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The Heart

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The Heart

By

Kracken

CHAPTER ONE

(On Clipped Wings)

The space between the moment when life is totally predictable, suffered, and accepted, to the moment when chains are broken, the unknown and unknowable dared, and a new path taken, is as wide and as long as the space between stars. The soul is caught up in a taken breath, the heart ceasing to beat, and the mind sailing on the euphoria of adrenalin. A wall is broken. The world becomes, in that endless moment, a place where anything is possible. Only for a moment, and then reality comes crashing back and the true test of bravery begins.

Jhan's feet hit the ground, her heels sliding out from under her and sending her sprawling. She gasped at the pain, but refused to let it slow her down. She rose, gathered her fallen clothing, and stumbled quickly away from Elmanan's house.

Jhan felt that running into the wilderness would be a fatal mistake. Blundering through the city, would be another one. There was only one place for Jhan to go and she was uncertain of her welcome there. She recalled her bitter words to Ahlen, but the memory of his reaction was less clear. How angry had she made him? Was he angry enough to refuse to help her? Perhaps he was even angry enough to turn her back over to Obahn. Jhan wished that she had another choice, but her odds seemed far more favorable turning to Ahlen for help.

Jhan limped into the cover of a row of stone and mortar houses. Children laughed and played in the snow to her right. Two women stood and talked on a back doorstep. A man was walking with head down and a bundle over one shoulder. Jhan watched him closely until he was out of sight.

Boldly stepping onto a sidewalk, Jhan hefted her bundle onto her shoulder. Copying the man as best she could, she entered the business section of the city with what she hoped was a mannish, swaggering confidence.

The sky chose that moment to drop its burden of snow. It was heavy, swirling in a blinding storm

that quickly covered every inch of the ground and made footing treacherous. It hid Jhan from any casual eyes, but also erased the few landmarks she remembered from her walk through town. All too soon, Jhan was stumbling and tired, leg aching with the beat of her heart and ill fitting clothes allowing too much of the cold to seep to her skin.

In the end, it was Ahlen himself who led Jhan to him. On the verge of banging on doorways and begging for help, Jhan was astonished to see a wide, wooden door slide back in front of her and a bright, yellow light pierce the snow storm. Ahlen leaned out, looked one way and then another idly, and then tossed some sort of animal outside. Looking like a cross between a furry iguana and monkey, the animal was startled and indignant, uttering a ferocious growl before it slunk off into the snow.

“Ahlen!” Jhan stepped forward as the man, unaware of her, began to close the door again.

Ahlen paused and squinted, trying to see who was there. “Sir?”

“Ahlen!” Jhan repeated desperately. Taking another step forward, she stopped uncertainly. “It’s Jhan.”

“Jhan?” Ahlen sounded bewildered, eyes trying to pick out her features as if he suspected some trick or a joke at his expense. “It is you!” he exclaimed at last. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m freezing to death!” Jhan snapped impatiently and pushed past him to enter the building. She was trying to cover up her trepidation and she didn’t turn to him for a moment, afraid to see that he *was* angry and ready to turn her out again because of it. Instead, she studied her surroundings, giving Ahlen time to adjust to this surprise.

She was in a large barn. With a wooden floor covered in hay, and wall to wall stalls, it was easily large enough to hold twenty imala. Almost every stall was full, and those that weren’t, had their occupants out in the back yard exercising in a corral. The entire building was shut tight from the weather and the animals made it very warm and comfortable, despite the strong odor of beasts. A coal stove added to the heat. “Checking on your baku?” Jhan wondered distantly.

“I’m staying here, actually,” Ahlen replied tentatively. “I’m their new stable boy.”

“And Ixien?”

“Sleeping back there,” Ahlen replied. Jhan didn’t turn to see where he was pointing. “He hasn’t stirred since we arrived, and I have the strange feeling that he won’t until spring thaw.”

Jhan pulled off her cap and let her hair fall down. She wiped at the cold snow melting on her face. “You were very lucky. We were told that getting lodgings in the city during the winter is nearly impossible.”

“I appeared at the right time,” Ahlen replied. “The old stable boy had succumbed to an illness only

lately and there are not many people who wish to have a job mucking out stables in the dead of winter.”

“I imagine there wouldn’t be.”

“Well,” Ahlen finally said impatiently. “Are you going to indulge in small talk for ever or are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Jhan turned to him at last. His honest face was disarming and she felt ready to weep. She crushed the hat in her hands and looked down at it. “I need your help.”

“We are not friends,” Ahlen’s voice wasn’t harsh. He was only repeating Jhan’s earlier words to make a point.

“No, we are not,” Jhan agreed, “but you did make a promise to me.”

“You threw it back in my face,” Ahlen reminded her. “I don’t see that I owe you anything after that.”

“No,” Jhan agreed again and gave a miserable sigh. Slowly, she began walking towards the door, not even certain what she intended to do next.

Ahlen closed the door with one great shove of his hand. It clanged against a metal latch and Jhan found herself staring at its rough, wooden surface. “I guess that I haven’t given you reason to think well of me, but you should at least know by now that I would *never* allow you to simply walk out of here and freeze to death!”

Jhan looked at him. Ahlen’s face was set hard and she could see that his shoulders were clenched with emotion. “I ran away from Obahn,” she admitted.

“I surmised that,” Ahlen replied, and then angrily, “What did they do to you this time? What horrible thing did they do that made you decide to save yourself at last?”

“They tried to make me into nothing.”

Ahlen blinked in confusion. His hand lowered from the door and he crossed his arms over his chest as if he were trying to hold himself still. “That was worse than being raped? Was it worse than being a pervert’s wife, or worse than having Obahn abuse you?”

“No,” Jhan replied, face going stiff as she tried not to weep, “but it felt the same as dying.”

Ahlen shook his head, teeth grinding together as he gazed about the barn as if looking for somewhere for Jhan to hide. “Sael will come looking for you,” he said at last. “You are his wife.”

“No,” Jhan countered quickly, “We were never consummated. We just pretended. Obahn knew it. He took me away from Sael. He wanted to give me to another man.”

“I knew it!” Ahlen seethed, as if long doubts and deep guilt had suddenly been put to rest. He looked relieved, but his mind was still full of insurmountable difficulties.

"I'll go," Jhan told him, though she still didn't have a plan. "I don't want to stay with you. If you'll just give me-," she stopped and swallowed, knowing she was asking a great deal. "I just need some help."

"Help to do what?" Ahlen wondered. He paced. "I don't think you know. Am I right? You plan to run into the teeth of winter and get yourself killed." He finally stopped before her. "I'm not asking you to beg for my help, Jhan. I'm not asking you to forget that you hate me. I'm not asking you to concede anything to me. Stop acting as if my help carries a price that you can't bear to pay."

"Everyone always wants something," Jhan countered bitterly.

Ahlen turned away from her and motioned to the stable. "This place is large enough to hide an army without much trouble. Stake out a space and make it yours for the winter. Keep hidden from the Master, but if he does see you, and discovers what you are, I'll have to pretend that you are my woman. I'll make sure you're fed and that you have what you need." Ahlen shrugged. "Think what you like about it. Come Spring, I'll be following Obahn to the Sun God. You can choose for yourself whether to follow or not."

Ahlen strode away, grabbing a pitchfork as he went and acting as if he didn't care what Jhan decided. She saw him stop at the end of the barn and begin mucking out a stall with determined concentration, but she felt that he was watching her covertly; waiting to see what she intended to do.

Jhan loosened the collar of her coat and sat down on a pile of hay. Her leg was unable to hold her up any longer and her bravery was deserting her. Sense whispered in her ear, telling her the obvious. As much as Jhan wanted to run as far and as fast from Obahn and his plans as she could, reality was inescapable. Her leg wouldn't get her a mile. The snow would probably stop her long before that. Without a clear plan of escape, and without any place in mind to escape to, there really wasn't any decision to make. Jhan was as much a prisoner of Ahlen again as she had ever been, held, not by chains, but by simple truths.

There was a room filled with tack. Without rising, Jhan simply flung her bundle of clothes into it, laying claim to that space and telling Ahlen, clearer than words, that she had lost and knew it.

"Are you hungry?"

Jhan started. Ahlen was standing close by, leaning on his pitchfork. She refused to look at him, sinking into bitter depression as she replied softly, "No, I had- They fed me. They did that much."

"And bathed you too," Ahlen noticed. "It is an improvement. The beasts stink enough without having a companion who stinks as well."

Jhan did stare at him then, incensed for a moment, and then defensive. "Are you going to tell me

how beautiful I am, now that I'm clean?"

"I don't think you want me to do that," Ahlen replied pensively and then straightened as he half turned away. "Besides, even clean, you are not the kind of woman I find beautiful, Jhan."

"Because of what I am?"

Ahlen snorted as if she had made a joke. "Not because of that, no."

"To some men, how I look wouldn't matter," Jhan told him. Her face was cold, but a deeper cold was settling in her stomach. If she was going to spend months with this man, a man newly awakened to what manhood could be, she felt that she had to be sure of him.

Ahlen seemed to be contemplating what job to start on next, but it was only a ruse to cover his discomfort. His hands were working on the rough wood of the pitchfork as if it could give him answers.

"I don't want to hurt you," Ahlen replied at last, speaking slowly and carefully, "but I know that you want reassurance from me. I can only give that to you by telling you the truth."

