

Obahn was watching Jhan with an unreadable expression. Rather than bear it and try and figure out what it meant, Jhan pried herself out of her blankets and hopped towards the trees to relieve herself. She passed Togo, Tagara, and Minyah as they huddled in deep conversation.

Ixien was watching the children of Selaya a few yards away. Jhan was forced to pass him as well. She could see that his usually bland face was tight and his clear eyes were almost malevolent as he breathed, "They will not take her from me."

"Are you so in love?" Jhan mocked.

"I need her," Ixien replied, sharply honest, "as much as I need you."

That stopped Jhan and she felt the small hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "What's that supposed to mean?" she retorted. "I assure you, Obahn doesn't want me staying. You can't rely on his interest in me to keep you in his company. Tagara has a better chance of that now."

"I will not explain," Ixien replied, not even deigning to look at her. His piercing regard never left the children of Selaya for an instant.

"*Still* you haven't learned!"

Sael was suddenly there, grabbing Jhan roughly by the arm. It was a demeaning gesture, another, obvious attempt to crush what was left of Jhan's spirit and make her obedient to Sael's will. All at once, like Obahn's stare, Jhan felt that she couldn't bear it any more.

With an effortless movement, Jhan had Sael's thumb trapped in her small hand. She smiled in relish, a maddened glitter to her blue eyes, as she twisted at the same time that she put her weight on her good foot and stomped on Sael's instep. He staggered, panted, and went down on one knee as he bit off a cry.

Sael's black eyes were furious over his red scarf as he swung with his free hand to knock Jhan down. She felt it connect with her side and also felt that he had pulled the force of it considerably, knowing how easily he could break her bones. His hesitation was her strength. It gave wings to her madness. Her foot left his instep and kicked into his stomach.

Sael sat down as the air was knocked from his lungs, but he wasn't finished. He grabbed her ankle

and jerked her off of her feet as he gasped for air. Jhan landed hard. She wasn't able to roll before Sael had thrown himself on top of her.

"Why do you tempt me to hurt you?" Sael gasped in her ear, forcing himself, despite his fury, to keep his voice low so that no one else could hear.

"Because, you've proven to me that you won't hurt me!" Jhan bit back and jammed her knee up from behind him. Sael felt it coming and threw himself forward to escape a crushed groin. He rolled back immediately and put his elbow into her adam's apple.

"It seems your torturer forgot to remove this man's part of you," Sael taunted her through gritted teeth. "Move and I will show you what will happen if I break it."

Jhan stared into his eyes and then she smiled again as she bent her body at an impossible angle with lightning speed. Her boot connected with his shoulder, sending him away from her. She tangled her hand in his scarf and ripped it off to further humiliate him. She was surprised to see that, beneath the scarf, Sael was smiling as well.

Sael's arm came around in a backhanded blow. Jhan ducked it, felt the rush through her curls, and then was unprepared when he spun around and caught her with the same arm around the waist. They both crashed to the ground, Sael on top again, still smiling down at her.

Sael caught a handful of Jhan's hair and brought it up to his nose. Taking a deep breath, as if he would inhale it, he suddenly ducked past it and locked his lips on Jhan's. When he sought to work a hot tongue into her mouth, she bit it and tasted blood. She felt his body convulse, but he didn't show any outward sign of her assault. Instead, he leaned in closer, a strong arm braced on the ground on each side of her, his long black coat hiding his lean body pressed hard against her.

It was like a revelation, things becoming crystal clear and chilling at the same time. Jhan felt nausea grip her. What were they doing? Jhan knew. They were challenging each other; daring each other to do something terrible to the other. Trying to feel alive and in power. Trying to dance with death and see if it was ready for them yet. Her hands were ready to break Sael's neck. She knew he was capable of the same. They were, both of them, locked in a moment where anything could happen.

It was Obahn, finally, who shattered that moment, dragging Sael up by his collar and shoving him towards the beasts with an almost horror stricken look in his eyes. "Go! Stop this- whatever this is that you are doing!"

Jhan lay panting, as Obahn stared down at her. She knew there was blood on her mouth. "I have never seen such a thing- at least not where a woman has lived to tell of it later," Obahn said and rubbed a hand over his face. "This is not as it should be. This is not man and woman, but some shameful perversion. If you do this within my sight again, I will kill the both of you!"

Sael was looking back over his shoulder. He spat aside and Jhan saw him wipe away blood from his own mouth. His eyes had calmed and he seemed ashamed now, downcast and feeling the dregs of their mingled, dark emotions. He purposely wrapped his scarf about his face again, needing to hide behind it, as he went to saddle the animals.

Obahn strode away. Jhan sat up, swallowing blood and bile and hiding her face in her hands. Tagara crouched by her, hot as a fire and face as smooth as the silk of her gown. "Go with us," was all she said.

Jhan laughed, bitter and wild. She looked up from her hands and saw the hairless skin above Tagara's eye crinkle in puzzlement. "Just like that?" Jhan wondered hoarsely.

"Yes," Tagara replied, and then with a tight threat in her voice, "None of them can stop me."

Jhan grew quiet and serious. "Where are you going to go?"

"Tsarianna's Temple," Tagara replied. "Ixien has told me that the Sun God may be able to take the fire away from me and heal my brother's afflictions. Once we are normal, we will be able to make a life for ourselves."

"And you believed all of that?" Jhan shook her head, feeling that ache again in her belly. She rubbed it absently, knowing it was despair and tightly coiled anger. "I think many people are going to be disappointed."

"What is your answer?" Tagara interjected impatiently.

"No." Jhan looked beyond her and saw Ixien, as always, close by and watching them. "I won't go anywhere with that Caefu. At least I know what the others want from me."

"They try to harm you." Tagara was incredulous. "They try and put their seed in you even though you are one of them. It is all madness and cruelty!"

"Is that what you thought Sael was trying to do?" Jhan felt that madness reach her eyes again and Tagara saw it too, straightening and looking down with her puzzled frown. "It was the last thing on either of our minds, Tagara. We were, both of us, trying to break out of our fates; trying to stop the inevitable course of our lives. You can't understand..."

"I will leave so that it will be a lesson I never learn," Tagara told her. "The people we took from the mountains, the many who tried to save Selaya, were never like these others. I cannot believe that the world is like them."

"It isn't," Jhan agreed wearily, "but it's not an easy place either. I've told Togo already, they don't accept those who are different. My own life was miserable enough even before Ahlen kidnapped me."

Sael brought Jhan's baku to her and a bowl of meat for breakfast. He was expecting her to eat in the saddle. Obahn was already mounted, impatiently waiting to leave.

"I'm not going with you," Jhan repeated firmly to Tagara and her misery deepened as Tagara turned and walked away, leaves and debris burning under her bare feet.

Sael was looking away as he handed Jhan the reins of her baku and the bowl. His face was unknowable under the scarf, but his jaw was a solid clenching of muscle. When Jhan didn't get up, something in his eyes flickered. Still without looking at her, he asked tightly, "Did I harm you, my wife?"

Jhan stared up at him, scowling. "I don't think Obahn is going to let you go on with this much longer. I think you'll have to find another way to make yourself respectable."

Sael's eyes half lidded and then he did look down at her. "You are driving me mad! It is you, with your woman's body and your man's scent, who challenges my honor and my oaths."

Sael bent down suddenly and began pulling the bindings from Jhan's leg. The cold was harsh on her bare skin. They both looked down at it and saw the healing, mottled bruises of every color.

"Your healing powers are incredible," Sael breathed in amazement, but then he recovered his composure. He wrapped her leg in the binding cloths, without the braces, and pulled up her socks. "Put on your boot," he said. "Your leg may still ache, but it is healed and you don't need my care any longer. We will stay parted as much as we can from this moment. I am resolved to keep my honor and my sanity."

"And your life?" Jhan taunted.

"You may keep yours as well," Sael returned sharply. Instead of helping Jhan get into the saddle of the baku, he strode resolutely away to join the men.

A week slipped by unnoticed. Ixien and the Children of Selaya didn't make any move to leave the company, but they all grew as silent as Ixien and they kept to themselves. Obahn watched them suspiciously and he never went one night without either being on watch or having Sael awake and alert for any trouble from them.

Jhan didn't blame Obahn. She was just as nervous as he was and found herself watching them as well. Togo, when he caught her eye, always gave her a sharp toothed, friendly smile, but Tagara was cool and Minyah seemed troubled. Ixien had become their leader and what his plans were, Jhan couldn't begin to guess.

They all rode in small knots during the day, separated by choice and affiliation. Zerain always rode with Obahn at the head of the company. Ixien, and his group of imminent defectors, always followed

several yards behind. Ahlen rode behind them, eyes always on Zerain and full of anguish. Jhan kept far behind him, not wanting him to feel free to share any more confidences with her. Sael lagged behind at the rear looking troubled, as if he were still fighting with himself whether to continue with Obahn or not.

“It’s getting colder,” Jhan muttered to herself as she patted the warm side of her weary baku. Frost hung on the bare skeletons of the trees and everyone’s breath smoked. Frozen leaves and sparse, frozen grass crunched under hooves. The sun continued to hide behind a sky heavy with the threat of snow.

Jhan slipped a gloved hand under her cloak and felt her warm heart even through the leather. It still continued to amaze her. Her body gained strength and built fat reserves on the meager meat rations Minyah managed to hunt. She felt warm under her clothes, vibrant and alive. She felt, strangely, ready for anything and any weather. If her body suffered in any way from Selaya’s meddling, Jhan hadn’t discovered it yet.

The darkness at the center of Jhan’s being uncoiled, angry. Bitterness twisted Jhan’s face as she turned it away from anyone who could see. She remembered the long, difficult year as Kile’s wife; his gentle and so careful hands. For such a large man, he had always forced himself to move as if in slow motion, thinking every movement through, holding the reins tight in passion and in everything else so that he wouldn’t hurt his fragile love. When he had nursed her back to health, through her infections and fevers, she had, more than once, seen the fear of her death in his eyes.

Jhan clenched her hand against her heart. How far would this new health take her? What were its limits? She was gaining weight. That weight was turning into wiry muscle. Her wraith like fragility was slowly being encased in solid, sturdy flesh. The clothes that had hung on her were now beginning to hang more closely to her form. It was as if, once again, her spirit was being given another new body to inhabit.

Yet, Jhan wasn’t happy about these changes. She told herself that she should be. If she made it back to Kile, as impossible as that seemed now, she would be able to give a new dimension to their relationship, one as more than a cared for invalid. Despite that argument, she grew bitterer. Through most of that day, she turned it over and over in her mind, trying to think why.

Jhan finally recalled Ahlen’s offer to set her free. What had she replied? She couldn’t remember the exact words, but she remembered how she had felt. It was better to be a captive than to be trapped in the same situation with her freedom. Jhan supposed it was the same with her body. She had known all of the limitations of her old self. Those limitations had interwoven with her personality. They had also made it easier to bear what was happening to her.

Being helpless had never required anything on Jhan’s part. There had always been a certain lack of

stress in not being allowed to make any decisions and in not feeling like she could have done anything about the way she had been treated. This new strength whispered to her options she had never considered before. It tempted her to fight back when Sael pushed her or expected subservience to him. It whispered hot hatred full of violence when Obahn ordered her about and spoke in a tone that was full of disgust.

Like Ahlen's offer of freedom, though, Jhan knew that the siren song of her strength was false. If she lifted her hand or her voice, she knew she would either be dead or left in the winter wind without help or hope. Nothing had really changed, except that her heart pumped blood more strongly about her body so that she felt less like a walking corpse, and her body had gained weight until she was slightly over a hundred pounds and not likely to blow away in a stiff breeze. It was a great change to Jhan, but in reality, it counted for nothing against the armed strength of the men around her.

"Who cares about being healthy when you're walking to your execution?" Jhan muttered aloud to herself.

"I have felt the same."

Jhan flinched and saw that Sael was riding close behind her. His words were enigmatic until she saw how the material of his scarf was hugging his sunken cheeks and how thin the fingers on the reins of his imala were. When Jhan searched her memory, she couldn't remember the last time that she had seen him eat.

"Dining on despair instead of food, Sael?"

Sael scowled and slowly began putting on his gloves in a pointed manner. It told Jhan, as clearly as words, that she was intruding.

Jhan shrugged. "I think you fall back on that custom of, *a man's business is his own*, only when it suits your mood."

"Now it suits my mood, my wife."

"Stop calling me that," Jhan growled back. "Even Ahlen can't believe that any more."

"You give him too much credit," Sael replied diffidently, "It doesn't matter. You are my wife, whether we consummate it or not. A man would have to challenge my claim, and win, to take you from me."

"Forget about all of that for now," Jhan grumbled. "Tell me something useful. Tell me where we are and what might be up ahead."