"What is the truth?" Jhan wondered.

"That..." Ahlen swallowed noticeable and his face turned red. He tried again. "When you were naked, standing by the frozen lake. When Obahn..." Ahlen stopped and tried once more. "Jhan, it doesn't matter that your hips curve like white moons or that your breasts are small and round. Having all the-the parts of a woman doesn't make me forget what you really are. It doesn't make me want you. When I look at you, I feel... When I saw Obahn grab you so crudely, I was disgusted. It seemed like perversion to me."

Ahlen stabbed the tines of the pitchfork into the wood of the floor at his feet as he continued. His voice lowered and his eyes flicking a short glance at Jhan's white face as he continued, "Sometimes, you seem monstrous to me. You're a strange creature. In my ignorance, I accepted you, thought of you as a woman, and treated you as a friend, but, now that I've discovered... I don't want to hurt you, but I would rather breed with one of the imala over there than bed you."

Jhan laughed. It caught not only Ahlen by surprise, but herself as well.

"I believe that, I really do," Jhan said at last. She wiped at a tear of mirth and sniffled a little. "For once, it feels good to be reviled. I feel safe with you, and that's something coming from me."

Ahlen wasn't pleased. His face was set darkly. "I've never heard you laugh, not truly laugh. Are you sincere in your words? I've hurt you enough. I want to help you."

Jhan sobered. "Even though you despise what I am?"

"I don't despise you," Ahlen replied strongly, looking at her fiercely. "Nothing that was done to you was your fault!"

Jhan was stunned. She sat with her mouth open, blue eyes wide as tears began pouring down her face. It was such a dramatic change of emotions that she felt her head pound painfully and her throat constrict.

“I’m sorry,” Ahlen muttered, as if angry at himself.

“No, don’t be,” Jhan choked on the words and then recovered with an effort, “not about that, anyway. You can’t imagine how long I’ve waited to hear someone, anyone, say those words to me. That it would be you, of all people... I don’t know what to think. I can’t forgive you, you know I can’t, Ahlen, but I have to-to thank you for that at least.”

Ahlen shook his head sharply, perplexed. “I don’t know why.”

Jhan found a smile for him, dredging it up from deep within her. “You’ve just treated me like a Human being, Ahlen. You can’t know what that means to me.”

Ahlen stared into her tear stained face, her haunted eyes, and nodded sharply, once. “I think I do.”

Nobody came looking for Jhan. At first, she thought that they might be scouring the countryside instead of looking in such an obvious place as the city. After a few days had passed, though, Jhan began to believe that her usefulness to Obahn hadn’t warranted the effort to find her and bring her back. Perhaps he had found another way of placating Elmanan.

Jhan used her time to rest. She kept mostly to herself in the tack room and to let her leg heal. When the constant ache of it turned into an intermittent, ghostly throb, she felt well enough to try and break up her sudden boredom by attempting to help Ahlen.

Ahlen worked diligently from sunup until sundown, either mucking out the stables or feeding the beasts the grain that created the conditions he was forced to clean up. Constantly in motion, the man went without a shirt, sweating even in the bone chill drafts that managed to seep through cracks in the barn. Hair tied in a pony tail and a rag tied around his forehead, his face had settled into a weary, grim expression.

Jhan found a stray strip of leather and tied her own hair back. Nervously, she approached Ahlen as he struggled to move a bale of hay over to a feeding bin. When she set a small, delicate hand to the cord that held the hay together, Ahlen started, turned to her, and glared as if he had forgotten that she

existed.

He had grown taller, Jhan noted, and he was looking down at her, a position that made her want to back up and reconsider. Ahlen saw her trepidation and his face smoothed out, eyes becoming kinder instantly.

“You surprised me,” Ahlen apologized. “I thought you were sleeping.”

Jhan pulled her hand back and clenched it uncertainly. “I need something to do. I can’t sleep through the entire winter like Ixien.”

Ixien had made a nest in a loft and Jhan hadn’t seen him since her arrival.

Ahlen considered her request. “I do need help,” he admitted with a sigh, but his eyes were dismissive of her as the solution.

“There must be something...” Jhan persisted.

“I can’t have you exercising the beasts,” Ahlen replied, trying to make her see reason. “Going in and out of the cold, trying to handle unknown beasts, you might either get trampled or become ill.”

Ahlen’s eyes flicked up and down Jhan’s slight frame. “You can’t lift feed bags or hay bales. You can’t -”

Jhan cut him off. “I can curry the beasts, polish the tack, and shovel manure just as well as you can!”

That teased a smile out of Ahlen. “Now, manure is definitely something I could use help with.”

Jhan went sour. “I was hoping that you hadn’t heard that part.”

“Too late! Grab a shovel, Jhan Dor!” Ahlen chuckled now, as if he were getting some sort of sweet revenge.

Jhan did pick up a shovel, but she stood, reluctant and at a loss as to where to start. Ahlen was watching her. She prickled under his regard. Maybe he was wondering if she thought herself too good for that sort of work. Jhan had been a princess, after all. To show him otherwise, she started towards a particularly reeking stall.

Ahlen reached out a tentative hand, but he closed it on her shovel handle instead of her arm. Jhan stopped, staring at him curiously. “I’ve had a thought,” he said as he took the shovel out of Jhan’s hand.

“That’s something new,” Jhan replied, but her attempt at humor rang hollow. There was simply too much between them to allow casual jokes.

Ahlen winced, as if she’d hit him, but he went on determinedly, “We are going to be locked in this barn for days at a time. The master says that the snows fall deep.”

“I know that,” Jhan retorted impatiently. “That’s why I’m not running through the countryside

right now.”

Ahlen leaned on the shovel, as if he needed that support. He scowled down at the hay strewn floor. “This isn’t easy for me. What I want to ask, is whether you think you can train me to fight as you do.”

“As I don’t, you mean?” Jhan snapped back.

“As you can, if you weren’t so careful of everyone’s life but your own.”

Jhan tried to keep a tight rein on her temper, but she could feel her face flushing. “Is there someone you want to kill?”

“Kill?” Ahlen started and looked at her intensely. “No! I only- Jhan, I was raised by hard headed farmers who live precarious lives on the side of mountain! We don’t fight. We don’t have the energy or the time. Here, in this place, I do have time. I am threatened. You have a skill I need.”

“Is this because of Zerain?” Jhan wondered. “Do you intend to kill Obahn and claim her as your wife?”

It was Ahlen’s turn to flush. His jaw knotted and released. “It’s the child,” he replied at last, small and quiet. “I want to protect the child. It might be mine.”

Jhan felt sorrow knot up her insides. “You can’t learn what I do,” she told him. “Your body isn’t like mine.”

“A man taught you,” Ahlen insisted, “Someone like me. I don’t expect to be a master. I only need enough skill to save my life.”

Jhan shook her head, the sorrow overwhelming her. “It’s a weapon,” she told him. “Once you learn it, you will use it. You will kill someone with it. Having that kind of skill... it doesn’t allow you to stand aside or avoid confrontations. It makes you responsible for anyone weaker than yourself, whether you want to be responsible or not.”

Ahlen replied bitterly. “I am already responsible, Jhan.”

“You’ve already killed a man,” Jhan reminded him. “If I teach you, there will be more deaths at your hands. They haunt you Ahlen. They never stop haunting you.”

Ahlen opened his mouth, perhaps to ask how many men Jhan had killed, but then seemed to decide against it. He swallowed hard and then his face expression became determined. “Show me,” he demanded.

Jhan ignored her leg, ignored her unwillingness, and ignored a voice that screamed down inside of her in panic, as she suddenly hit the handle of Ahlen’s shovel with her heel. It snapped cleanly. Denied his support, Ahlen fell flat onto the floor with a shocked expression.

Jhan’s own expression was haunted, eyes large wells of blue as she stared down at Ahlen and

remembered horrors. “I could have gone straight through your stomach and snapped your spine just as easily. Are you sure that’s what you want to learn?”

Ahlen sat up and stared at the two ends of the shovel handle. “You were so fast,” he said in amazement. “You could have killed Obahn, Sael, and me easily... I don’t understand.”

“Did you find it so easy to kill?” Jhan wondered acidly.

Ahlen slowly placed the two pieces of wood together in his hands and gripped them so tightly that his knuckles turned white. “No,” he admitted.

“Sael and Obahn are warriors,” Jhan told him. “Even if I had been cold blooded enough to try and murder them, it wouldn’t have been easy. There was never a guarantee that I would survive it.”

Ahlen stood stiffly, looking at her at last. “You must know some moves that won’t kill? I remember that hold that you used on my throat... I couldn’t move. I could learn that.”

“A man in Pekarín taught me that move and a few others,” Jhan replied distantly, thinking of gruff General Vek and his endless patience.

Ahlen asked, “Please teach me what this man taught you, Jhan, and nothing else. It will be enough for me.”

Jhan nodded and then glanced about the barn distractedly, trying to shake off the dark memories that threatened to crawl out of the depths of her psyche. “Now?” she wondered finally.

Ahlen stared down at the shattered shovel ruefully. “No, not now. I have to fix this before the master sees it.”

Jhan found that she was out of shape. Her body had developed muscles for enduring on the back of baku, for striving against the elements, and for simply sleeping on hard, frozen earth, but her skill itself demanded much more of her.

A month slipped by. Jhan spent it regaining her flexibility; discovering in the meantime that her persistent dizziness had gone away at last and that the exercise helped her to lose the last of the bone ache. It felt good to sweat and to press herself to her limits, as long as she didn’t think too hard about how much learning her skill had cost her.

As for training Ahlen, he could only endure for an hour at first, before collapsing in exhaustion, and then for only two hours, at the most, after his body became accustomed to the exertion. He wasn’t a

good pupil either. Jhan struggled to find a way to teach the clumsy, overgrown boy. He could never seem to find his balance, and he hurt himself because of it more than once.

“It’s a dance,” Jhan said to him in exasperation and then bit her lip hard when she remembered that it had been Dagara Ku Ni who had told her that. It was a long moment before she could go on. “You have to think of music and flow with it. Stay on your toes. Keep your body loose and light.”

Ahlen shook his head as he wiped a rag across his sweating brow. The exercises Jhan had put him through had deepened his chest and broadened his shoulders, but he still had that look of a boy about to sprout inches unexpectedly.

“Enough for today,” Ahlen sighed and shrugged into his leather jacket. “I still have to exercise that striped baku. The master will have my hide if I don’t. It’s his wife’s cart beast. He told me she’ll need it tomorrow.”

Jhan had never seen *the master*. She kept mostly to her tack room and the man liked to shout orders to Ahlen through the doorway of the barn, rather than soiling himself by coming in. The wife had been more evident. She was the one who brought their meals. She proved kind. When Ahlen had begged that Jhan be allowed to stay, the woman had felt sorry for them. She had given them more food, though she had acted as if her husband might not approve. She had also been kind enough to supply them with several more blankets and an old pair of shoes that were far warmer and more practical than Jhan’s own.

The master’s wife was the only face that Jhan saw beside Ahlen’s that entire month. It would have been hard to endure under any other situation, but Jhan had sorely needed the time to recover both emotionally and physically. Unfortunately, as the days wore on and the snow kept falling, her contentment began to vanish. As Ahlen’s proficiency grew and he began to practice more and more by himself, Jhan found herself alone far too much with her own thoughts. Little by little, those thoughts turned inward and became dark. In the gray, bleak winter, her depression grew.

“Hello!”

In the tack room, Jhan flinched. She had been polishing a saddle. Her fingers gripped it nervously as she rose and peered out of the doorway. She was in time to see Ahlen shyly approach an older woman in a riding habit.

“Lady,” Ahlen said respectfully.

The woman was tall and straight backed, though her hair, tied in long, numerous braids, was iron gray and her face was lined with age. Her eyes were dark and piercing and obviously amused as they swept up and down Ahlen’s body appreciatively. Her air of authority gave the impression that she was

used to being in command of any situation.

“I need an imala for the evening,” the woman ordered briskly. “I’ve already spoken to your master.”

Ahlen was astonished and uncertain. “The weather isn’t good, lady. It wouldn’t be wise to travel, now.”

“I know the way well and it isn’t far.” The woman was curt with him, as if Ahlen were a naughty boy. “Do as I say.”

Ahlen reluctantly obeyed, saddling a gentle white imala with a black patch of color over one eye.

The woman watched Ahlen with a small smile. Dressed in the same lace collar as every other man and woman in Bairkun, and strapped into a corset as well, she didn’t seem to possess any of her fellow citizen’s demure attitudes. Her eyes were bold and lustful, Jhan realized in surprise.

“Perhaps you are right about the danger,” the woman said as Ahlen turned to her with the reins of the imala in his hand. “I think you had best escort me to my destination.”

“But,” Ahlen flicked a glance toward where Jhan lay hidden, but his concern was only an instant’s worth as the lady reached out and touched his arm. She ran her fingers along it and then touched his bare cheek. “My master-”

“Will approve,” the woman assured him. “I am high in his regard, never fear. What is your name?”

“Ahlen.” He sounded dazed.

“Ahlen,” the woman repeated with a smile. “I am Saleoch. Get yourself a beast and we will be on our way.”

Ahlen nodded shakily, wiped his hands on his pants as if he were sweating, and quickly saddled the striped imala of the master’s wife without thought or consideration.

“Good,” Saleoch purred. “Come, Ahlen. I don’t wish to be late.”

Jhan watched them go, leaning around the door frame of the tack room and craning her neck until they opened the door and then closed it behind them. Then she retreated and began polishing the saddle in her hands again. She had a feeling that the lady was going to make Ahlen very uncomfortable on his ride.

Voices woke Jhan late into the night. She stirred from her straw bed and slowly peered out of the tack room door. She saw Ahlen leading the two imala into the barn. Tying them to a post, he began to pull off their saddles. Saleoch hadn't followed him inside.

"She kept you late," Jhan couldn't help saying in reproof.

Ahlen turned and blinked at her as if he were half asleep. Even his smile was slow and dazed. "It was for a good reason."

Jhan tentatively came out of the tack room and went to take off the bridles of the beasts. She held them tensely in her hands, searching Ahlen's face quizzically. The obvious was simply too unbelievable. Jhan fished for another explanation. "So, she didn't simply want to go riding in the snow. Where did you go?"

Ahlen ran the tip of his tongue briefly over his lips as if tasting something sweet. "We went to a temple, not far from here. She's a priestess."

"A temple? Why isn't it in the city?" Jhan wondered.

"It's--" Ahlen was distracted for a moment, as if getting lost in the memory, and then he shook himself and replied, "They worship a bird. The temple was built where it lives in the forest."

"What did you do there?"

Ahlen shook his head, his lips curving in a languid smile. "I won't speak of that. That's a *man's* business." He seemed proud to give himself that distinction.

Jhan felt disgusted with herself for wanting to know more. Had she become so bored that she needed to know things like that? Ahlen had probably met some other, younger priestess, or devotee, who had been more than willing to appreciate Ahlen's new status as a man. In all events, it wasn't her business and it wasn't something that she ever wanted to make her business.

Ahlen dropped the saddles suddenly, his strength seeming to give out. He heaved a heavy sigh and ran a distracted hand through his hair. "She gave me a few coins for my trouble," he mumbled.

"Who?" Jhan winced, startled out of the question, but then determined not to ask another one.

"Lady Saleoch," Ahlen replied easily enough. "Come with me to the inn tomorrow and I'll buy you good drink and food with the money. I want to celebrate my good fortune."

Jhan bit her lip and only narrowed her eyes in disgust.

Ahlen staggered towards the corner of the barn where he had made his bed in the straw. "I would take you tonight, but I'm too tired. Far too tired," he mumbled.

Jhan watched Ahlen collapse into the hay. The imala grumbled irritably. Jhan blinked, shook herself, and then turned to lead them to their stalls where she wearily brushed and rubbed off the

weather from their hides. Finished with that, she dragged the tack into her room and put them where she could work on them in the morning.

Falling once more into her makeshift bed, Jhan thought about Ahlen's escapade despite her determination not to. That gleam in the old woman's eye... Her easy acceptance of her own sexuality... It made Jhan consider her own state sourly. She knew that she would never feel like that woman. Dagara Ku Ni had cut that out of her along with her trust in men.

Jhan sank deeper into depression. Forced to spend her life as a counterfeit woman, little better than a eunuch, the feeling of *need* was always going to be denied her. Love had always been enough with Kile, but, just once, she wished that she could have met his fire with some of her own.

Jhan fell into an uneasy sleep. Towards dawn she awoke with a start and found herself full of sweat and aching as if she were ill. She had been dreaming of bodies making love in a tumble of black, silken sheets.

Disturbed, and unaccountably angry, Jhan paced the barn to shake off the last of the dream and to cool off. The drafts chilled her skin and she shivered after only a few moments. Seeing that Ahlen was still asleep, Jhan undressed. There was a bucket of water near the coal stove to keep it warm and free of ice. Jhan dipped a rag into it and then used it to wash herself. The warmth and gentle rubbing motions of the cloth against her skin relaxed her. The dream faded away and was forgotten.

Wrapping a blanket around her, Jhan retreated back to the comfort of the tack room. She dressed again and then curled up on her bed, trying to decide whether to sleep once more.

The anger didn't go away. Jhan wrestled with it. It was wrapped with a strange longing and an unsatisfied need she couldn't identify. Unlike the dream, it refused to be put aside and forgotten.

It hit Jhan then, like a brick, and she flinched as she tried to deny it to herself. She was jealous! Not because Ahlen had decided to have a woman, but that he could. While she was forced to live her life of a captive, unable to do anything or go anywhere, Ahlen, the one who had caused it all, was busily leading a life independent of his quest or his crime. He was enjoying himself! It was intolerable.

Jhan wondered how she could face Ahlen when he woke up.

In the end, she didn't have to. She fell asleep at last and, when she did wake up, breakfast was nearby, cold, and Ahlen was outside shoveling snow out of the corral. He whistled a light tune, loud and happy. It soured Jhan's mood even more.

Jhan finished her duties in the early afternoon and Ahlen completed his only a little later. He didn't insist on lessons then, nor did he practice the skills Jhan had taught him. Instead, he bathed carefully with a rag and the bucket of warmed water and then put on clean clothes. When he looked around for

Jhan at last, she was staring back at him with a glare.