"It's never interested you before." Sael gave her a critical look. "If you are planning on running away now--"

"Would you stop me?" Jhan demanded. "I thought you were trying to help me!"

“I was, at first,” Sael replied honestly. “Ekhal help one another. It’s how we survive. I gave you more help than even honor demanded of me. It is this mistake of nature inside of me, this despicable softness that I can never rid myself of, that you owe your life to.”

“You’ve already told me that,” Jhan retorted wearily. “Are you still convinced that showing up at the Temple of the Sun God, with me on your arm, is going to improve your chances of seeing Hagen again?”

“Obahn doesn’t think so,” Sael admitted pensively.

“He never did,” Jhan told him. “He just wanted you to be quiet and to keep following him obediently.”

Sael’s face went red and his eyes were unpleasant as he glared up ahead to the distant figure of Obahn. “I shall keep you, in hope that a god, maybe, doesn’t truly know all.”

“Blasphemy?”

“No, only grasping at the slimmest of hopes,” Sael admitted softly. “I shall stand with Obahn and you will be in the shadows with Zerain, clearly my wife for any eye to see. That is how I plan it. I will be a warrior when I stand beside Tsarianna. He must find me worthy.”

Sael’s eyes were firm and commanding as he continued, “I will keep you in ignorance of our surroundings. I don’t want you to kill yourself trying to make your way in this rough land. You can call that what you may. It can as easily be concern for you as reluctance to have my plans spoiled.”

“All in the point of view,” Jhan agreed sourly and kicked her baku into a trot to get away from Sael’s oppression.

“I have conceived, my Husband.”

Zerain’s announcement caught Obahn in the middle of a yawn and a stretch. She was kneeling at his feet, her veiled face looking up at him. Her words had carried easily throughout the camp and everyone had an expression that mirrored Obahn’s; startled confusion.

Obahn’s confusion gave way to pleasure. He reached out and touched Zerain’s forehead as if in blessing. “It is inconvenient, but I will honor you above all other wives if it is a boy.”

Obahn began to turn away, this small display seemingly all that he was willing to show. Zerain caught at his leg, stopping him and earning herself a fierce scowl. He gathered patience, visibly, and turned to her again.

“Husband,” Zerain began in her most subservient tone of voice. “I fear for the child’s life, your

son's life, if I continue on this journey. Allow me to return to our people--"

Impossible!" Obahn cut her off sharply, his hand chopping in the air to enforce his negative response. "Who would I send to guard you?"

"Then allow me to stay and wait for your return at the next village we happen on."

Again he made that sharp, cutting motion. "You ask the impossible! Again, who would I choose to stay and be your guard?"

Zerain seemed to reach deep down for courage. "Then it is Penatha, my Husband."

Obahn looked so angry that Jhan recoiled. She stood, pushing aside her blankets, and quickly walked to the edge of the camp. Sael was already there along with Ahlen, feeding the beasts. Sael had an unreadable look in his eyes, but Ahlen was standing stiff and white faced, feed bag forgotten in his clenched hands.

"How can you ask that?" Obahn was demanding in a voice that cracked over the camp like thunder. "You are my only wife on this journey!"

"I don't need to ask." Zerain was clearly afraid, but she wasn't going to back down. "It is my right."

"If you refuse to be in my bed then I haven't any use for you, woman!" Obahn seethed. "Is that what you want? Are you trying to force me to leave you behind?"

"That is my wish," Zerain admitted. "If I can't protect your unborn son in a safe haven, then I must protect him in all other ways open to me."

Obahn turned his hands into fists and his lips drew back from his sharp teeth. Jhan found herself taking another step away and she bumped into Ahlen. He gripped her arm hard. "How can she know, so soon?" He whispered in a voice that trembled as if he were going to faint.

"I don't know," Jhan replied tightly. "I don't know anything about it. Maybe she can." Jhan frowned and looked back at Ahlen, at his wild eyes and the sweat trickling down his face even in the bone chilling cold air. "So soon? You mean, after you had her, don't you?"

Ahlen's hand tightened till Jhan hissed at the pain. Sael was suddenly there, prying that cruel grip loose and pushing Ahlen forcibly back. He hadn't heard their exchange, and he was angry at Ahlen.

"If my wife is in your way, Kantori, only tell me so that I may punish her," Sael told him and then glared at Ahlen's obvious distress. "Are you ill? Has my Lord's good fortune upset you in some fashion?"

"We aren't so open about such things," Ahlen forced out through tight lips. "It is shocking, that's all. Women's business," he concluded lamely.

Sael was contemptuous. "A man proves his virility to everyone in any fashion he can. Only the

inadequate keep it in silence and in the darkness. A woman heavy with a man's child is shown to everyone. It is a matter for bragging."

Ahlen went even whiter and walked away. Sael was frowning as he picked up the dropped feed bag and began tying it onto the nose of a baku. "I didn't know that he was so prudish," Sael remarked absently, "or is he only more of a boy than I had thought?"

Jhan rubbed at her bruised arm, saying grimly, "Oh, he's not a boy at all, Sael, not now. That kind of trouble's just begun for him."

"Manhood isn't trouble, unless one is married to you, my wife."

"Or oathed to a dead man," Jhan retorted without thinking.

Sael stopped abruptly, but didn't turn around. "Go away," he warned.

Jhan felt a chill that didn't have anything to do with the cold air. Trapped between a suddenly furious Sael and a still erupting Obahn, Jhan didn't have any choice but to seek refuge near the children of Selaya and Ixien. They were watching Obahn curiously, all of them ignorant as to what the argument was about.

"You will not manipulate me, woman!" Obahn was shouting. "You forget your place, and your honor, to want to seek safety away from your lord!"

Zerain stayed resolutely on her knees and Jhan longed to see her expression under that veil. She imagined it calculating and not at all daunted. Jhan could understand her plan. Staying behind, maybe bearing Ahlen's child, would give her the privacy she would need to make certain that it resembled herself enough to pass for Obahn's. Jhan could imagine the savagery that would ensue if Obahn ever found out that he had been cuckolded.

"I don't do this for myself," Zerain countered. "It is my first child and your unborn son. The healers say a woman may miscarry if stressed too much or keshun too roughly. You are strong and your desire is powerful. It is only wise--"

Obahn ran calloused hands over his face with an angry groan. "Be free of your duty to me, Zerain, but you will still journey with me. I won't trust any other sword to protect you." He lowered his hands and glared at her, "Know, too, that I will take another wife in your place as soon as I may."

Zerain stiffened. It was plain that she wanted to argue, to beg, to keep Obahn from walking away. He pulled roughly out of her grip and strode away, ending the conversation and any further pleas. She stayed on her knees there for a long moment, and then her back straightened as she bore up under her disappointment. Slowly, she stood and began to make breakfast.

Jhan looked about her, letting out a held breath as the tension in the air melted away. Her eyes lit on Tagara first. The woman was standing with pain in her eyes, her hand on her stomach and her gaze

on Zerain. Ixien went to her and took her hand in his, looking up into her face, not with concern, but with a calculation to rival and surpass Zerain's.

Tagara's eyes went liquid as she met Ixien's gaze and she smiled as she said, "She carries life, Ixien. It is a powerful thing; a wondrous thing. I wish to share it."

Jhan found pity for the woman. She was fire in human form. No one but an emotionless Caefu could touch her. She was dreaming the impossible and Ixien woke her to reality bluntly.

"I crave your fire," Ixien told Tagara, releasing her hands and stepping away. "I need your power. Don't expect other things from me."

Tagara turned away. She was still smiling, but it was frozen on her face, forgotten. In another moment she was a ball of fire, rising up through the trees and hovering there, as if she couldn't face humanity any longer.

Togo was angry, glaring at Ixien. "You are cruel," he seethed.

"The truth is what it is," Ixien replied and walked away to stand under Tagara, staring up at her as if he were frozen in fascination.

Minyah growled and flexed muscles as if he was about to spring on the Caefu and rip him to shreds. Togo twisted a hand into his fur. "Quiet, Minyah," Togo soothed. "Violence won't heal our sister's spirit and she cares for the Caefu."

"Not any longer, I think," Jhan murmured. "Tagara's found out that she didn't know as much as she thought about men and the world."

"She said that they were all cruel," Togo replied as if Jhan had wanted an answer. "I think that she is right about that."

"No," Jhan countered, "she isn't. It's just that these specimens are the bottom of the barrel. She thought that she could pick one of them out and make her life normal, instantly. She lied to herself that Ixien was so much better than the rest only because he was enough like her to put hands on her."

"We have been alone, shut out from life for so long," Togo told her softly. "She thought that it was a gift from Selaya that she found someone so quickly who could endure her heat."

"Life is never that tidy and quick," Jhan replied bitterly, "at least it hasn't been for me."

Ahlen was still off trying to regain his composure. Jhan went to the baku, forced to begin strapping on their harness herself. Sael came up beside her. She flicked eyes at him briefly, but his anger was gone. He moved to adjust a strap that didn't need adjusting and said, "Obahn hasn't fathered any children in some years."

Jhan grunted, "So, what are you thinking?"

Sael shrugged. "It is strange, that is all."

“As Ahlen would say, “Jhan said with heavy innuendo, “Scherial is kind.”

Sael didn't pick up on it, mind slipping onto another track entirely. “We call her Sekhal, in my land; The Giver of Life and the Bearer of Life.” He touched a quartered circle charm on his scarf. “This is her symbol. Women burn fruits and flowers to her to conceive and men give blood sacrifice to her to make them strong and virile. She is all aspects of life. A man is Lekhal. A woman is Jekhal. Ekhal and Ikhil; all aspects of Sekhal, the Earth Goddess.”

Jhan shook her head. “I don't think I could get used to a woman as God. It must be the way I was brought up. I've always considered it a masculine sort of role; a father figure, I suppose.”

Sael snorted, “Male gods are leaders and warriors, not creators of life.”

Jhan sighed, “I'm not in the mood to argue religion with you, Sael. Are you going anywhere with all of this?”

“Going?”

“Are you attempting to make some point?” Jhan clarified impatiently.

“I might have, but you have made me forget it,” Sael grumbled, “You do that often.”

Ahlen chose that moment to appear and relieve Jhan of putting the heavy baggage on the baku. “There is breakfast ready,” he told her absently, fingers tense on the straps of the baku, “Eat while I finish.”

Sael's eyes traveled over him and Ahlen flushed. “What is wrong with you that you can't understand that she is not your woman any longer?” Sael demanded. “Must I kill you?”

Ahlen slowly looked from Sael to Jhan and it was obvious what he was thinking. He was experienced enough now to know the lie. “You are a thekling,” he said simply, and there was a hint of disgust and a daring challenge that Jhan had never heard from him before.

Sael put a hand on his sword hilt, but he had narrowed his eyes, as if Ahlen hadn't given him enough reason yet to draw it. “That is true,” he replied tensely.

“What is she to you then?” Ahlen wondered.

“My wife,” Sael replied and he pulled his sword out an inch.

“In what way?” Ahlen persisted. “I have seen her without her clothes. How can she interest someone like you, who desires... desires only men?” His disgust was deepening and so was his challenge.

“You don't understand, boy,” Sael replied, “and you are not a lodge brother to ask such questions of me.”

“I am a man!” Ahlen bristled.

“Are you?” Sael wondered acidly and his eyes became as hard as the steel of his sword. “How did

that happen? You haven't had a chance to prove it, have you?"

Ahlen's face closed like a trap and he turned it away from Sael, suddenly frightened. Jhan sighed and went to get her breakfast, glad to leave their tense knot of male posturing behind. She settled by the fire as Zerain quietly handed her pieces of meat. Jhan silently chewed on them, longing for the coarse, bland cereal she had thought that she would never miss.

Jhan caught herself watching Zerain, looking idly for any signs of her pregnancy. It was foolish she knew, but it was the same curiosity that made people slow down and stare at an accident, even thought they were afraid to see the tragedy. Was It Ahlen's child or Obahn's? Jhan wondered. Why had Zerain taken such a chance? Had she been so afraid of not conceiving by Obahn that she had gambled on getting away with a deception?

Jhan never considered love being the reason for Zerain's infidelity, or even simpler lust. Zerain was as cool and indifferent to Ahlen as she had ever been. No, she had planned it. It was nothing but a strategy to her. Jhan recalled Sael's words. He had said that Zerain would be made a princess if she conceived Obahn a son. What better time than now to put her plans into motion? Jhan had heard the talk. They would soon be passing close to small towns where they could get supplies. It would have been simple for Zerain to stay behind; to have her prince in safety.

What if that child should have gray eyes instead of gold? Jhan felt a shiver of premonition. Forced now to continue the journey, Zerain's deception would be apparent immediately when she birthed the child. Would Obahn kill it? Kill Zerain?