“Expecting company again tonight?” Jhan wondered darkly.

“No,” Ahlen replied and had a momentary bout with embarrassment. He recovered, smiling as he tried to engage Jhan in his mood. “I want to take you out of here, at least for a few hours, for some food and good drink.”

“No,” Jhan replied without thinking.

Ahlen was patient. “I’m not going to ask you why not. I already know all the answers.”

Jhan hardly knew how to reply to that. Finally, she grunted, “Good.”

“But, you’re going anyway,” Ahlen persisted. “There is an inn down the street with a good tavern,” Ahlen explained. “Lady Saleoch spoke of it to me. She said that a man could relax there without any trouble.”

“You were talking about inns last night,” Jhan said, suspiciously. “Is that where you really went?”

Ahlen was embarrassed again. “I already told you, we went to a temple. Saleoch asked me if I was lonely. I told her that I longed for company once in awhile.” Ahlen gave Jhan a look that was critical, but she pretended not to see it.

“Why should I go with you?” Jhan demanded.

“You don’t have to go with me,” Ahlen corrected, “but we can both go to the inn. I would like some strong drink and something other than the fried meat and roots the master’s wife gives us.”

Jhan was sarcastic now, wanting Ahlen to get angry enough to leave her alone. “Should I dress for the occasion?” she mocked. “Should I put on my ribbons and lace?”

Ahlen seemed to chew on the inside of his mouth for a long moment, simply glaring at her, but then he managed to keep his patience, saying in a reasonable tone, “I think we both know it would be better for you to dress as a man.” He added, “I don’t think the master’s wife would give your dress back to you anyway.”

The master’s wife had been very kind. Jhan had given her the expensive dress that Lord Elmanan had given to her. The woman had almost fainted in appreciation and hadn’t asked Jhan how a stable boy had come by such an expensive thing. Though it was too small for her to wear it herself, Jhan guessed that the master’s wife would probably cannibalize it for other dresses.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jhan insisted and turned her back on Ahlen, crossing her arms.

“You’re going to stay in here for three months?” Ahlen was pacing now, hands working in agitation. “I know you like to be alone, but-”

“I don’t like to be alone!” Jhan shouted back.

Jhan began to back to the tack room, intending to end the conversation herself. She found herself confronting Ahlen's chest. He had stepped in front of her.

"I won't let anyone hurt you," Ahlen promised, cutting to the heart of the matter. "I think, after what you've taught me, that I can manage to make people respect me enough to leave us both alone."

"Why bother?" Jhan demanded, glaring up at him as she walked around him into the tack room.

"Because, despite what you think, I am a good man," Ahlen replied seriously.

Jhan replied in the only way she could. She closed the door to the tack room in his face.

There was silence as Jhan sat down on her bed, tense, but determined not to allow Ahlen to make their relationship anything other than what it was; complete enmity.

Ahlen sighed heavily on the other side of the door and Jhan heard something, maybe his hands pushing on the wood as if he were forcing himself away. "All right," he said, loudly, "Maybe you need a few more weeks to stew in here. We'll try this again then. I will be back in a few hours. You might brush down that striped imala, and put medicine on that spotted baku, while I'm gone."

Jhan didn't reply. She heard his footsteps after a moment, punctuated by a frustrated growl. She waited several minutes before she opened the door again and peered out. She was alone. It bit deeper than she had expected.

CHAPTER TWO

(Ghost Light)

Ahlen was sitting listlessly on a barrel, the door of the barn cracked to allow him to stare outside. The streets were silent, the hour late, and there was nothing to see but the closed store fronts and the drifting snow.

Two weeks had passed since his first meeting with Lady Saleoch. She had come almost every night after that, taking out an imala and asking Ahlen to accompany her. At first, he had been happy and content, but lately he had begun to look worn and thin, his eyes red and his mouth set in a line of inner suffering. He stopped going to the inn and his work in the barn, little by little, was beginning to be left undone.

Jhan tried to pick up the slack, at first, but she was too small to accomplish some of the tasks Ahlen was neglecting. Sooner or later, the master was going to notice. Jhan didn't relish being thrown out into the snow. It spurred her, at last, to try and talk to Ahlen.

The cold was pouring in through the open door. Jhan hunched into her coat and stood facing Ahlen. She glared into Ahlen's bewildered eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" Jhan demanded.

Ahlen's hands worked helplessly in his lap for a moment and then he sank into himself as he lifted his eyes to stare past Jhan's shoulder. "She didn't come."

"Saleoch?"

"Yes!" Ahlen became anguished now, cheeks sucking in as if against a sharp pain. "Why didn't she come?"

Jhan frowned. "How should I know? Maybe she's tired of you having sex with her priestesses."

Ahlen blinked stupidly. "No!"

"No, what?"

"There isn't anyone else there. It's her!" Ahlen moaned under his breath and hugged himself, hunching over his arms. "Can't you see that she's beautiful? She makes my blood burn when she's near! She makes me cold and weak when she's gone!"

"Ahlen!" Jhan exploded, furious at his strange behavior. She bit her lip to calm herself. In a softer voice she asked, "Are we speaking of the same old woman who comes here to ride an imala to her temple?"

“Yes!” It came out like a tormented growl from Ahlen’s chest.

“You’re-,” Jhan shook her head and half turned to look out of the door. The cold was penetrating everything that she was wearing. “What’s wrong with you?” she wondered again, but she didn’t expect to get anything coherent out of Ahlen.

Someone was walking far down the street. Jhan blinked and narrowed her eyes, but there was too much snow falling to make out much. She knew that she was too visible with the light of the barn shining on her. She stepped behind its wall and faced Ahlen again. He looked even worse than a moment before.

“I think you’re sick,” Jhan finally concluded, not having anything else to explain Ahlen’s confusion. “I think, riding out every night and then drinking with those men at the tavern-”

“Wasn’t drinking,” Ahlen contradicted with weak indignation. “Talking. We just talked, which is more than *we* ever do!”

“They must not be curing your feeling of loneliness,” Jhan shot back waspishly, “if you’re desperate enough to have sex with someone old enough to be your grandmother!”

That was blunt and Ahlen frowned. He still continued to stare past Jhan, but she could tell that he was thinking about her words. He tried to dismiss her by insulting her. “She isn’t old!” he protested. “Her skin is as soft as baby’s. Her face is sweet. Her body is like a young woman’s. You’re just a gelded- You don’t care about such things. You can’t!”

Jhan stepped closer to Ahlen. She raised a nervous hand and touched his forehead. He was very warm. She could ignore his words. She didn’t care what he thought and she’d heard it too many times already.

Ahlen flinched away from her touch. “Don’t touch me you-you little pervert! *Is* that what you want? Are you like Sael after all?”

Jhan balled her hands into fists as she stepped back. “You’re sick in more ways than one, Ahlen. How did Sael get into this conversation?”

“You’re two of a kind!” Ahlen stood up, staggered as if he were going to faint, and then regained his balance like an unsteady colt. “The more I am with women, the more I can see what disgusting-”

“I’ve heard enough of that, Ahlen!” Jhan shouted back with a scowl. She watched Ahlen walk unsteadily to the door that led to the corral. He began to open that as well. “Do you intend to freeze us to death along with the animals?” Jhan demanded.

“Have to watch for her,” Ahlen mumbled.

Jhan stepped away from the front door and followed him. “Ahlen, I don’t care that you’re so sick

that you're imagining a thin old woman is beautiful, but I do care that you're beginning to be too sick to do your duties in the barn. If the master sees, he'll throw us both out! I think you should try and rest. Maybe the master's wife has some herbs that you can take--"

"Saleoch!"

The woman swept into the barn and brushed past Ahlen as if he were invisible. She had noticed Jhan at once and it was to her that she strode, her riding boots chiming with spurs. With hands on hips, and back straight, she stared down her nose at Jhan in a clear challenge. "Who is this?" she demanded.

Ahlen rushed to Saleoch's side, hands working as if to put out a fire. "Nobody, Saleoch! Jhan is taking shelter here, just like me."

"Jhan," Saleoch echoed and her mouth went sour. "Such a tender, young thing you are, but *what* exactly are you?"

The woman's eyes were an earthy brown, but they seemed to glow with the force of her irritation. Jhan met them angrily. "Ahlen's right. I'm nobody," she replied steadily.

Saleoch wasn't satisfied. She had a bag and a leather flask hanging from one shoulder. She fiddled with the straps without taking her eyes off of Jhan. "You are dressed as a boy, but you don't have a boy's face," she noticed. "Are you some pleasure house creature from the East, or are you one of those half-men the Northerners like to keep?" Her eyes seemed to bore into Jhan's as she purposefully goaded Jhan to anger. "Are you worse yet, some woman run from her proper place and living as some shameless--"

"I don't need to listen to this!" Jhan lashed out. "Why don't you just take Ahlen and go?"

"Because, he must not be brought before my god sullied by such as you!"

Jhan's mouth opened and then closed with a snap. She looked to Ahlen for some reaction, but he was staring at Saleoch with dazed eagerness. He was acting as if he hadn't heard a word either of them had said.

"What sort of god do you have?" Jhan wondered, fishing for an appropriate insult. "Doesn't he care that you're having sex with Ahlen in his temple?"

"Lodi is a god of fertility," Saleoch replied in a quiet, dangerous tone that made the hairs on the back of Jhan's neck stand up in warning. "Ahlen has given himself willingly in the rites with me."

"Willingly?" Jhan looked at Ahlen again. The man was tugging like a little boy at Saleoch's clothes, wanting to be noticed. Saleoch pulled her sleeve away from him impatiently. "I think Ahlen's too sick to have much will about anything."

"He is not sick," Saleoch corrected Jhan as she took a step towards her. "He is simply weary. The

rites are long and...arduous."

"I bet they are," Jhan muttered.

"You mustn't interfere." Again that warning tone was in Saleoch's voice.

"I'm not going to," Jhan growled. "He can do whatever he wants."

Saleoch moved even closer. Jhan smelled an odd cinnamon scent on her. It burned Jhan's nose and she rubbed at it absently. Saleoch *was* beautiful, she decided after a moment. Her bones were fine and strong and her bosom, under her lace collar, was full and enticing. Jhan had a bizarre urge to pull that lace aside and too look closer.

Preoccupied, Jhan hadn't noticed Saleoch step right in front of her. Her neck was pale and creamy above her lace. The cinnamon scent grew stronger. Saleoch touched Jhan's hand. Jhan trembled, looking up into Saleoch's eyes as a hot flush gathered in her belly.

"What are you?" Saleoch wondered in a voice that purred like a cat, throaty and vibrating. "You feel it don't you? Women shouldn't feel that, ever. It doesn't work on us."

Saleoch leaned way down and her lips were close enough to kiss. Jhan saw their full richness. Even the age lines at their corners brought beauty to their gentle curve. Jhan wanted to seize them with her own. She wanted to touch them with her fingers. The heat in Jhan's belly grew to pain and she let out a long, agonized breath that was almost a groan.

A hand touched Jhan's pants. She thought she would faint. When it slid inside, cold and soft, and felt her, Jhan could barely keep on standing as her knees turned to water. The hand withdrew, like torture. Saleoch was puzzled.

"You seem a woman. I can't understand it." Saleoch seemed to consider the problem as Jhan slowly began to reach a hand out for her, to bring her back. Saleoch avoided her and stepped aside. Ahlen was beside himself, shifting from foot to foot and moaning like a wounded animal as he watched them.

"I can't take the chance," Saleoch said at last. "I must purify Ahlen again just in case you have enjoyed his favors. Tomorrow night will be soon enough to complete the right."

Saleoch took off her leather flask. She placed it into Jhan's dazed hands. Small and light, Jhan hardly noticed that she held it. "Drink it," Saleoch ordered. "I will make more for Ahlen tomorrow and complete the right." When Jhan didn't move, she insisted. "Come! Drink! It's all that you deserve for disturbing such an important ceremony."

Jhan unstopped the flask as if she were a puppet. She found that she couldn't disobey Saleoch and worse, that she couldn't think of a reason to disobey her. She took three swallows under Saleoch's

watchful eyes. It tasted like bad wine; vinegar and fruit.

Saleoch took the flask away, stoppered it, and then handed it back to Jhan. “Drink more later, if you’re still alive,” Saleoch instructed her.

“I-,” Jhan held out a hand to her once more, wanting desperately to touch her skin.

The woman smiled at her with a sneer. “The women of Bairkun won’t be blessed with children if I spend my time doing the rites of Lodi with you!”

Jhan wanted to weep. She watched Saleoch order Ahlen to saddle the imala, and then stared after them as they rode out into the snow. She didn’t know how long she stood there before she began to come back to her senses, the smell of cinnamon drifting out of the barn with a chill breeze.

“Are you a fool? You will die of the cold and the animals with you!” That was Sael’s voice, clipped and angry.

Jhan heard the door of the barn slide shut with a clang of metal and then became aware of Sael striding past her in his black coat as he went to shut the back door as well. When he faced her, he seemed completely alien. His red scarf hiding his lower face, black braid and shaggy hair, and his black gloves and ornate sword were out of place; barbaric in that normal space.

It was hard for Jhan to think. She blinked at him, frowning, as she clutched the wine flask in her hands. He noticed it and pulled it away from her. Unstopping it, he took a quick sniff, made a face, and then closed it decisively.

“So, you’ve become a drunk now?”

“I’m not drunk,” Jhan finally gathered her thoughts together enough to reply. “I-I wasn’t drinking. I don’t even know what that is.”

“Bad wine,” Sael replied shortly. He paced as if he were looking for something to fight. “Where’s Ahlen?”

Jhan shrugged and went to sit in a pile of hay. “Don’t know. Or, I do, but I don’t care.”

“Has he claimed you again?” Sael demanded. He stopped pacing and confronted Jhan. His gloved hands flexed.

Jhan stared at them, feeling that they were about to grab and shake her if she didn’t begin to make sense. “Claimed me?”

“Had you! Keshuned with you! How do you say it, *jumped you*! What else is there to do in this forsaken, snow bound, city?”

Jhan thought of Saleoch. She shivered. It was like a dream, fading and slipping out of the fingers of memory. Jhan struggled to capture the feeling; the *need*. She had wanted Saleoch! She remembered

that much!

Like a dash of cold water, Jhan tried to stand up, shocked to the bone. Her legs refused her. She put her hands to her face and clutched at her skin with her nails. Sael thought that it was a sign that he was right.

“It seems that I will have to wait for his return then.” Sael settled onto a bale of hay near Jhan. He fingered the hilt of his sword. “I will have to challenge him. I imagine the fight will take all of a heartbeat and then *you* shall be coming with me back to Lord Elmanan’s house!”

“Why?” Jhan was speaking to herself, mind searching frantically for a comforting explanation and finding none. Something inside of her longed to smell Saleoch’s scent of cinnamon.

Sael thought that Jhan was speaking to him. His eyes narrowed as if she were daring a great deal. “I intend to take you before Obahn and make you my wife. Once he has witnessed it, he will not be able to refuse to have you with us.”

The implications of that statement were lost on Jhan. She hardly heard him. Her body had suddenly become a stranger. Had Selaya’s healing touched on the parts of her that had been Jhanian Kevelt, a man? Had Selaya restarted the hormones and the processes that Dagara Ku Ni had burned out of Jhan to keep her as he had made her? The thought was terrifying. To react to women as she had so longed to react to Kile... No, Jhan thought, she couldn’t bear it.

“Have you heard anything I’ve said?” Sael wondered sharply

Jhan’s eyes met Sael’s at last. “I’m not going anywhere,” she replied in a harsh whisper.

Sael frowned at Jhan’s pained and frightened expression. “Has he hurt you?”

“You’ve hurt me,” Jhan replied. “I think you’re about to hurt me again.”

Sael lost some of his determination then, but not enough of it. “You don’t have any say in the matter. I will make you my wife. I can do it, even in front of Obahn.”

Jhan heard him then, and she flinched, feeling an almost uncontrollable urge to run. “Why now? What’s happened?”

“I’ve found you; is what happened,” Sael replied angrily. “I saw you from the street, standing in the doorway. Obahn sent me out....”

Sael swallowed and looked away.

“For what?” Jhan prodded him. “What would Obahn need that Elmanan couldn’t give him?”

“You shamed him,” was Sael’s hot reply. “After you ran away, Obahn was left to make peace with Elmanan.”

“He didn’t throw you out?”

“No.” Sael swallowed again, but he wasn’t ready to reveal anything to Jhan.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Jhan persisted.

“You must!”

“Or you will do what?” Jhan wondered. “You’re alone. Obahn doesn’t know where you are, does he? I think I can take care of you without much trouble.”

Sael drew his sword, lightning quick, and put the point of the blade squarely on Jhan’s jugular. She could see sweat on his forehead, despite the cold of the barn, and the small tremor of his hand on the sword hilt. The tip pressed inward and Jhan felt a prick. She sat, without moving, but her eyes went flat.

“Will you argue with sharp steel?” Sael demanded.

“Tell me why,” Jhan asked in a voice as flat as her eyes. “Give me that much. If you’re going to rape me in front of Obahn, at least tell me why.”

In his black clothes, and with his dark hair, Sael looked like a shadow of death, but his eyes betrayed his humanity. They were mortified. “Lord Elmanan is intrigued by me,” he said in disgust. “Obahn permits it. I am playing the part I asked of you when we first arrived there. I am the one that must lead him on, hoping that he never goes farther!”

The sword trembled, “Last night, he put his hands on me,” Sael admitted. “It was dishonorable. Obahn was angry. He told me to end it. He said that we were so entrenched now in Elmanan’s hospitality, that he couldn’t dislodge us no matter what happened. He told me- he told me to get a woman. He said that Elmanan would leave me alone if he thought that I wasn’t Ekhal.”

“So, you were out looking for a woman,” Jhan laughed, short, sharp and mocking, “but you found me instead. What will Obahn say when you bring me back with you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sael told her. “I must have you. I have already told you why.”

“Because you can’t keshun with women,” Jhan said, but her look was pure acid. “As I recall, you couldn’t with me either.”

The point of the blade twitched as Sael took an angry breath. Jhan felt a trickle of blood start a lazy trail down her throat. Her eyes didn’t waver as she stared down the length of that blade into Sael’s eyes, daring him.