Jhan ached for that unborn baby and she felt a stirring of hate for Zerain, even though all of her thoughts were mere supposition at that point. Jhan wondered if she would survive the journey long enough to see Zerain give birth. What would she do if it did look like Ahlen? Jhan had allowed them to treat her as cruelly as they pleased, out of fear and acceptance of the inevitable. When she thought of doing nothing while Obahn ran his sword through a baby, she felt a trembling over take her and a sick chill go over her skin.

"Ikhlil," Zerain whispered harshly, her blank wall of veil tipped as if she were staring down her nose at Jhan. "Do you tremble because you see, at last, what a real woman is?"

Jhan realized that she had been staring at Zerain while gripped by her inner thoughts, and that Zerain had completely misunderstood. Jhan looked away and stood up, wiping her greasy hands against her filthy pants. "No," Jhan replied just as quietly, "I see the darkness."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

(Breaking Ice)

“Tagara is gone,” Togo announced later in the day. They had stopped for a rest, the weather turning bitterly cold and the sky heavy with the threat of snow. Togo looked distressed, eyes scanning the treetops as if he hoped that he was wrong.

“Gone where?” Obahn growled around a mouthful of stringy meat.

“She was distraught,” Togo replied. “She spoke of returning to our mountain home, but Minyah and I refused. I didn’t believe that she would go back alone.”

Obahn stood from the rock he had been sitting on and tossed the rest of the meat aside with a curse. He turned commandingly to Sael. “She was good for keeping watch, since she rarely slept. We will both have to stand watch more vigilantly from now on.”

“As my Lord wills,” Sael replied, but his dutiful response was heavy with another meaning. Jhan tensed, crouched to take a drink of water from a skin. She lowered it from her lips and watched them nervously.

Obahn understood what Sael was saying well enough. He glared and then spat aside. “You’re hopes are misplaced, Ekhal. Even if my needs were to make me mad I would sooner keshun with your Ikhil wife than to-”

“There is nothing shameful in it,” Sael replied quickly, eyes level on Obahn's. “Warriors take Ekhal into battle often when women would be disruptive. You know this.”

Obahn’s face darkened and he spat again. “It is you, Sael Ruon, I despise. It is you I will not have touching me!”

Sael looked down. His face was blank, but Jhan was sure there was a smile under his scarf. “Then I offer Jhan in my place, to fulfill my oath.”

Jhan stood with a gasp, letting the water skin fall from her fingers. The water poured out onto the ground and quickly began turning to frozen slush. Obahn heard the noise and stared at her. It was only for a moment, and then he was glaring at Sael again. His eyes had been dismissive and full of revulsion. Jhan knew, relieved, that she wasn’t in any danger of Obahn taking up Sael’s offer.

“We are not far from a city I know,” Obahn said, “I will find me another woman and this matter will not be spoken of again.”

“My Lord.” Sael gave a dip of his chin and walked away.

“Your cloak is torn.” A warm finger poked into that opening and Jhan jerked away, spinning to confront Ixien. The Caefu was staring at the rip dispassionately. “You should acquire a coat from one of the others or you will become sick from the cold.”

“And you care? Why?” Jhan demanded, breathless with her confusion and anger.

The sun was sparkling in Ixien’s alien eyes, making them as clear as crystal goblets. “I needed Tagara, but she has left,” Ixien replied.

“That’s an answer?”

“Yes.” Ixien cocked his elfin face a little and stared about them, saying as if to himself, “It will grow very cold soon. We will have to stop and shelter for the rest of the winter.”

That alarmed Jhan. “Ahlen needs to reach the Sun God’s Temple before next year. He won’t wait.”

“If he goes on, he will die,” Ixien sounded certain, “Trails will be lost in the snow and the way will become impassable, even on foot. You seem healthier, but I doubt that you have become strong enough to survive the wilderness in winter.”

“It doesn’t bother you,” Jhan pointed out, “Are you going on?”

“My people draw their strength from the fire of the Earth, but the sun is a substitute when we are away from it.” Ixien stared up at its milky light. “It dims and there will be long stretches of days where it will not shine at all. I must have a haven before then.”

Jhan felt frustration well up and all but overwhelm her. She wondered if this was all empty speculation on Ixien’s part or if he was echoing what he might have heard from the others. As they ended their rest and began down the trail again, Jhan tried to ask Sael. He turned a shoulder to her, saying nothing, lost in his own problems and uncaring of hers. Ahlen was even less approachable, his eyes hot and haunted. In the end, Jhan chose to ignore Ixien’s words, believing instead that the passions that drove her companions wouldn’t be conquered by the obstacle of weather.

The land gentled, flattening out and opening up, until they were passing only lone clumps of trees in frozen landscape of brown, stubble grass and patches of light snow and frost. The lake they happened on was a surprising barrier. Its blue-white color was an unbroken sheet that stretched in all directions.

Obahn didn’t hesitate. He dismounted and led his balking imala onto the ice, slipping and sliding until he had the trick of it. His imala honked and twitched nervously, but its hooves were sure as it followed after him. Zerain was his shadow, following closely behind.

Minyah was frightened until his brother gave up his airborne form and materialized next to him. Togo had been doing that often, sometimes walking for miles to keep his brother company. He patted Minyah on the shoulder now, with a good-natured smile, as he stepped onto the ice along with him, murmuring encouragement.

Minyah went down on all fours uncertainly. His feet and hands slid. Minyah was delighted all at once, causing himself to slide intentionally. “Fun!” he shouted happily, just as Togo, thrown off

balance, slipped and fell over him.

“Idiot! No!” Togo exclaimed, but his words were punctuated by laughter as Minyah leapt and slid, pulling Togo to the opposite side of the lake on his behind.

Jhan found a wan smile at their childish antics. It felt stiff and unused and she couldn't remember the last time that she had smiled for pleasure. Sael was staring at her, his one hand on the nose of his nervous imala and his other hand tight on the reins.

“You are not so unpleasant to look at when you smile,” Sael remarked softly.

Jhan's smile fell and she glared at him, leaving it all unsaid. He had the sense to be uncomfortable, and to let his eyes drop, as he led his imala across the ice.

“We should tie the baku together,” Jhan suggested as she turned to Ahlen. “These beasts are used to it. It keeps them calm.”

Ahlen nodded and waited patiently while Jhan attached the leads to all three animals. Ixien perched on the last in line, the baggage baku. He was staring at the frozen water as if it were burning acid. Jhan almost told him to get down, but then shrugged to herself. The baku might slip and crush the little Caefu, but she found it very hard to care.

Ahlen led the beasts onto the ice, making small sounds under his breath to distract them and keep them quiet. Jhan let them pass her, checking one last time that none of the leads were tangled. Satisfied, she began walking, slid, caught herself and then slid again as she tried to keep up with the sure footed baku.

Sael's imala had balked at the center of the lake. He was tugging on the reins and cursing ineffectually as Ahlen attempted to lead the baku wide and around the distressed beast.

It was a faint sound. Jhan hardly noticed it as she watched her feet and tried to keep her balance. She almost dismissed it as tree branches rubbing together, or even the creak of harness, as Sael tried to bring his imala to order. It was too late when she realized that it was none of those things.

The ice cracked under Jhan's feet with a sound like a rifle shot, the weight of baku and imala too much for it. She threw herself forward, the pack baku honking in surprise and alarm, as the ice tipped out from underneath their feet; water splashing up like deadly fingers trying to drag them in.

Jhan scrambled wildly, a mirror image of the pack baku as it also flailed to save its life. The lead between the animals held and their forward, panicked momentum, pulled the pack baku out of the hole and across the ice, also dragging Sael and Ahlen, who were holding stubbornly to their reins, along with them.

Jhan was left to save her own life. With the ice holding under her light weight, she was able to ignore the vicious throb of her healing leg to sprint out of danger, slipping and sliding alarmingly, but

still managing to head towards the shore quickly. She began to relax. She knew that she was going to be safe. A matter of a few yards separated her from the others and solid ground.

It hit her as if she had run into a wall; a dire feeling of something being forgotten. Her mind crawled over the problem, as if time had ceased, her eyes searching the people waiting for her anxiously on the shore while she fought for balance on the slick ice. With a sinking, nauseating sensation in the pit of her stomach, Jhan realized at last what was wrong. Ixien wasn't on the shore. He had been riding the pack baku. The beast was there, head down and sides heaving. Its back was still full of their gear, but Ixien was conspicuously absent.

What made her do it, Jhan couldn't begin to guess. She stopped, turned, and saw the Caefu slipping under the icy water. He was screaming like a little child, eyes wide and mouth hanging open as his hands desperately scrambled for the edge of the fissure. There wasn't any consideration, not any pause to remember the horrible, unfeeling acts this creature had perpetrated on Jhan. She simply reacted automatically, not even certain what to do, but knowing that she was going to do something.

Jhan ran back towards the fissure, ignoring the shocked shouts of everyone on shore. When she passed the first thin cracks in the ice, and saw Ixien's small hands disappearing under the water, she threw herself belly down with a painful smack! She slid the rest of the way to the edge of the fissure. Her gloved hands reached into the cold water and searched on briefly before finding and grabbing hold of Ixien's arms. She pulled up with all of her might and the Caefu broke the water.

At once, Ixien was attempting to climb up on Jhan, choking on ice water and clawing skin from her neck. His skin was dead cold and his face was blue with it, his power over the elements washed away with the water. It was then that Jhan realized why he had always been so afraid to get wet. Like the harsh wind of the mountains, his power was simply overwhelmed, snuffed out like a candle.

Jhan straddled the ice, legs sprawled out. She desperately fought with Ixien, clutching the edge of the fissure to keep from falling in. He was unable to get out of the water and she was unable to pull him out, both of them balanced precariously. At any moment that balance was going to tip, Jhan knew, and she didn't have any doubt that it would be into the water.

"Fool!"

A weight lay over Jhan's legs. She glanced back only briefly and saw Sael sprawled crosswise over her legs, hands and toes trying to find rough spots on the ice to brace them both. His scarf lay loosely about his neck and his bare face was pale and furious.

Ixien locked little hands about Jhan's neck and he pressed his face against her, simply clinging now while she reached down and tugged at him. It should have been easy. It wasn't. Ixien felt as heavy as an elephant and Jhan simply wasn't strong enough to move his weight even buoyed by water.

Jhan gasped as Ixien's claws dug into her, as vicious as a startled cat. She didn't think that she could push him off now if she had wanted to and Obahn's voice, carrying to her from the shore, made her determined not to try.

"Let him go!" Obahn roared. "You will all die if you don't!"

"Let go of him, my wife, " Sael grated under his breath, hands biting cruelly tight into Jhan's legs, "Quickly, before Obahn orders me to leave the both of you to die!"

"Can't!" Jhan bit out and then let out a scream as Ixien tried to scramble up her back again. His flailing legs splashed water over her, choking her as it filled her nose and mouth with cold so intense it burned.

"I command you, Sael Ruon!" Obahn roared. "Leave them to their madness. Find yourself another wife!"

"I must obey!" Sael groaned to Jhan, "He has my oath. It is stronger even than husband and wife. Forgive me."

"No!" Jhan shrieked, choking and twisting her head about as Ixien's arms began to cut off her oxygen.

Sael was gone and Jhan felt herself sliding into the water. Her head went under even as her fingernails tore to keep her grip on the ice, desperation making her unwilling to give up even now. When her ankles were grabbed and she was jerked backwards onto the ice again, she could hardly believe it. Gasping for air, Ixien's cheek pressed against her own, Jhan heard Minyah's voice rumble from behind her, "I not let you die!"

Minyah was using his claws, digging them into the ice as he slowly backed up. Togo in turn, had hold of him around the waist, using his uncertain footing as a weight to help propel them. Ahlen had a hold of Togo, face stricken with fear as he completed the chain towards shore. Struggling, slipping, sliding, and cursing, Ixien was freed from the grip of the water and they all half walked, half crawled off of the ice.

They all lay in a heap then, panting and hearts racing, as Zerain lit a fire. Obahn swore and paced angrily, Sael mute and bleak beside him, as blankets were unpacked and wet clothes were taken off and thrown into sodden piles.

Ixien crawled to the fire and his skin steamed as he began to regain his heat. He was clearly shaken, eyes wide open as if in shock, and lip caught between fine, sharp teeth. He said nothing, not even thanks, as Jhan edged away from him.

Jhan shuddered, as much from the cold as the stabbing pain of her abused leg. Togo was holding up a blanket, waiting expectantly for her to drop her clothes as he, Ahlen, and even Sael had already

done.

Self consciously, Jhan glanced around her at the moving, naked bodies. In the cold, those bodies were shivering, manhood shriveled, hands snatching and working furiously to dry and clothe exposed skin. Sael was lean, too lean, chest wide and arms rounded at the shoulder from long hours using a sword. Ahlen was lanky, an overgrown puppy obviously intending to grow even more. Togo, Jhan blinked at him, still dazed. His body was as normal as any man's, though perhaps, even in the cold, more endowed than usual. He was unconcerned with his nakedness, weight on one hip and tall body poised in concern for her.