It was as if a dark veil suddenly dropped over Jhan’s head. She blinked, blinked again, until she realized that the darkness was in her own eyes. She heard a rush. It seemed to come from behind her, but then it centered itself between her eyes. It was a pounding force, an irregular beat that suddenly became piercing pain.

Jhan sobbed out a cry as she brought her hands up to her face, pressing her fingers into the pain between her eyes. She felt the blade slice along her skin before Sael twitched it aside. More blood trickled. The pain bloomed. It radiated outward to engulf Jhan's head. Her sob became a hiccupping wail, but distant to her own ears, as if some demented animal was dying close by.

Sael's face, half hidden by the darkness in Jhan's eyes, hovered before her. Jhan felt herself melting into the hay even as Sael caught her and helped her lie down. Her body was limp, disconnected from her brain. Sael's hands were on her, loosening her jacket, trying to see what was wrong with her. Jhan had one last look at Sael's confused, anxious face before she was sucked down into the pain, her brain seeming to explode in a shower of lights.

"Be still," Sael warned. "You've had some sort of fit. Drink some of your wine. It will help you wake up."

Jhan felt her head lifted and the spout of the flask put to her lips. The wine bit her tongue and slid down her throat, making her choke and splutter. She managed a swallow, before turning her head away.

There was noise, soft exclamations of surprise. Jhan opened her eyes and saw Ahlen and Saleoch come into the barn. Whatever they had done hadn't taken long. Jhan tried to sit up, rocked momentarily, and then collapsed back into the hay as her head grated with pain. Saleoch saw the movement and her face was unpleasant.

"Ahlen Kantori," Sael strode purposefully towards them, hand drawing his sword. "I challenge you for Jhan Dor. Put this other woman of yours aside and meet me like a man."

Ahlen drew himself up and tried to block Sael from approaching Saleoch. He was still dazed and ill looking, but he moved with a dangerous spring to his step. His stance was almost like an animal guarding a mate from a rival.

It wasn't lost on Sael. He halted, surveying the situation. "It isn't her I want!" Sael spoke loudly. "Go aside, woman!" he commanded Saleoch.

It came dimly to Jhan that Sael didn't know of Ahlen's new skills. She saw Ahlen sink into a fighting stance, preparing himself. Jhan wanted to call out, whether in warning or just to put an end to it all, she didn't know. Her voice refused to obey her. Her muscles were shaking and just as unresponsive. In the end, she could only watch.

It was Saleoch who finally moved to do something. "Enough!" she barked. She stepped between Sael and Ahlen. "In all of my years as priestess, I have never been in such a situation! There was to be only one stable hand, not two and an angry rival! The rites can't be completed! I must begin again with a new sacrifice!"

“Quiet woman!” Sael retorted and began stepping forward as if to shove her out of his way.

Saleoch drew a small bottle out of a bag hanging from her arm. She pulled out a cork with an exasperated air. “I have to get rid of all of you! This would be scandalous to my sect if you spoke of this to anyone. Our rites are secret and hallowed.”

With quick flicks of her wrist, Saleoch shook the bottle she held at Sael and then turned to do the same to Ahlen. Stepping quickly around Sael, she strode to Jhan.

“This is your fault,” Saleoch declared, whitely furious. “You’ll bear the brunt of the punishment. In the old days, that punishment would have been much worse... much worse. As it is, you’ll be sorry the drug in that wine didn’t kill you.”

Saleoch emptied the rest of the bottle all over Jhan.

Jhan felt warm flecks of cinnamon scent splatter over her face, her clothes, and her breast that Sael had bared to check her heart. That scent instantly engulfed Jhan’s senses, kindling a fire in her belly once more and an overpowering need to reach out and bring Saleoch to her.

Saleoch avoided Jhan’s grasping hand expertly. She stepped back, surveyed the barn, and then quietly strode out, leaving the door open to the street and the snow.

Jhan needed to go after Saleoch. She managed to sit up, but her body felt like a dead weight. Jhan groaned in frustration as she tried, and failed, to get to her feet.

There was a fight. Jhan saw Sael and Ahlen ripping at each other’s clothes, panting with effort and eyes wild. They looked as if they were about to rend, not just their clothing, but each other limb from limb. When they fell to the floor, Ahlen was on top, strong hands holding Sael down as he straddled the Ekhal. Jhan expected Ahlen to hurt Sael, bash his head against the hard wood, or even bite him the way he had his teeth bared. Instead, he began spouting bizarre words.

“Never knew how beautiful you were!” Ahlen groaned. “So thin. Skin so soft.” He yanked Sael’s hair out of its braid and pulled it viciously until it fell about Sael in a black cloud. “Like silk,” he growled, low and tight. Sael’s face scarf was pulled off next. Ahlen bent and grabbed Sael’s lips into his own as if he were going to devour them. He bit and pulled and then released them with a sucking sound. One of Ahlen’s hands roughly burst buttons and clasps until Sael was almost naked beneath him.

Sael was doing very little fighting. His hands were pulling off Ahlen’s clothes in turn while he emitted painful, small sounds of desire. Jhan saw them tumble together, a tangle of bodies she couldn’t identify one from the other. Someone cried out and continued to cry out in protest, but Jhan couldn’t see anyone trying to get away.

Saleoch was gone. Jhan’s desire wasn’t waning, but it lacked an object to center on. Her brain

refused to think clearly. Darkness kept clouding her sight. She felt as if she were having a stroke and a heart attack, everything within her pounding with pain while she struggled to make her body move.

Strangely, only one thought penetrated Jhan's growing confusion. Someone was being hurt. It gave her something to latch on to, some sense out of the chaos. She pulled herself towards the struggling bodies, intending she didn't know what.

Someone was crying louder. It wrenched at Jhan. It sounded pitiful; helpless. Jhan knew that it had to be coming from either Sael or Ahlen. The smell of cinnamon was so strong now that it was sickening, but Jhan found herself taking in deep breaths as if she couldn't get enough of it. It wrapped around her brain and she felt energy she didn't know she possessed, as she finally pulled herself up to Sael and Ahlen. It was then that she realized that the person crying was herself.

Sael and Ahlen smelled like sweat and hot cinnamon. They were locked together still, but their hands grabbed Jhan almost immediately and pulled her in. She slid across hay and wooden floor as they forced her clothes off of her. She felt bodies begin pushing and fighting, dimly saw first Ahlen's and then Sael's faces intense with their passions.

The second dose of the poison hit Jhan then. The pain drilled through her head, colors cascading and flashing behind her eyes. She shrieked and writhed in their grasp as she felt parts of her brain burning, melting under a chemical onslaught. They were oblivious to her pain.

Sael and Ahlen fought with one another. Blows fell, some of them on Jhan. Bodies crashed and rolled. When the pleasure hit, spiking through the pain, it surmounted it and drowned it, making Jhan shudder as she was mauled and thrown about as if she were a piece of meat being fought over by two fierce dogs. Neither of them could get the prize, so, in the end, they tore her up between them.

Jhan couldn't understand what was going on. She couldn't feel their bodies, or her own for that matter, all of her senses drowning in singing pleasure and the smell of cinnamon. She wanted it to go on. She would have done anything to prolong the experience. She wasn't even aware that it was killing her.

In the end, Jhan's body collapsed, unsatisfied to the point of unconsciousness. Her last sight, before she fell into the darkness, was the final victor, Sael, looking down into her face as he grinned like a rabid animal.

She was a he and he was crouched into himself, as close to the floor as possible. Booted feet were in view, but Jhan closed his eyes and tried not to imagine what they might do. Still, he didn't flinch

when one finally rose up and carefully, oh so carefully, stepped onto his face, pushing it down until it was pressed hard against the stone floor.

“That wasn’t quite right, Jhanian,” a silken voice growled. “You are slow today.”

The boot ground skin against the harsh surface.

“Are you distracted by something?” The voice lowered dangerously. “What could you be thinking of?”

The boot left Jhan’s face and nudged him in the ribs.

“Get up.”

Jhan stood and faced Dagara Ku Ni with a blue eyed stare blank of all intelligence.

Dagara’s eyes glowed. “Can there still be some spark of resistance in that tiny body of yours, my Moonflower? I’ve snuffed out everything inside of you that made you a man. I’ve shrunk you to a child again. I’ve cut, snipped, cracked, and twisted. I’ve even pulled out every manly hair you possessed. What could possible be left that would make you rebellious?” His hand reached out. “These? I didn’t even leave you much of that.” he laughed, cruel and as bright as his eyes.

Jhan was as still as a wax figure, unmoved by another entry in his long litany of abuse. Dagara watched him, waiting for Jhan to blink, twitch, look uncertain even for an instant; A betrayal of self. When nothing was forthcoming, he was disappointed. He never liked disappointment.

“Guard,” Dagara suddenly barked. A man stepped forward. “Send for Gyven.”

The guard didn’t question the order. He turned briskly and left.

Dagara put a powerful hand to the back of Jhan’s neck. He pushed him steadily to an open window.

Gyven entered, looking irritated and rushed. “Your Majesty,” he murmured acidly, even though he gave a short bow.

Dagara was distracted. He blinked and then smiled, showing his sharp teeth. “Oh, forgive me, Gyven, I should have specified that I wanted you in the garden.”

Gyven was puzzled. “Your Majesty, I don’t-”

Dagara shrugged. “I don’t have time today to turn our Jhanian over to the guards for some play. I think a quick reprimand is more in order, so that we can get back to our lessons.”

Dagara drew a long, thin knife. Without blinking or dropping his smile, he gutted Jhan and sliced upwards to his ribcage all in an instant. In the next instant, he shoved Jhan out of the window.

The cut was designed to inflict the most pain. The fall to the thorny flower bushes was merely the desert after a fine meal.

Jhan thrashed as she came fully awake. She was covered in sweat, but shaking with cold and reaction at the same time. Her wild eyes sought immediately for reassurance. It didn't find any.

The room was small, hardly large enough for the bed Jhan was lying in. A lantern, perched on one wall above a painting of a field of flowers, cast light on richly paneled wood walls and Ahlen seated rigidly in a chair by the bed.

Jhan tried to speak. Nothing came out but a harsh, strangled noise. She tried to sit up, but her body was tied at wrists and ankles to the bed frame. She was naked, uncovered, and fresh from a dream of abuse. She wanted to shriek.

Ahlen must have heard her motions, but he didn't look at her. His eyes seemed to be trying to bore a hole in the wall. The bones of his face stood out sharply and one corner of his mouth trembled now and again. He was acting like a man who had just lost everything.

Jhan saw Sael come through a narrow door and close it purposefully behind him. He held a bag of something, moving it from hand to hand, as if it pained him. Ahlen turned away, becoming even more distressed and sunk in depression.

Sael put his burden on Jhan's belly. It was freezing. Snow, she realized, and began to shiver harder. She arched her back to dislodge it and then gasped as an enormous stab of pain took hold of her lower body. It radiated down to her knees and up to her breast, pulsing and sickening.

Sael pulled a pad of cloths out from under Jhan with the ease of long practice. The cloths were black with blood. He tossed them aside into a bucket of them and then replaced them with clean cloths.

"The bleeding has almost stopped," Sael commented absently.

Ahlen grunted noncommittally, as if it didn't matter to him either way.

Sael was impatient with him, scowling over his scarf. "How long will you agonize over this?"

"All of my life!" Ahlen grated back. His shoulders bunched and his head bowed.

"You were drugged. We both were." Sael recited the words, probably having repeated them more than once. "It was just madness, not anything either of us wanted! I don't understand why it is destroying you like this."

"Because, you *liked* it!" Ahlen exploded and did turn, fists raised and threatening to do damage. "Because I wanted what you are and I raped that creature in that bed nearly to death! What am I that I could do such things? What am I that a drug could make me forget who I am?"

"Liked it?" Sael was furious now too and struggling with emotions his people weren't supposed to

admit to. “You don’t know who I am if you think being-,” he choked. “It was a rape for me too, but I am not blaming you, Ahlen Kantori! I am blaming a witch priestess and a drug. I am forgetting that it happened! I am going on with life. I am trying to save Jhan’s life so that all of this doesn’t become even more horrible!”

Ahlen shook his head as if his head were going to explode. He gripped his face, his fingers claws. “Why bother? The poison Saleoch put in her wine, which you so generously fed to her, didn’t leave much to save.”

That cut Sael hard. He was blaming himself bitterly for that. “I will attempt it, nonetheless. You can go now. Go find a willing woman somewhere and prove to yourself that you’re not an Ekhal. Maybe that’s the only thing that will clear this thing from your mind. You’re not doing Jhan any good here.”

Ahlen stood, but he paused, glaring warningly at Sael. “If you touch her...”

Sael was facing Ahlen suddenly, almost nose to nose, and hand on his sword. “Do you think for one moment that I would try and- and do that to her now?”

Ahlen became as cold as the snow on Jhan’s belly. “Only Obahn stopped you from raping Jhan to death. He doused us all with cold water and hit us until we came to our senses, remember? You were quick to claim Jhan for your wife. So quick to impress on Obahn that he had witnessed your consummation. If you would do that, what else won’t you do?”

“Fool!” Sael shouted in Ahlen’s face. “If I hadn’t, he would have left Jhan dying in the hay! He might even have decided to join in! If you don’t know it by now, Obahn isn’t above such things. I had to voice my claim before he could decide that she had become our whore!”

“Didn’t she?” Ahlen’s voice dropped, full of pain and self- flagellation.

“Get out!” Sael ordered and shoved Ahlen towards the door. “You’re a foolish boy. You’re naivete blinds you to all sense! If I let you stay, you will only say things to Jhan that no one should hear.”

Ahlen looked ready to fight, but Sael slipped his sword out partially in threat. Jaw working, Ahlen gave ground and then turned and opened the door with a jerk. Storming out, he slammed the door shut with a deafening bang!

Sael grumbled under his breath as he sat down in Ahlen’s chair and moved himself closer to the bed. He checked under the bag of snow and readjusted the cloth pads.

“I think,” Jhan’s voice was as weak as a soft breeze, but she managed to make it carry enough for Sael to hear. “I think I need to know what happened.”

Sael only glanced at her, as if, like Ahlen, he was prepared to ignore her. When he saw her staring

back at him with some sense, though, he started eagerly and leaned close to her. “Jhan?”

“Why am I tied up?”

Sael was genuinely relieved. “We’ve been trying to stop the bleeding. We had to make sure that you remained still.”

“Bleeding,” Jhan repeated dully. She tried to capture some part of memory that would let her know why she was there and failed. “Where am I?”

“This is Lord Elmanan’s house,” Sael replied.

“Untie me,” Jhan demanded and tugged at the cords weakly.

Sael was reluctant. “You haven’t been in your right mind, Jhan. I think I should wait.”

“Tell me-Tell me what happened.”

Sael clenched his hands together and stared at a spot on the wall intensely. A twitch started at the corner of his eye as he replied, “We were drugged by the Priestess Saleoch. She thought-I think she thought that we would kill each other. She wanted to use Ahlen for a sacrifice to her god, but you ruined her plans. I made matters worse. She took her revenge by poisoning you. I- I didn’t know. I gave you more of the poison, thinking it was just wine.”

Jhan’s eyes became portals of pain. Her mouth clenched in a hard line and then she forced herself to ask the question she most dreaded. “I remember the drug. I remember feeling things I haven’t felt since I became this. I *wanted*...,” Jhan felt tears sliding down the sides of her face. “So, am I your wife or Ahlen’s now?”

Sael twitched and his body clenched and unwound suddenly from the chair. He stared down at Jhan as if his honor wouldn’t allow him to do anything else but face her pain. “You are my wife. Obahn... he heard us-heard you- screaming when he went to see where I had gone and why I was taking so long to return. He was astonished to see me using you so brutally.” He swallowed audibly and his hands clenched and unclenched. “He separated us and brought Ahlen and I back to our senses. I had to claim you. You know that.”

Jhan felt white with pain and loss of blood. Her lower body told her terrible things with its burning, raw places. It let her know exactly what Sael and Ahlen had done to her. Again, she wanted to scream, but her voice still wouldn’t allow that expression of her utter misery.

“I don’t want to hear any more,” Jhan choked out. “I want to forget it. Now; instantly. I don’t think I can live, knowing that you did that to me and that- that I couldn’t stop myself from enjoying it like some... Untie me!”

Jhan jerked weakly against the ropes. They were worn and stretched. She must have pulled on

them furiously in her delirium. With a twist, she freed one hand. Sael jumped forward as if to stop her. She drove the heel of her hand towards his face, all of her grief and fury unloading along her arm like a deadly spring.

She was a he and he was lying among black sheets on a wide bed. Jhan stared at a ceiling hung with darkness and silver chains that glittered and swayed with promises of torment.

Dagara poured himself on top of Jhan, enticing, spicy scent and clothes and skin as silky as the sheets. His dark hair brushed Jhan's face as he licked a tongue along his ear, darting inside and breathing hot breath. He teased, tormented, nibbling, biting, moving down to Jhan's breast and then back up as if he wanted to devour him, but couldn't quite make up his mind when.

"Say it," Dagara whispered.

Jhan stared at the ceiling.

Dagara hovered and then pressed himself down, taking Jhan into a crushing embrace. He rolled and Jhan was on top, limp and unresponsive, face angled sideways against Dagara's face.

"Say it," Dagara demanded more urgently. "Come, Prince Jhanian Kevelt of Karana. Say it so that the world will know. Say it loud enough so that your father can hear it. Your brother would spit in your face if he saw you now. Say it so that they all will know what you are."

"I love you," Jhan finally whispered, clipped and broken.

"Again," Dagara demanded with a laugh. "Even I didn't hear that."

"I love you!" Jhan screamed again and then shrieked it against the sheets, as Dagara pushed him aside and then forced him face down, stretching out over Jhan's back as if he fully intended to consummate his assault. His instruments of torture were too varied to take comfort in the fact that he never did.

The hot breath was in Jhan's ear again. "Well, I don't love you, Jhanian Kevelt. I only want to use you."

Jhan was panting, eyes wide and blank, as she swam up from a hallucination that had been as crystal clear as the room she faced now. Every muscle in her body was trembling and she felt screams strangling in her chest. She wanted to rub at her skin, chafe it as if she needed to slough off sickness, or

the remembered touch of an evil hand. It was a long while before she gained control of her terror enough to look around her.

Jhan was still in the small room. It was in shadow, the lamp on the wall having been reduced to a flickering glow. Sael was sitting with his heels propped up on the bed, looking almost asleep.