To protest would only bring all eyes to her, Jhan knew. At that moment, everyone was busy with their own needs, ignoring anything and everyone. Togo seemed to grow anxious, his hands tightening on the blanket. "You must be quicker than this, or you will become ill," he warned.

What was one more humiliation? Jhan thought darkly, as she stood, shivering and teeth chattering, and stripped off her clothes. She dried with the towel and then dropped it, wet now and freezing, as she was forced to stand, naked, while clothes were found for her. She crossed her arms over her chest, bowed over her heart, and tried to keep turned away from the others.

It happened so quickly, Jhan was unprepared. Obahn was suddenly towering over her as if he had sprung from the ground in front of her. He was all heaving muscle and reeking body, teeth gritted as he twisted one hand into the back of her hair and tore her arms away from her breasts with the other. Hard, calloused, fingers; tough and possessed of that incredible strength that men always had, forced Jhan about as if he wanted to look at all sides of her.

Obahn's gold eyes went to the spot, as every man's did. Jhan saw that familiar, puzzled, muddled expression and that hint of green flush over Obahn's skin. He was imagining all sorts of things, Jhan knew, trying to fathom what was beneath her light dusting of hair and the concealment of skin.

Fight back? Jhan was too shocked and frightened, still stunned with all that had just happened and adrenalin ebbing to the point where she felt weak enough to faint. When Obahn's hand dived between her legs and felt there, searching as his fist tightened in her hair, Jhan couldn't do more than freeze like a rabbit in the jaws of a wolf.

Obahn's hand didn't grope long before he felt what he had been searching for. His face twisted into disgust. "Sael had told me," he grated, as if he were about to vomit, "but I couldn't believe it. Ahlen named you Prince, and still something in me denied it. It is there. The cuts, the scars; small, but there, and that awful opening where there shouldn't be one, where a woman's is not! How can you have such bravery when all of the things that makes a man has been cut from you? Where does it spring from? What are you that my Bhakali, an Ekhal, risks his life for you?" His fingers pulled and pinched, "What

is there between your legs that makes even such as he want you?"

Jhan felt tears, but her horror was too great to release them. Her face shivered along with her body as she met his gold eyes with her blue ones, her words coming out surprisingly calm, "You have it in your hand, Lord Obahn," she dared and couldn't believe that she was daring, "Why don't you tell me, since even you seem unable to keep from touching it?"

Jhan almost thought that Obahn's hand was going to be crude and delve deeper, wanting to humiliate her in revenge for her words. His fingers flexed threateningly, but then only gripped her there, tight and warm; eyes never leaving hers as he purposely tried to demean her in front of everyone.

"You want to make me ill, don't you," Obahn growled, "You want to make me leave you alone. Isn't that why you told me your sad tale back on the trail?"

Obahn slowly looked Jhan's trembling body over, watching it betray, not just that she was freezing, but how truly afraid she was. Her helplessness seemed to tantalize him and he gently licked his lips, ignoring all the stillness and the people standing around them staring.

"You are so beautiful, despite your wear and your dirt," Obahn told her, sounding almost regretful, "You have been shaped to be a plaything, that's clear, but even though you have been given over to man's use, you still carry yourself honorably. You fear me, but you try to act brave and defy me. Even now, like this, you still face me eye to eye like a prince."

Jhan took a long, slow breath to steady herself, but her voice was still thin and choked as she demanded, "What do you want me to say? If you're going to do it, then go ahead, and let me get warm again."

"Do it?" Obahn grinned and it seemed a mad, tense expression on his face. "Keshun with you? Is that what you mean?"

Obahn's hands left Jhan at last, but then both of them returned just as quickly. He grabbed her breasts, stroked them, and pulled roughly on the nipples to heighten her humiliation. Slowly, he let them drop, one by one. He stepped back and touched the front of his pants as if he had been aroused, shifting his clothes there.

"You have the skill to stop me," Obahn said at last, clearly puzzled, "You obviously have the courage to use it. Why allow this?"

"That's easy," Jhan's said, utterly degraded and eyes sunken hollows of misery, "Sael would have killed me if I had."

Obahn watched impassively as Togo wrapped Jhan in a dry blanket, face unreadable as he continued to pick through clothes to find her enough of them to dress in. Finally, Obahn grunted, curious, "I wouldn't have killed you myself? Do you imagine your skill the equal of mine?"

Jhan felt a shaky smile on her face, a shadow of madness in the way she bared her teeth as if she were snarling. "It is," Jhan replied with a flat tone that left Obahn without any room for doubt, "but you would have occupied me long enough for Sael to run his sword through me. Being groped is nothing compared to other things I've suffered. It certainly isn't worth dying over."

"It sounds like cowardice, yet I saw your bravery when you tried to save the Caefu." Obahn was angrily bewildered. "Explain this contradiction."

Jhan was still shocked by her own actions and she didn't have an easy answer for him. "I didn't think," she surmised, "I just reacted. If I had thought-" she let it drop, shaking her head.

Obahn said nothing to that, watching as Jhan dressed in a mixture of Ahlen's clothes and Sael's, all patched, worn, and dirty. "I see," Obahn said at last and Jhan shot a look at him as she pulled a second sweater over her head. It had a rip along the collar and she fingered it ruefully before pulling on a too large coat of Ahlen's.

"See what?" Jhan felt forced to ask.

"If you had thought," Obahn reasoned, "you would have been too afraid to save him, as you are too afraid to fight me. It is death that keeps you timid and acting the woman. You fear it more than living mutilated and used. That is the dishonorable part of you. It answers my questions; completes the puzzle you have been for me."

Jhan shrugged, not caring what Obahn thought any more. He took that as assent, sneering at her. She crouched by the fire and put her soggy boots by it to dry, not sure how much time Obahn was going to give them to recover. "So," she said, almost not loud enough for anyone but herself to hear.

Obahn heard and frowned warningly. "So?" he repeated, as if he suspected that she was cursing him.

"Are you or aren't you going to?"

She sounded so bold, Jhan thought, when she was secretly dying of fear, knowing that none of them was going to help her. They had even began dressing again, trying to share enough clothing and finding that there wasn't enough to keep them all warm. They were discussing it among them, as if she and Obahn had gone into another room, or maybe, as men, they had sensed something in Obahn that Jhan had missed; an unspoken understanding that Obahn wasn't going to do anything.

"I don't keshun with men," Obahn grunted and turned away, throwing over his shoulder, "or cowards pretending to be women."

They all crouched by the fire, getting warm, everyone silent and shivering. Togo, Minyah, and Ahlen were the closest to Jhan. She should have thanked them. Without their help she would have died with Ixien. Instead, Jhan stared sullenly into the flames of the fire, lips locked on bitterness and the

screams of anguish she longed to utter. It still felt as if Obahn's hand was on her, too hot and degrading to be forgotten.

Jhan knew that she was being watched. She looked up, only briefly, and saw Sael staring at her, his face set in disgust and disappointment. Of course, Jhan thought, she had dishonored herself. She hadn't fought back.

Jhan's eyes darted under her eyelashes and she saw Ahlen staring at her as well, face set in anger and a little confusion. Now that he was a man, had Obahn's roughness moved him? She could imagine his confusion at reacting to someone like her and under those circumstances.

Again, Jhan's eyes shifted. Obahn was staring at them all impatiently, his assault already forgotten. It hadn't been sexual at all, Jhan knew, but only a crude satisfying of his own curiosity; a need to put her back in the low place he had placed her in before her bravery in saving Ixien. His pawing, calloused hands, had only been instruments to crush her, to mold her back into the helpless creature he knew her to be. For what purpose, Jhan couldn't guess, but it seemed Obahn was done trying to make her into a warrior.

"Do you think the little one will recover?" Togo asked to no one in particular. He was staring at Ixien as he hugged his meager sweater to his lanky body, chilled hands trying to spread his pile of wet clothes out next to him.

Jhan looked at Ixien, expecting to see his usual indifferent self. Instead, she was amazed to see him shaking, skin as white as snow and eyes wide and shocked. His body heat was having trouble overcoming the wet of his skin and he had literally thrust his arms into the flames of the fire.

Jhan found herself standing, gathering up a dry blanket and crushing it against her as she took a deep breath and rounded the fire to reach Ixien. She dropped the blanket onto him, not wanting to touch him, and he began furiously wiping the water from his skin. His hot hands made the fibers of the blanket smolder as if it were going to catch on fire.

Ixien's clear eyes lifted to Jhan's. "Why?" he asked simply.

Jhan swallowed as if she were going to be sick. She stuck her hands into the pockets of her warm coat and shifted from one foot to the other, longing for her boots and for all of this to be over with. "I'm a human being," Jhan replied, but she couldn't help sounding angry, "They haven't been able to make me forget that yet."

"You swore that, when the time came, you would relish watching me die," Ixien reminded her.

"That's not what I said," Jhan retorted and then pressed her lips together tightly. She took a blind look about the camp to gather her thoughts and to take a tight rein on her emotions. "I wanted you to feel helpless."

“I would not have saved you, if you had been in the same situation.”

Jhan looked down at him again and her blue eyes narrowed at his childlike, elfin face. “I know,” she replied. It didn’t make any difference. The very thing inside of her, that had kept her from being able to kill everyone of her tormentors in cold blood, had been Ixien’s savior. It wasn’t in her to stand and watch anyone die, even for revenge.

Jhan walked back around the fire and crouched to warm herself again. Trembling, she wrapped her arms around herself. Togo lifted the blanket she had discarded and began to put it about her shoulders. He froze when he saw the blood.

“Savior of Selaya,” Togo began, but stopped when Jhan gave him a hard, angry look.

“Please don’t give me any more titles to carry around,” Jhan snapped acidly. “I have enough I’m trying to get rid of.”

Unperturbed, Togo timidly tugged at the collar of Jhan’s sweater and coat and saw the deep scratches along her back and neck. “The Caefu has sharp claws,” he observed sympathetically, “Will they fester, do you think?”

“I did get some of the dirt off of me in the water,” Jhan replied absently, “They’re probably clean enough.”

Togo blinked as if she were being foolish, shaking his head and contradicting her worriedly, “You are covered all over in filth! Even the water wasn’t enough to-”

“I don’t care,” Jhan snapped, cutting him off. “I just don’t, Togo. I have too much to deal with right now. Please, I-I don’t want anything- anyone bothering me.”

“Obahn has made you upset.” It was a whisper from Togo and he looked disturbed. “I didn’t know what to do. I don’t know enough custom to understand what is acceptable, but your expression when he touched you that way... It was wrong, wasn’t it? Very wrong.”

“Yes,” Jhan replied in a whisper. She turned her face away and bit her lip viciously to keep herself from crying at his gentleness.

Sael and Ahlen had risen from the fire, haggling over a pair of gloves as if they didn’t dislike each other. Sael insisted Ahlen take them, since he had lined pockets in his coat. Ahlen agreed with a nod and began putting them on.

“Such concern,” Zerain mocked as she began to bank and put out the fire. “One would think that you were both Ekhal.”

“If you didn’t know better,” Ahlen was too quick to reply.

“Do I?” Zerain wondered archly and her hips swayed insolently as she walked away.

Ahlen was red in the face, his gloved hands clenching. Sael was looking from Ahlen to Zerain and

then he stiffened, understanding at last. His tone was low and tight, his eyes searching for Obahn, to make certain he was too far to hear. "Be careful!" he warned Ahlen, "My Lord's honor is in my keeping. Don't let me hear what I ought not or I will have to tell Obahn of it."

Ahlen's red face turned to white and his eyes became alarmed. He opened his mouth, stammered nothing, and then closed his mouth and nodded fearfully. Sael nodded too, once and strongly to make his point, before he left to check on the beasts.

They moved about in disarray. The beasts were nervous and balking. Clothing, dry and wet, had to be packed once more. Everyone seemed to not know where to go or what to do. A bellow from Obahn brought everything back into order. He shouted commands and soon had them all lined up and ready to travel.

Ixien was a huddled ball of misery on the pack baku, but he was steaming as his body began to reheat itself. Ahlen was far down the line away from Obahn and Zerain. Obahn was striding around, checking to make certain nothing had been left behind. Zerain awaited him patiently on her imala, at the head of the line.

Sael was on his imala coming close to Jhan, mouth tensing as he prepared to say something to her. Jhan turned to escape it, knowing what he wanted to ask. On foot and hand tangled in her baku's reins, she tripped and fell straight into Obahn's broad chest. He grabbed her by an arm and glared down at her.

Jhan knew that she couldn't stand one more assault. She hung in his grip, blue eyes turning into wells of tears; waiting for pain, mental or physical. Obahn leaned, slightly, and whispered in her ear. "You have forgotten your boots." He held them in his free hand.

Jhan felt them pressed into her hand and then he was releasing her, almost gently, and taking a step back. Jhan took a shuddering breath, on the verge of fainting. She had reached the pinnacle of fear and despair and there hadn't been a climax. It was almost more than her nerves could bear. Obahn was enjoying it too, his body relaxed and languid and his lips almost smiling. A cat playing with a mouse, Jhan thought, as she turned blindly towards her baku and scrambled up onto its back, needing that height, that small feeling of being out of reach and safe.

What did he want? Jhan couldn't begin to guess. He was planning something and he was beginning to prepare her for it, obviously testing her and making certain of his facts about her.

Obahn's mind was too complicated for Jhan to fathom. He was playing a chess game and he was ten moves ahead of her, planning strategies within strategies to some unknown end. Jhan didn't flatter herself. She knew that, in that game, she was only a pawn; a piece to be discarded for any convenience.

"We will be wintering in Bairkun," Obahn announced as he mounted his imala. "I had hoped to

reach it before noon, but, after this fiasco, we will reach it late afternoon. When we do reach it, I don't intend to continue with certain baggage. Ahlen Kantori and the Caefu must find their own way and means. They have proven themselves useless."

Ahlen didn't bristle at the insult. He looked suddenly lost, the child he really was. He opened his mouth as if to protest, or maybe even to plead, but Obahn's face was set in such a way that he shut it and looked down. Ixien was quiet and turned inward, not indicating whether he had even heard his fate pronounced.

"Why me?" Jhan muttered as they began down the trail once more.

"As well ask why Togo and Minyah," Sael replied beside her, "but you at least have a claim as my wife."

"That isn't the reason and you know it," Jhan said with a shake of her head, not really wanting to think about it at all.

"No, I do not," Sael replied. "Our customs are strong. You are my wife and, therefore, my business. Obahn wouldn't ask that you be cast out. He would have to challenge me or claim that you endangered his life and our oath with your presence."

Jhan's face twisted bitterly. "I guess that you showed him that I don't endanger your oath. You left me to die when he called you."

"When he commanded, yes," Sael sighed, "but surely you understand that? I must be by his side. I must follow his commands. That is part and parcel of an oath."

"I don't understand anything," Jhan retorted sharply, "but it doesn't matter whether I do or not. You've shown to me how far I can trust you."

"I haven't shown you anything," Sael growled back, "You don't know me at all and you certainly don't know what I will or will not do."

"I didn't think that a pawn could be in two games at the same time, but you and Obahn are managing to do it."

"Pawn. What is a pawn?" Sael wondered. "Is it the same as minion?"

"Minion?" Jhan repeated the word and then scowled. "Yes, but most of the time a minion chooses a lord for good or ill. A pawn never can. That's what it means; a piece in a game to be moved about against its will, without any understanding of why."

"Shall I weep?" Sael mocked and Jhan shot him a furious look. "Obahn was right about you. You do fear death too much to fight back. You're making yourself into this *pawn*."

Jhan's eyes never left his. "If Obahn had put his hand on you, just as he did to me, would you have let him?"

Sael stiffened and his jaw worked, but then he nodded reluctantly. "Yes. I am Ekhal. We are oathed. He may do anything he likes to me."

"Are you afraid of it?"

Sael didn't dignify it with an answer, but his eyes slid away from hers. "I am a man."

"So you keep saying," Jhan told him, "and I am a woman, as I keep saying. Even after all of this time, my mind still doesn't remember that I have this ability to save myself. Next to Obahn, I'm so very small. He seems invincible; strong, a man. My bones melt when he looks at me. When he threatens me, all I want to do is faint or find somewhere to hide."

"Your face never shows that," Sael observed. "You always look like steel."

"Would he leave me alone if it didn't? Would you?"

"No," Sael replied, angry now. "What do you hope for with this?"

"I don't know," Jhan sounded defeated even to herself. "Maybe I'm trying to warn you."

Sael snorted, but he wasn't amused. "You are not making any sense."

"I suppose not, but none of you are either." Jhan shrugged, looking away. "I'm warning you that I have limits. You've seen it. Whenever I forget myself, lose my sanity even for an instant, the training that was given to me through torture, until it's a deadly reflex, becomes beyond my control. Obahn wants to push me, why I don't know. If he keeps at it, I don't think I have to explain what will happen?"

"No, I understand." Sael's voice went low and dangerous. "I will be watching you. You spoke the truth to Obahn, whether you knew it or not. Raise your hand against him, and I will kill you."

Jhan swallowed and nodded, understanding that much very well as Sael fell back to guard the rear of the column. She was glad that he left her, not wanting to talk any more. It was better to ride in silence and recover from the ordeal on the lake.

There were unanswered questions there too. Jhan still couldn't believe that she had risked her life for Ixien. That she hadn't even stopped to consider all the wrongs he had dealt her seemed incredible. She would have liked to think that she had plumbed some depth within her that none of her tormented life had yet erased, but it was more likely, she acknowledged ruefully, that she had simply not thought, just as she had said to Obahn. Reflexes had saved the day, not moral mettle.

They rode into Bairkun about the time Obahn had predicted. The sun was slanting towards late afternoon and a heavy snow had begun to fall, the sky threatening a storm.

The city was a surprisingly civilized place in the wilderness. A broad, cobblestone road, with

gutters and sidewalks of slate, snaked through tidy rows of shops. Side roads led to residential areas in a neat, orderly grid, intersections wide and obviously designed to accommodate a large crowd of travelers and citizens alike.

People walked casually down the sidewalks, staring with interest at the dirty, bedraggled company, but not overly surprised. The men wore breeches that ended at the knee, hose from there that went into ankle boots, and jackets embroidered and shinning like velvet. High collars were the fashion for both sexes; lacy delicate confections. In the men they were stiff and short. In the women they were tight at the neck and covering shoulder and bosom. Their dresses were billowy, as tight as their lace collars down to their waist and then streaming out in flowing trains behind them. Every point of them was covered, from their lace covered hands to their feet and ankles covered in hose and high top shoes. Some even wore lace pinned in their hair to trail over and cover their faces.

“Here.” Obahn suddenly swung off of his imala. “Wait for me.”

Obahn walked purposely to Jhan. His eyes traveled over her and she tensed, not certain what to expect. When he suddenly reached out and clasped his hands around her waist, she almost cried out.

“Be still!” Obahn barked.

Obahn’s hands traveled up Jhan’s waist until they were forced to part to reach a point under her arms. He was pulling her forward and down to do this and Jhan began to shake, still not understanding what he wanted.

At last, Obahn released Jhan and she straightened in the saddle, head down and mouth a silent line of tension. Obahn was ignoring her now. He was staring down at his hands as if to keep something in his mind, and then he was striding into a shop. Jhan didn’t look to see what sort of shop it was. She was too unnerved.

Baku snorted. A hand touched Jhan’s knee. She looked down with a start and saw Ahlen looking up. “I need the animals,” he said. “I’ll have to sell yours to be able to afford a place for the winter.”

Jhan began to dismount, but Sael stopped her with a hand on her arm. She sat quietly while the Ekhal handed a few coins over to Ahlen. Ahlen looked at them, seemed satisfied, and then looked up at Jhan again.

“I would take you with me if I could,” Ahlen told her. He sounded afraid, voice tight and anxious, maybe thinking that Sael might react violently because he was addressing her.

“We are not friends,” Jhan stressed for the last time. “Being with you is hardly better than being with these others.”

Ahlen’s distress grew, a line creasing the middle of his eyes as if he were in pain. “Do you truly think that?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” Jhan grated, keeping her eyes on her hands as they twisted on the reins of her baku.

Ahlen shook his head and turned away. She heard him mutter, “It isn’t true,” as he took the reins of Ixien’s baku along with his own and led them over to the open door of a stable.

Obahn returned from his errand, silent about what it had been about. He seemed oddly cheerful, face as fierce as ever, but relaxed. He led the way down the street and Jhan didn’t bother looking up to see where they were going. She felt strange. It didn’t seem right to be separated from Ahlen. He at least had given her torment some meaning. Now, there was nothing. She didn’t know what was expected of her or what would happen next.

Jhan smelled the bath house before they reached it. It was a narrow building shoved up between a bakery and a butcher shop, steam seeping into the cold air from a bad seal under its doorway. The steam smelled of bath salts and something floral.

“Soft,” Sael was growling, “Everything is so soft here! It disgusts me. With a handful of men I could-”

Obahn had dismounted. He tied his imala to a post. “Come,” he commanded, “We must make ourselves presentable before we reach our destination.”

“Here?” Sael was startled into protest as Obahn opened the door of the bath house. “It is- What must go on there? Men and women bathe together? Soft scents and putrid-”

“I’ve been among foreigners before, Sael,” Obahn told him reassuringly, “Nothing goes on here except washing, and you can order the bath as you like. Come,” he ordered again, more firmly, “Being filthy is shameful as well.”

Sael glared about them, undecided, but his lord had commanded and he didn’t have any choice but to dismount. He helped Jhan down from her baku as if she were the wife he pretended, eyes never leaving off from scanning their surroundings. What was he looking for? Whether he expected ridicule from passersby, danger that might take them unaware when they were most vulnerable, or simple discomfort at strangeness, Jhan couldn’t tell.

Togo and Minyah were just as nervous, but for other reasons. They had seen how easily Ahlen and Ixien had been cast off. They weren’t sure of their own fates. The town was completely foreign to them and the idea of a bath house must have been even more alien.

They all followed Obahn inside, sighing as the warmth of the place enveloped them and welcomed them in. A man dressed in a white robe, waited by a door. His eyes studied them with an anxious twitch. He was bald and gaunt looking, his long fingers raised to stroke a black beard as thin as his body.

“So many,” the man had an unusually high voice, “and women as well! I can’t accommodate all. We close half of the place down after the caravans stop coming through. Only laborers seek our service and we put them in the common room.”

“That will do,” Obahn replied as he slapped money into the man’s hand. “We are husband and wife. Nudity among such is not a taboo thing.” He motioned to Togo and Minyah. “They will bathe after us with whatever is left.”

The man nodded, pleased, as he poured the money into a hidden pocket. Bowing, he turned and led the way down a narrow hallway. He stopped at an open doorway and motioned them all inside. His dark eyes rested on Minyah and Togo. They rested longest on Minyah, the man puzzling over exactly what Minyah was.

“Sit there.” Obahn motioned to a bench. Togo sat and Minyah settled at his feet like a dog. Obahn addressed the proprietor, “I have clothing coming from the tailor shop. See that I receive it at once. It would be a waste to clean only to put on rags again.”

That was wise and the tall man sniffed, as if agreeing that they were dressed like beggars. “Shall I burn these old things?” he sounded hopeful.

“No, bundle them up and send them to a cleaner,” Obahn commanded. “I don’t waste anything, even rags.”

They left Minyah and Togo in the small ante room and entered a spacious brick room with a large metal vat of steaming water. Benches lined it and hot coals had been laid in a wide bed underneath it to keep the water warm. A pipe led from the vat to a metal boiler as well and another pipe snaked out from under it, probably to take away the dirty water. Towels were stacked in another corner, along with brushes, and a straight razor in wooden holder before a very small mirror. It was obviously set up for men.

Sael gave everything a withering look, testing the water with a finger and smelling the soft mounds of soap in wooden bowls beside the vat. He soon nodded, approving of the spartan accommodations, and began to undress. He put aside his sword and his knives as if he were taking off his arms, but he didn’t put them far from his reach.

Obahn and Zerain were undressing as well. Zerain’s scarf came off and her face was closed and cold, eyes properly downcast as she began unlacing her heavy skirts and jacket. Obahn was looking at her. He smiled and put a hand to her flat belly, as if he could already feel the child there. Zerain didn’t, not even for a second, look guilty. She was proud and unafraid, too certain of her plan. When she turned to get into the water, Jhan saw that she had a line of tattoos swirling over one shoulder like a delicate dance of butterflies.

Obahn was scarred in every place imaginable. Hair ran up from his groin to grow like a pelt on his broad chest. His legs were thick, like tree trunks, and his arms were almost too large for his body. Jhan noted a great scar near his last rib. It was thick and jagged. Only a strong and determined man could have survived a wound like that. It made Jhan suddenly very afraid of him and she found herself taking a step backward, hands wrapping around herself as if someone had threatened to tear her clothes off of her.

“Don’t,” Obahn warned. That one word was filled with threat and his utter assurance of his control over her.

“My wife,” Sael cut in just as quickly and just as heavy with threat. “I am oathed to Obahn. We are part of his lodge. There is nothing to fear, not any dishonor in this.”

“What part of you haven’t I seen,” Obahn wondered irritably, “or touched? Do you hide a secret still?”

Jhan chewed on her lip, knowing he was right, but still reluctant and afraid. She slowly peeled off her clothes as if she were taking off her skin. Crusted with dirt and smelling terrible, they were stiff. She fumbled to unfasten buttons and hooks. She was taking too long.

Obahn had waited enough. He strode to Jhan, grabbed her by her clothes, and simply flexed his muscles. The cloth ripped and, just as Jhan had feared, Obahn was throwing her to the floor, pulling them off with violent motions. His calloused hands scraped Jhan’s skin and bruised her when they lifted her, naked at last, and threw her into the vat.

Water cascaded onto the floor and Zerain shielded her face with a disdainful scowl as Jhan reemerged, spluttering and gasping for breath. Obahn and Sael climbed in after her. Their hands took hold of Jhan and she felt soap rubbed into her hair and onto her skin as if the men were grooming a dumb beast. A brush attacked her and Jhan felt as if her skin was going to be scraped off along with the dirt. They spoke over her, Sael arguing and Obahn barking orders.

Jhan’s head was repeatedly thrust under water. It kept her off balance, full of panic, and unable to react. She felt her lungs constrict, several times going nearly long enough without air for her to faint. Her heart throbbed, the pounding in her ears drowning out their words and curses. She clawed at their hands, gasped pleas for them to stop, as she tried to get in air at the same time.

Finally, Jhan was thrown back out of the vat. She slid on the floor, bruising her knees and slapping her hands painfully as she tried to keep her head from being bashed on the stone. She sat up, legs straight out, and put her hands to her face as she wept into them. She could hear them still talking, about small things, as they bathed themselves and relaxed in the hot water.

Jhan calmed herself. She shuddered with the effort, but she knew, as she had always known, that

crying never helped anything and, as always, she simply had to go on. She refused to look at them as she slowly climbed to her bare feet. She padded over to the towels and grabbed several. She dried her body and her long hair by the heat of the boiler.

Her body kept constricting in spasms. Jhan held herself still each time until they passed. It was her emotions welling up, trying to seep, like the steam under the door, out of her mind's control. She held them in check, cruelly tight. Dagara Ku Ni had relished seeing them, proof that his torture had been bearing fruit. They had egged him on to greater efforts. In his school of pain, Jhan had learned never to show them to him.

Wasn't this the same? Didn't her pain and anguish only make them crueler? Jhan had learned her lessons well and they were coming back to her now. She looked at her face in the crude mirror. It was as white as moonlight, big eyes, blue wells of sadness etched with madness. Her hair, in a cascading fall of disordered curls, gave strength to that impression. Oh so beautiful, even in its bleakness. Jhan concentrated, frown smoothing out and eyes going blank. She felt numbness creep over her and she was ready when Obahn spoke behind her.

"Why did you fight this time? You see what has been revealed under all of that filth?"

It had been Jhan's protection, a thin veil that she had hid behind. When she turned to Obahn, she made her numbness a replacement for that protection. Her cold, dead eyes made him frown, as if he suspected she might have gone quietly mad. He waited, but, when she continued to say nothing, he placed a package into her arms. Their clothes had been delivered while she had been absorbed within herself.

"Dress in this. Zerain will help you." Obahn turned away to pull on his own clothes.

Zerain was already dressed in black; a heavy skirt much like her old one, an equally heavy coat that hid her form. Her red scarf, tied in her braid, and her long veil, were the only color. Her posture was stiff and displeased. It grew even more so when she saw the dress that Jhan unwrapped.

Jhan stared at the dress flowing from the package into her hands. She almost let her numbness slip until she reminded herself that this wasn't a gift. It had a purpose. She held it tightly, fisting her hands into the soft material, and then resigned herself and began dressing.

It was flowing gray silk with a hundred hooks and buttons. Zerain patiently fastened them, pearl colored buttons marching in a long line down from her breast to her waist as the dress encased Jhan as tight as a glove. A collar of gossamer, white lace encased her just as tightly from her breast to her chin. The bottom of the dress was more, shimmering gray silk, but a molded belt of gray-blue ruffles went about her lower hips, accenting them and making them seem unusually large for the small waist that rose up from them. White hose were pulled up to Jhan's knees and attached there with pink, silk

ribbons. Her small feet went into high topped, white leather shoes with pointed heels.

A last accent, a senseless ornament that Zerain pulled about Jhan's throat as if she would strangle her with it; A blue gray bow that tied at the back of her neck , trailing ribbons down through her fall of black curls. Those curls were left free, dry now, and springing over Jhan's shoulders and down to her waist.

They stared at her as Jhan pulled on lace gloves. She met those eyes with her dead, blue ones, not caring, but imagining that she looked like an overdressed doll. Sael was horrified.

"She is my wife!" Sael exploded. "You cannot mean for her to be seen in such- in such shameful-"

"Silence," Obahn replied softly, not even glancing at him. His eyes were avidly on Jhan. "This is modesty here. This is fashion. I have paid a high price to dress the Ikhil so."

"Not Zerain," Sael dared through gritted teeth.

"No, Zerain is with my child," Obahn replied. "She isn't of interest to any man now."

"And neither should my wife!"

"Your wife?" Obahn growled, looking at him at last. "She is no more your wife than mine, Ekhal, and now is the time to end such lies. I need her. This man we must beg room and board from, won't be turned by my title alone. I need to make certain of him. I need to interest him. He was always a man for pleasures and for pretty faces."

"She will kill him," Sael retorted, stung and coloring all the way to his ears. He didn't bother denying Obahn's assertions.

Obahn shook his head. "I think your Ikhil's spirit has been taken away. I think our host will be able to do anything he wishes without much trouble. He may even take her as wife. I would have taken her myself if she had really been a woman."

"He will have to challenge me," Sael warned.

"I deny your claim," Obahn snapped back, jaw working and face scars standing out lividly. "She is not your wife."

Sael had put on his sword. He was gripping the hilt of it now. "She is," he insisted, but he was going pale, knowing that he was daring death.

Obahn faced him, picking up his own sword from the floor and gripping the hilt. "Prove it. Now!" he challenged, "Take her on the floor, against the wall, standing, with her back to you like an imala; any way that you are able! If you can, I will forget this plan and think of another. As it is, this man doesn't owe me any favors. I don't relish being milked for all of our money for room and board when these people know we will die in the snow without it. I would rather be a guest at a Lord's house. She is our coin to that end. She will give him reason to want us there."

Sael stared at Jhan. She knew that he could do just as Obahn asked, despite being Ekhal. He had admitted it to her already. His clothes were overlarge. Obahn had only bothered measuring Jhan. The rest were approximations. Sael fiddled with his pants, eyes never leaving Jhan, but he was only pulling them up, his hands tightening his belt rather than loosening it. He nodded to Obahn reluctantly.

“I understand what you want. I won’t challenge it, yet.”

Obahn was relieved, nodding too and turning to finish dressing. Sael stepped close to Jhan. She twisted her arms into a knot, gripping herself around the chest as if she would squeeze herself in two. He leaned close, his breath hot on her ear. “I hope that you are as much a woman as you claim,” he said, “and that you can lead this man Obahn speaks of in circles, wanting you but never having you. It is something the simplest woman can do. Fail me, and I will have to take you any way I can, in front of Obahn for a witness, so that I may keep you.”

Jhan let his words slide over her, like stones dropping into a well. She felt a spasm overtake her again. She quivered, gasped, and let her eyes go blank and wide as she tried not to imagine how it would feel, to have Sael plunge into her and do that to her. It was simply too terrible to know that she would enjoy every second of it while she lost her mind forever.

They moved about her, Togo and Minyah bathing, rueful at having only dirty water, and Sael, Zerain, and Obahn finishing sorting out the rest of the clothing to separate among them. No one took advantage of the razor or the mirror. Obahn and his people were too sure in their vanity and none of them grew beards.

Jhan lowered herself onto a bench, as stiff and as porcelain colored as the doll she appeared to be. Togo sat next to her, toweling himself dry and appearing amazed by her clothing. “Is there some purpose to this costume?” he wondered, “It is beautiful, but constricting. Surely your circulation and your digestive functions are being hampered?”

Minyah reached out a tentative hand and stroked the gray silk, “So soft, but little one’s skin is softer. Bad to cover it all. Like bandages on wound.”

Sael began to be angry, to demand that they not speak to Jhan, but then he bit his lip. “Give her peace,” he said instead. “Her place has been taken from her.”

Togo blinked. “Place?”

“She isn’t my wife any longer,” Sael explained, “She doesn’t have anyone to defend her.”

“Then Jhan is free?”

Sael did get angry then. “Are you intending to claim her?”

Togo was very slow to grasp what Sael was asking. He shook his head, stating with flat simplicity, “No, I was merely glad that Jhan was free of your cruelty and able to go away from you now.”

“She isn’t free to go anywhere,” Sael replied as if Togo were worse than naive. “Obahn intends to give her to another man in exchange for our room and board during the winter.”

Togo was disturbed. “And Jhan doesn’t have any say in it at all?”

“Of course not.” Sael turned away, but not before he revealed a flicker of doubt and pain.

They gathered their things and left the bath house, shivering as they stepped out onto the cold street. Jhan began to move towards her baku, but Obahn stopped her with a sharp, “No!” and a furious, “You’ll ruin the dress. Walk!”

They all walked, taking the winding, cobblestone road through the town as snow drifted down in gentle flakes and the world turned gray. Jhan walked at the front with Obahn, as if she were sleepwalking, mind receding further and further into herself with every step. It seemed like the beginning of some nightmare, everything too soft and indistinct, and the city too normal and quaint after so long traveling endless rough lands.

They passed the last shop of the city and the road forked, one arm traveling up a slight rise to a very large house, and the other snaking out and into the countryside where it abruptly turned into hard packed earth. Obahn took the road up to the house.

It was very large, at least twenty rooms and three stories. Glass windows winked in the weak light and balconies curved like cupped hands under each one. A great courtyard greeted them. It was centered by an old tree, bare of leaves and towering over everything like a withered giant.

There was an archway, delicate with stone gingerbread over the lintel. The guards who stood before it were a sharp contrast, uniforms black and quartered by a blue blaze. Faces scowled under metal helmets as they threatened the newcomers with long pikes.

“I am Hyjar Obahn Om Sukhelan,” the words rolled off Obahn’s tongue, sounding completely barbaric in that civilized place. “Inform your lord that I have arrived.”

One man stepped forward. He had a gold badge on one sleeve and an air of importance. It was the only thing that marked him from the others. His face was as hidden under a helmet as theirs was. “We were not told to expect guests.” His eyes traveled over each of them, looking for a threat, but seeing only a sight that was both perplexing and strange.

“He doesn’t expect us,” Obahn admitted, but his hand was caressing his sword hilt, not used to being questioned. He said nothing more, not demeaning himself further by speaking with a mere guard.

The man waited, expecting more. When it wasn’t forthcoming, he looked back at his men and growled under his breath, as if he wasn’t certain he could trust them to do anything right if he left them. Finally, he made up his mind. He bowed respectfully to Obahn. “I shall return soon, your Highness.”

As the man left through the archway, Obahn turned with burly arms crossed over his chest, eyes

scanning the courtyard. Sael watched the guards nervously, hand on his sword. They watched him in return, just as nervous.

Jhan let her eyes travel up the length of the wall. It was red brick and it reminded her of a prison. It could so easily be one for her, if she wasn't careful. Given over to yet another man, her journey might end, but maybe not her torment.

Obahn reached out and flicked something off of Jhan's shoulder, scowling at the wet spots the snow was making on her dress. Jhan flinched, thinking he meant to hit her, but he only grinned savagely and turned back to the archway.

A man came through it. He was tall and very portly. He might have been muscular when he was younger, but he had gone soft now, his body only retaining the shape of a long lost youth. His hair was black, a thatch cut short to tame it, but unsuccessfully. His eyes were rather large and a deep brown, crinkled in wrinkles at the lids. He wore a high collar of white lace, but his clothes were black leather and his boots were scuffed and abused from much riding.

"The Lord of Bairkun," the guard who had gone to fetch him announced importantly, "Elmanan Velorka."

Velorka made an impatient motion of one hand and smiled modestly. "Please, I'm only a trader, Captain Elorian. They only call me lord because my house is the largest in the city." He had a deep base voice. It rumbled out of his chest good naturedly as he held out a hand to Obahn. "Prince Obahn! It has been years since I took traders your way! I'm pleased that you remembered me and thought to visit as you passed through Bairkun."

Obahn took the offered hand in a swordsmen's grip, clutching the man's wrist only briefly before letting it drop. He could have stood and spoke niceties all day long, hedging around the question, but he was Obahn and a prince, so he not so much as asked as commanded.

"I and my company need lodgings for the winter," Obahn gave a meaningful look at Elmanan's home. "I will require three rooms, or at the very least, two rooms and a stable space for these two not of my lodge," he was speaking offhandedly of Togo and Minyah. "This is possible?"

Elmanan was prepared. He wasn't a fool and he had known all along why Obahn had come to his home. His eyes faked a small bit of concern, going soft and sympathetic. "Prince Obahn, I would be honored to house you and your companions, but I have so many relatives staying that there is simply not enough room. Winter is a time for dances and occasions. We save them for the cold days to liven the bitter months. I doubt if you could find a spare room in all Bairkun."

"Ah, I understand," Obahn growled, angry, but keeping it tightly reigned. "It will be hard on my pregnant wife to attempt going through the snows, but it is the little Lady Jhan I worry over the most.

She is born of delicate stock.”

“Lady?” Elmanan sounded doubtful, perhaps expecting one of Obahn’s heavily veiled women; a barbaric woman to go along with the barbaric company he saw before him. His brown eyes flicked up and around at them, falling briefly on Togo, Minyah, resting on Sael’s scarf until he assured himself that Sael was a man, and then falling on Zerain. “Ah, she doesn’t appear so delicate. I think she will manage.”

Obahn was furious. His jaw gritted as he was forced to turn. He spotted Jhan standing almost behind her baku. He snaked a hand out and pulled her forward. At the last moment, he turned the motion from violent into solicitous, slipping an arm about her waist and bringing her in front of Elmanan.

Elmanan’s attitude changed instantly. He was stunned. His mouth opened slackly as he stared down from his height at Jhan. He blinked his eyes and they were as wide and as blank as an astonished cow. He trembled, leaned forward as if he were going to fall over, and then recovered with an effort. He straightened and licked his lips, forcing his eyes away.

“F-Forgive my stare, Lady Jhan,” Elmanan stammered, “I did not mean any disrespect.”

“She is but lately a free woman,” Obahn explained, keeping his tone nonchalant, “I thought to leave her in safe hands, since she isn’t one of my people. Can you think of anyone who might care for her honorably, as she deserves, Lord Elmanan?”

“I-I,” Elmanan stopped, swallowed, and then nodded briskly, “I think that I do, but you may have to stay here until I bespeak him and lay it before him. I’m certain there are some of my relations who could share quarters and give you the room you need.”

“But the weather,” Obahn demurred, “If we can’t stay for the Winter-”

“Who am I to refuse a prince?” Elmanan interjected hurriedly, “and my relations are far from high enough to argue with my decisions. Please, be welcome as my guest, you and your companions, Lord Obahn.”

Obahn gave an arrogant nod and Elmanan led the way under the arch and into his home, glancing back furtively, now and again, at Jhan. Jhan ignored him, keeping her eyes on the floor, until he called a woman over to him. “Tandhi, take Lady Jhan to a room and give her all that she needs. You will be her maid while she is in this house.”

Tandhi was a thin, mousy looking woman with big, green eyes and an easy smile. She was dressed in a rougher version of the fashion of the city; her white collar not lace and her tight bodice and skirts made of a deep brown material that had the texture of wool. Her blonde hair was tied modestly at the neck and she, like Jhan, wore a constricting gold bow about her throat. She had an amazed look on her

face as she looked at Jhan and she seemed embarrassed, eyes downcast and mouth tight and closed as she murmured an assent.

Sael appeared ready to protest, but Obahn said one curt word in their language, and Sael bit down on whatever he had been about to say. He met Jhan's eyes briefly, as if he were trying to tell her something, but Jhan was too numbed to understand it as he walked away, following dutifully behind Obahn.

Jhan followed the servant down long hallways, blind to the costly carpets and the warm heat emanating from grates in the floor. The walls were paneled wood, stained dark and wainscoted with delicate beading, and the ceiling was plaster and as smooth as an eggshell. It was obvious that Elmanan was very rich.

Tandhi opened a door and preceded Jhan into a small room. She was nervous, repositioning a chair with an embroidered cushion and almost flying to smooth a wrinkle on a rich, green coverlet on a wide bed. There wasn't any fireplace. As in the hallway, heat rose up from metal grates.

Tandhi opened a heavy curtain. Milky light streamed in and made a dull illumination on the hardwood floor and an intricately woven rug. When she turned back to Jhan, hands twisted in her dress and eyes still downcast, she seemed ready for censure.

"It isn't much for someone in your station, Lady Jhan, but I'm certain Lord Elmanan will rectify it as soon as he can." Tandhi opened a smaller door and motioned inside. "There's a private bath and a necessary. A bell pull by the bed will summon me if you need help. "

Jhan stared at nothing. A long minute passed in which she wasn't even aware of Tandhi squirming. Even the dust motes in the air seemed frozen, everything pausing while Jhan listened, hearing only her own breathing in the complete silence of the room.

Tandhi coughed delicately. "Is there anything you require now, Lady Jhan? I am at your service. If you wish me to wait, I will go and stand so as not to disturb you."

Jhan didn't even wonder how Tandhi would accomplish that in such a small room. She stirred herself, realizing at last that something was required of her. Someone was *asking* her to make a decision. "I'm fine," she murmured, and then more strongly, "You can go. Thank you."

Tandhi did a small curtsy and then went out of the room. The door closed solidly behind her. Jhan went to it and stared at the heavy wood as if she had never seen a door before. The bolt of the lock was metal. Jhan reached up a quivering hand and shot it home. She was seized with a spasm of emotion as she heard the deep, *chunk*, of the lock going into place.

Turning, Jhan gave the small room a wild look. She went to the curtains, unsteady on her unfamiliar heels, and threw the heavy curtains closed on the outside world. Turning again, she went to

the center of the room and simply stood, silent again and motionless.

She was alone. The feeling was indescribable. For so long she had been constantly on the move, constantly fearful, constantly in the company of so many others; others who had wanted to tear her apart with their needs and their demands. To be truly alone and motionless, nothing expected and the trail ended for now, was too much like a pleasant dream she would soon wake up from.

The bed beckoned with its softness. It begged her to lie down. The chair was turned invitingly as well. Everything spoke of comfort and repose, a putting down of the burden of her life for just an evening, an evening where the bolt of the door would hold the world at bay. Jhan gave in to it all at once, the hard steel her body had become, weakening, her knees shaking as she bent to pull off her shoes.

Jhan poured herself out on the bed, sinking into downy softness and velvet coverlets. It wrapped her in warmth and she snuggled down into it as if it were Kile's longed for arms, or the almost forgotten embrace of her lost mother. She closed her eyes, the silence so complete that it was almost a sound itself, and she let herself forget and buy into the dream. She accepted it and tried to pretend that it would go on forever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

(Playing Dolls)

A light tapping on the door roused Jhan. She tensed, eyes opening and darting about as she tried to remember where she was. The thick scents of animals, campfires, and unwashed bodies were conspicuously absent. The ground was far too soft and she was unusually warm and rested.

The tapping sound came again, tentative, but persistent. Jhan sat up on the bed, eyes dazed as she slowly pieced the world back together. Of course, it came back to her in a painful sting, she was in Lord Elmanan's house and Obahn intended to use her like a whore.

Jhan stood up, swaying at the unaccustomed weight of her dress. It was rumpled and creased, binding her body like a boa constrictor. Jhan pulled off the bow at her neck and unbuttoned the lace collar down to her breast as she slowly walked across the warm floor to the door. Her hand rose to the bolt. She paused to pull off the tight gloves, dropping them absently; knowing that it was all to prolong the moment when she would have to let the real world back in.

Again the knock came, a little more anxious and a little more boldly. Jhan took a deep breath to steady herself and then threw back the bolt. Opening the door cautiously, she saw Tandhi on the other side with many bundles balanced in her arms. She was peeking over the top of them, green eyes nervous.

“Is my Lady ready to begin her day?” Tandhi asked cautiously.

The answer was no, but Jhan knew better. She nodded stiffly and stepped aside to let Tandhi enter. The woman went to a small side table and put down her bundles with an almost concealed sigh of relief. Turning, she curtsied to Jhan, eyes downcast.

“It is almost noon, Lady Jhan,” Tandhi informed her, not in censure, but matter- of -factly, just in case Jhan was interested.

Jhan puzzled over her words and then realized that Tandhi meant that it was afternoon of the day after Jhan’s arrival. Jhan had slept through the evening and the next morning. She digested this while Tandhi waited patiently. It was hard to tell what the serving girl thought, but it was apparent that she didn’t give Jhan much credit for intelligence. She went to close the door and then came to Jhan, speaking to her as if she were a child.

“Did you try to undress yourself?” Tandhi reached up and began undoing Jhan’s buttons. “You have only to ring the bell, Lady Jhan, over there by your bed, and I will come to help you in anything you need.”

“I don’t have anything else to wear,” Jhan finally gathered her thoughts enough to say.

“It is all taken care of, Lady Jhan.” Tandhi was pleased with herself. “I saw myself that you had come without any of your baggage. Lost on the trail perhaps?” she didn’t wait for a reply. “I bespoke the head chambermaid and she gathered all that you would need while you slept. She even sent to a shop for dresses, sparing no expense mind you, and had them stitched by the seamstress. I told her that you had a perfect figure, one that women in Bairkun would give all to have.”

Tandhi was expecting a smile, a blush, perhaps even praise. Jhan continued to stare blankly at her, hardly following the shy patter of her words. She was thinking instead of Obahn, Sael, Lord Elmanan, and even of Ahlen. She wanted to brace herself for what might happen next, though she couldn’t say why. Being prepared, she thought dully, might even make it worse for her. Ignorance might truly be bliss, at least for a small amount of time.

There was a tap on the door. Tandhi went to it and peeked outside. She opened the door wider and took things from someone standing outside. Respectfully, she carried three magnificent dresses over one arm and placed them gently on the bed. Returning to the door, she received a tray of food and drink. The unseen servant said nothing and Jhan didn’t even see who it was. Tandhi closed the door and

returned to her.

Peeling the last of the dress, Jhan stepped out of its gray folds in her stocking feet as if she had been taken out of cruel bondage. She sighed softly and rubbed at the marks on her skin some of the tighter bindings had made while she had slept. Tandhi was appalled.

That shocked, open mouthed expression was enough to rouse Jhan from her frozen stupor. Her hands rose as if to cover herself, but she didn't know what part of her was evincing such a look. Had Tandhi guessed so quickly what she was? Jhan's body, tight muscles, lean frame, as lean as any greyhound, and her gentle curves at breast and hip gave nothing away she knew. Was it something less perceptible? An unusual curve to her arms or chest, the flare at the top of her back that was more a boy's than a woman's?

Maybe she had it wrong, Jhan reconsidered. Tandhi's horror might be more about all of Jhan's bruises and scrapes, the vicious line of scratches Ixien had left across her neck and back, still livid and raw, or her leg, an aching patchwork of ugly bruises from the top of her knee to the instep of her foot.

Tandhi's next words made it all clear in an instant. "My Lady! You don't have anything- Where are your underthings?" Her face turned pink, as if Jhan had strutted nude in front of the entire town.

Jhan didn't reply. She had spent a long time in men's clothing, but before that she had always insisted on dresses. Pekarins were modest, but few people there wore much beside a few petticoats and a strip of cloth about their hips. Obahn hadn't even thought that necessary.

Tandhi went to her bundles, hands shaking and perfectly mortified, as she unwrapped them. Brushes, combs, jeweled hair pins, and mounds of ribbons and lace spilled out as she searched. A last bundle contained linen bloomers, silk chemises, hose, corsets of lace and bone, and delicate panties of bows and embroidery. She turned with these in her arms as if she would attack Jhan in her hurry to get them on her.

Jhan sidestepped her and purposefully walked towards the bathroom. "I can't," she said quietly. "I have to... Let me alone for just a moment."

"Oh, my Lady! Of course!" Tandhi exclaimed as if she thought Jhan might be ill. "Refresh yourself! Once you are clean and dressed properly, you'll feel better." She rushed to put items in the bathroom and then she retreated back into the main room, but didn't leave.

Jhan went in and locked the door. By the light of a candle, she relieved herself and then went to the wash basin. She felt a miniscule uplifting of her mood when she saw that there was indoor plumbing and, when she turned on a spigot, hot water. Washing herself, she felt cleaner, as if Obahn and Sael's ministrations from the day before had only left her filthier.

There was a mirror. Jhan touched it. Mirrors were hideously expensive and few people had them.

This one was large and especially reflective. A fine work of a mirror-maker's art, it had been given a golden frame.

Jhan picked up a hairbrush, stared at her pinched reflection, and then put the brush back down. Her eyes were dark and very angry. Her mouth was set as if she had tasted something sour. It made her appearance unpleasant and threatening. Meeting her own eyes, Jhan felt almost hypnotized, as if she were staring at a stranger; a dark id on the other side of the glass. She memorized every line and then made that reflection her own, freezing it and carrying it with her as she went back into the main room.

Tandhi was eager to encase Jhan in clothing once more. Jhan said nothing. She didn't protest at the layers of underthings, the tightening of bows and buttons, the lacing of corsets, and the constricting dress of light blue silk that went over it all. Even her feet were put to the torture of fashion; delicate bead work stockings, that itched and tied with satin lace down the backs, and high heeled shoes that made her unsteady. A great bow was wrapped about her lace covered throat, peeking delicately from behind her fall of hair. That hair was attacked by a brush, Tandhi apologizing over and over again in a senseless drone as she hurt Jhan repeatedly trying to work out the knots.

Jhan allowed it all, cold and silent, face stubbornly frozen on her new expression. It intimidated Tandhi and Jhan thought the girl would cry, thinking she was displeasing Jhan terribly. When she finished at last, Tandhi dipped like a little bird and kissed the laced fingers of Jhan's hand, meeting her eyes as if pleading for forgiveness.

Jhan looked away, walking to the tray of food and eating and drinking in a quick manner that made Tandhi even more anxious. The girl had a napkin in both hands and was trying her best to keep the food from spotting Jhan's clothing. Jhan ignored her, eating everything on the tray in a mechanical fashion. Tasting nothing, she was only seeking to fill the growling emptiness of her stomach.

Satisfied at last, Jhan turned away from the tray and looked at Tandhi coldly. Tandhi dipped in a nervous curtsy again. "Lady Jhan, Lord Elmanan asks that he receive you in the dinning hall for the afternoon meal." When Jhan glanced back at the tray, the woman didn't seem to see the problem. "If you will come, I will take you there."

Jhan kept her silence. She wasn't fooled into thinking that she really had a choice. She followed Tandhi from the room and the woman led her up stairs and through long corridors. They passed men and women. All stopped, staring in stunned amazement at Jhan.

Tandhi was proud, carrying herself straight and importantly in front of Jhan. "You are truly beautiful," she said softly back to Jhan. "You are the one the men sing of when they imagine perfection. I am honored to serve you."

Perfection? Jhan passed several women who were easily more beautiful than she was. They had

rounded feminine forms and soft bosoms. Their faces were smooth and devoid of care. Jhan glanced at them from under her eyelashes, not understanding how her small, slight form, anemic, milk white skin, and overlarge, owl like eyes could make anyone look twice.

“Why do you think that I’m beautiful?” Jhan finally wondered, not satisfying some vain, prurient interest, but needing to know what she must ruin before meeting with Elmanan.

Tandhi laughed as if Jhan were joking with her. “Why, you have the perfect body for ornamentation. The bows and lace lay flat and show to best advantage. You don’t have any ugly bulges of the hip or largeness of breast to distract from the perfect flow of your gown. Even your legs stay neatly hidden, not curving outwards and disrupting the ruffles and folds of the silk.”

“So,” Jhan groped for words, feeling a sullen heat overtake her, “I look good in clothes. Is that what’s important to men in Bairkun? Don’t they care what’s underneath?”

“Underneath?” Tandhi turned to Jhan sharply and Jhan almost ran into her. Tandhi was turning red in embarrassment. She looked up and down the hallway. It was empty for the moment. “Lady Jhan,” Tandhi asked in shock, “what is it like where you are from? Men in Bairkun don’t look under a Lady’s clothing! That is for birthing wives and the lower classes like myself.”

“Birthing wives?” Jhan’s cold demeanor cracked into confusion. “What are you saying? Ladies here don’t have sex?”

Tandhi put hands to her mouth, twitching as if she longed to cover up Jhan’s mouth with them and silence her. Once again, she glanced furtively up and down the hall. “Such words, Lady Jhan! Of course ladies don’t do such things. They are above such crudeness!”

“Then what does Elmanan want from me?” Jhan demanded in exasperation.

“He wants you for your beauty of course.” Tandhi was again treating Jhan as if she were simple, speaking distinctly and slowly. “He had such a fine wife, but she died of an illness last year. He has been speaking with Prince Obahn about you. “Tandhi smiled as if she were revealing a secret that would please Jhan. “I think he wishes to make you his new wife.”

Jhan shook her head, running her hands through her hair as if she would pull it out by the roots. “Elmanan doesn’t want me for sex?”

Again Tandhi reddened, gasping a little with wide eyes. “Please, Lady Jhan, if he heard that you were speaking like that... It isn’t proper! Of course he wouldn’t want such a thing from you. He has three birthing women for that and has been dallying with two maids, that I know of, lately. What would it be if you became pregnant? Your figure would be ruined and you would be ugly, swollen like a melon. What man would want you like that? How would they be respected by anyone in Bairkun? A wife is for beauty, to stand and be perfect beside her husband.”

“So, I’m supposed to be a doll, not a bed mate,” Jhan guessed. The coldness gripped her again and clutched at her heart, though the fear was becoming less. “I don’t know which is worse.”

Tandhi was completely confused. Instead of continuing further with the uncomfortable conversation she decided, instead, to complete her duty and to forget that any of it had occurred. She led the way down the hall again with a stiff back, turning right, and then left again to usher Jhan through an archway and into a large dinning hall.

There, as everywhere else, the room was perfect. Tapestries hung on the walls, depicting scenes of flowering gardens. The floor was highly polished wood, the long table at the room’s center the only thing vying it for shine. The table top was like a dark pool of water, a pewter table service purposely muted so as not to distract from it. The chairs were straight backed, embroidered on the seats with the same garden scenes that adorned the walls.

Obahn and Elmanan sat next to each other at the table, eating a light meal and talking animatedly. Sael stood behind Obahn, his eyes narrowing at Jhan’s finery as she entered the room.

Tandhi directed Jhan to sit on a chair away from the table. It was a position someone might sit in who was being called on to entertain, but no one so much as looked at Jhan as she settled there, the great weight of her clothing pooling about her. Tandhi backed away to stand by the door, leaving Jhan puzzled and suspicious.

The luncheon dragged on. Obahn was discussing trade with Elmanan and Jhan idly realized that Elmanan had made his fortune trading. They spoke of settling a price for linen and maybe relenting on Obahn’s reluctance to trade his people’s fine blooded imala. Elmanan looked pleased, smiling often. Obahn had his habitually hard look and Jhan could tell that the conversation meant nothing to him. He was simply trying to placate Elmanan.

After awhile, the only thing keeping Jhan from folding in on herself, was her tightly laced corset. Every part of her began to ache and to cry out for release. She wanted to shout at them, demand to know what they wanted from her, but she kept her lips tightly pressed together, unwilling to draw attention to herself.

Sael was dressed like one of the people of Bairkun. Jhan noticed that Obahn was dressed the same. It was almost laughable to see their proud, barbaric bodies bound in lace and hose, but Jhan had run out of laughter long ago. It wasn’t much consolation to know that they were suffering some of what she was suffering.

At last, Obahn and Elmanan rose from the table. Elmanan patted his mouth with a fine napkin and held out an arm for Obahn to clasp in agreement on a deal. He excused himself briefly, spoke with a servant that had been hiding in the shadows, and then returned to lead Obahn out of the room. Sael

paused beside Jhan's chair.

"You look ridiculous. What was the purpose of this?"

Jhan looked up at him coldly. "You might as well ask why the chairs are embroidered when people only sit on them! I'm decoration. I'm something pretty to look at, like an arrangement of flowers on the table."

"Sael!" Obahn snarled, and Sael hurried to catch up to Obahn and Elmanan.

The servant approached as Tandhi came to Jhan with an almost possessive air. Jhan was her doll; a living doll to dress and pose and place where her lord could see and appreciate her. "Your business?" Tandhi asked with a heavy tone of snobbery.

The servant was young, tow headed and pale skinned. His blue eyes were nervous as he held out a small, beautifully wrapped gift to Jhan. "From Lord Elmanan," he told her. "He welcomes you to his household and assures you that this will be only one gift of many."

Jhan clutched the gift in one hand and almost let it drop in disinterest. Tandhi was frantic, grabbing hold of it and quickly opening it for her. Her gasp was full of joy and astonishment. "Lord Elmanan has declared his intention to marry you!"

Jhan looked down as Tandhi showed her what she held. It was a ring, encrusted and worked so intricately that, if Jhan had put it on, it would have painfully enclosed most of her ring finger.

Jhan stood, snatched the ring from Tandhi, and tossed it through the air. The boy servant's eyes went wide and he nearly shrieked as he lunged for, and caught it, juggling it briefly as it bounced against his skin.

"Tell Lord Elmanan that I'm not interested," Jhan said simply and left the dinning room. Tandhi was too shocked to follow.

Jhan moved quickly, hands pulling up and supporting the dragging weight of her dress as she lost herself in the myriad hallways of the house. She wasn't sure what she intending, believing that someone was going to stop her at some point; never hoping for more than a pitiful defiance that would quickly be ground under a heel.

People stared. Everyone had one or two servants. None of the women were alone. Jhan's behavior was so unusual though, that none of them could make up their mind to stop her. Their servants gasped shock and Jhan heard mutters. She had to do something before one of them thought it through enough to have her pursued.

Heavy boots sounded up ahead. Metal grated against metal and men's voices alerted Jhan to guards. She distinctly heard Captain Elorian's grumbling tone. In a moment, they would come into her hallway from an intersection and that would be the end of it.

Jhan put her hand on a doorknob to her right, twisted, and found it unlocked. She let herself into a darkened room and closed the door behind her. She leaned against it, breathing shallowly until she heard the footsteps approach and pass her. She almost turned and went back into the hallway, until the window caught her eye. It was almost at ground level, the back of the large house winding down a hill and out into a rolling countryside covered in snow.

Jhan slowly looked about her. The dim room was sparse, but as finely furnished as her own had been. It smelled masculine; cologne and riding leather. A wardrobe opened to her small hands and she saw a wealth of clothing, boots, and coats.

There was a decision to be made that Jhan had thought that she would never have cause to make. That decision was dangerous. Her spirit, stripped bare and crushed by cruel hands, quailed at even considering it, yet it required such tremendous bravery that Jhan hardly knew where to begin to look for it within herself.

Only desperation and fear; the kind of fear a deer felt when it fled from hunters, had made Jhan leave Tandhi and all that she had represented behind. The constricting, suffocating life that would have been hers as Lord Elmanan's wife had been too horrible to contemplate. Bravery hadn't played any part in Jhan's flight from it. This that she contemplated now, required more than simple horror or even greater fear than she felt now. This was the course of action that required Jhan to chance her life, throw herself from a cliff of unknown possibilities and hope that there was something below to save her.

Jhan clutched her hands to her face, took a deep breath, and dared. She stripped off her hated clothes, bundled them tightly so that they wouldn't give her away, and took men's clothing from the very back of the wardrobe; hoping that they might not be missed.

Jhan dressed rapidly, tightening a belt to hold up too large pants and tucking in the long tail of a linen shirt. The extra long arms of that shirt she rolled and hid within the brown velvet coat she put on over it. It had a thick warm lining, but she gathered up several woolen sweaters and scarves to be on the safe side and bundled them with her women's clothes. Her hose and shoes she had to leave on. There was nothing even close to her shoe size. Her coat was long. Jhan hoped it would hide anything that would pick her out as stranger in Bairkun.

As Jhan tied up her hair and tucked it into a brown cap with a jaunty red bird feather tucked into its side, she felt her hands begin to tremble and her stomach begin to tighten with the nausea caused by the battle with her fear. She forced herself, and it took all of her will, to go to the window and place her hands on the sill. There she froze, fear and her attempt at bravery becoming equal in its strength.

What if's streamed through Jhan's mind, beating her like whips, imagining countless scenarios where she ended up being the very thing she was trying to run away from, but punished, horribly

punished by Obahn, or Sael, or- who knew what they would do to a woman fleeing her place, breaking out of her cocoon of heavy cloth and embroidery?

Jhan lifted open the window. The free, cold air slapped into her face, made goose bumps rise on her skin, and almost displaced her hat. She gripped her bundle of clothing, practical and ridiculous, and tried not wonder where she would go. If she did that, she knew her nerve would fail her entirely. It had been that fear, coupled with the fear of being punished that had been keeping her a prisoner as surely as any chain.

“I have to go,” Jhan muttered to herself. “I won’t stay and spend my life as some man’s pretty toy. That would be as cruel as anything Obahn, or any of them have ever done. To be treated as less than human, that’s the real torture, the real torment. I’ll brave anything, chance anything to escape that. I didn’t have the opportunity before, but, here it is. I can’t let it slip through my fingers.”

Jhan swung her legs through the window. Being at the back of the house, it didn’t have a balcony. Jhan looked down at the twelve feet separating her from the snowy ground, took a deep, shuddering breath, and then dropped.

Book Five: The Heart