“What happened?” Jhan hardly recognized her own, weak voice.

There was a livid bruise across the lower half of Sael’s face. He blinked wearily as he sat up and stared at her. His expression looked as if he doubted Jhan’s sanity. Jhan doubted it herself.

“The poison hurt your head,” Sael explained, satisfied that Jhan was alert enough to understand him. “You’ve been falling into some sort of waking sleep. You don’t hear me when I speak to you and nothing I do wakes you. You stare at things that aren’t there. It is unnerving. No, horrifying the way your face changes, the way it becomes dead and tortured.”

“Untie me,” Jhan demanded. The ropes were stronger now. The knots were more intricate.

“No,” Sael replied simply.

Jhan was covered with a blanket now; warm and comfortable. The burning pains were dull aches and the pads of cloth were gone. It begged a question.

“How long?”

“Four days,” Sael told her. “It will take weeks for you to stand and recover, if you can.”

“I’ll start now,” Jhan insisted. “Let me sit up. Let me do something, anything. The dreams-The dreams are coming back. I have to do something to make them stop!”

“You tried to kill me,” Sael reminded her.

“Do you blame me?”

“No,” Sael replied stiffly and sat down again, “but you can’t expect me to let you try again.”

“How will I get well again if you won’t let me out of bed?” Jhan demanded.

Sael stared and then sighed in disappointment. “You’ve forgotten again, haven’t you?”

“I remember much more than I want to!” Jhan exploded and pulled against the ropes. They were cushioned by cloth, but still nearly tight enough to cut off her circulation if she struggled too hard.

“You’ve tried each day to get up,” Sael told her and Jhan stopped struggling. It was her turn to stare. “Each day you’ve fallen into a trance, forgetting everything when you wake up. Yesterday, you tried to choke me.” Sael rubbed at bruises on his throat.

Jhan went very still.

Sael was relieved. “That’s the first time that you didn’t try to hurt me when I told you that. Maybe you are getting better at last.”

“What’s going to happen?” Jhan wondered softly.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m- I’m damaged somehow,” Jhan clarified, forcing the words through her anguish. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“We have another month for you to gain strength and to heal as much as you can,” Sael’s voice was grim, matter-of-fact. “If you can, you will travel with me.”

“Travel to where?”

Sael blinked. “To Tsarianna’s temple.”

“Who?” Jhan felt a chill as Sael’s expression reflected an ugly realization.

“What is your name?” Sael suddenly asked, calmly, as if the answer weren’t important.

Jhan paused as her mind changed tracks, trying to recall it as if the name was a half remembered face in a crowd. “Jhanian Kevelt.”

Sael considered her reply and then accepted it. “You have liked to be called Jhan Dor.”

“Why?” Jhan couldn’t think of the answer herself. It seemed hidden, buried under pain and shock.

“What land are you from?” Sael persisted, ignoring Jhan’s growing distress.

“Larksburg,” Jhan replied without hesitation.

“Where is that?” Sael was bewildered, obviously not knowing the name.

“Pekarin,” Jhan replied and then bit her lip, scowling. “No, that’s not right. I- I can’t remember what the right answer is.”

“Do you know Ahlen Kantori?”

“Yes,” Jhan replied, grasping at this and thinking she was on safe ground again.

“Who is he?”

“He’s from the mountains,” Jhan replied easily enough. “He lost his sister and he’s trying to bring her back, to apologize to her.”

Sael shook his head and sighed again as he slumped unhappily in his chair. “No, you’re confusing things.”

Jhan was so sure of what she did know that she almost doubted that Sael was telling her the truth.

“Are you a man or a woman?” Sael demanded, as if it were an accusation.

“A woman,” Jhan replied promptly.

“Were you born so?”

It seemed a strange question. “Yes.”

“Who is your husband?”

Jhan's face darkened and she felt sickness roll over her. Her eyes reflected her pain and humiliation as she replied in a very small voice, "You are."

"Has there ever been anyone else?" Sael's upper face showed a surprising number of emotions. They were so conflicted that Jhan couldn't sort them out to guess what he was thinking.

"No," Jhan finally replied.

"Never?"

"Never."

Sael stood up and stared down at her intensely. "If you are to live, you must remember that much. You must be my wife and you must do everything I tell you. Obahn will not allow any more of your rebellious foolishness. I am risking my honor on this, but I need you and, after what I did, drug or no drug, I feel I must make amends. Swear to me. Swear that you will do this."

Jhan was becoming too confused. She hesitated and Sael became angry.

"Say it!"

Sael's words were like a spear thrown into Jhan's gut.

"Say it!" Sael demanded once more.

"I... I love you," Jhan choked out and felt her body melt into the bed, her strength gone and her attempt to hold her mind together slipping fast.

There was a pause, a cloud of darkness that seemed to wrap around them both. "You are mocking me," Sael bit out. "I offer you a way to live. I offer you protection. Only swear that you will be a wife to me. If you do this honorably, I will swear that I will never keshun with you again."

That was interesting enough to prick down into Jhan's consciousness. It was too much like water to a drowning man. Jhan couldn't resist it, even though she knew it was probably never going to come true.

"I swear." Jhan whispered it, but Sael heard and nodded in satisfaction.

Jhan remembered the next day, but other things were patchy and uncertain. Her dreams were more solid and lasting and they horrified her until she wanted nothing more than to escape them. The only way to accomplish that, she felt, was to escape that small, claustrophobic room first. She needed to move, to distract herself, to think of something other than the broken thing her body had become.

Sael untied Jhan, but to move was torture. Her lower body was hurt inside in a way she couldn't

determine. Her hips felt bruised and out of their joints. Her knees bore the fading marks of someone's fingers, but those fingers had dug into muscle and those muscles trembled when she tried to lift or move her legs. When she had heard them say that they had almost raped her to death. It had been the literal truth.

There was also her mind to contend with and a frightening habit of her right eye to haze over as if fog had passed over her sight. It happened without rhyme or reason, but it was always heralded by a shattering pain in her forehead. Almost always, it was followed by a seizure, a stiffening of her body and a blanking of her mind that left Jhan unaware for hours at a time. These bouts proved devastating. They stole pieces of Jhan's memory each time they occurred.

As the month slipped by, Jhan often wondered at her determination to do anything other than die. Ahlen was often in attendance, but he spoke little and she could see the same question in his eyes. Why try? Jhan couldn't remember any longer, but she felt that it was important somehow. Important enough to bear with the pain and the knowledge that she would never be well again.

When Jhan finally was able to totter through the door of the room and into a larger suit that belonged to Sael and Ahlen, she felt little sense of triumph. Sael was pleased enough for them both, helping Jhan into a chair near a bright window and wiping the dripping sweat from her brow with a rag.

The suite was only slightly larger than Jhan's own room, but it had a high ceiling painted with flowers and several long windows, one of them decked with a balcony. A bed was against one wall and expensive carpets covered the floors.

Jhan stared out of the window. There was still snow, thick and deep, but the sun was out and the trees were knobby with buds preparing to open. It wouldn't be long before the thaw would allow them to leave.

Ahlen was leaning in the doorway to Jhan's room, arms crossed and face pensive. He had never apologized to her or even spoken of the rape. The boy Ahlen was gone. There was a bitter man, with too much pain, in his place. Sael had already put it behind him. Jhan had placed it in her hall of memory with the other horrors. Ahlen would never forget or forgive himself.

Sael gathered the rag in one hand and watched Jhan carefully. "How do you feel?"

"Well, my husband," Jhan replied as Sael had taught her. Her past had become too ground together, too inexplicable, for her to know how to feel about it. It had become easier to simply acquiescence to anything Sael wanted of her. Fighting back was the privilege of people who could remember their own name and walk more than a few yards without collapsing.

"Your balance is improving," Sael observed. "Your strength is coming back. I think you have a

chance of riding out of here with me.”

“Lord Elmanan still wants her,” Ahlen said suddenly, words ground out harshly. “You said so yourself. She still has her beauty. Why not leave her and be done with it? She will never know the difference now. After a few days, Jhan will forget we even existed.”

Sael drew himself up. “I allowed you to help me with her because you are oathed to me, Ahlen Kantori,” Sael reminded him. “You begged it of me. You said that you would abide by the customs of my people in that matter. The customs of my people dictate that Jhan is my wife now that we have keshuned. Jhan has sworn herself to me. I have to protect her. You have to protect her as my oath-brother.”

Ahlen glared. “I would have anyway.”

“I know that,” Sael replied, “but there is more to it than that. More than you wanted or intended. I am going to the Sun God to die and join my Lord Hagen. As my wife, Jhan will help me convince the god of my honest intent. That hasn’t changed despite what has happened to Jhan.” Sael paused and then stressed the rest clearly. “Obahn is my Lord. You are my oath-brother. I am no longer Ekhal-”

Ahlen’s face went scarlet and his jaw clenched. “Not since that night in the barn, you mean, or has Lord Elmanan tried to put his hands on you again?”

“I am no longer Ekhal,” Seal continued, as if determination could make it true. “The Sun God will know that I want to join Hagen honorably. He will allow it.”

“Is that where were going?” Jhan wondered blankly.

Ahlen sighed as if Jhan had made a point for him and he didn’t need to belabor it further.

CHAPTER THREE

(Through a Clouded Glass)

The courtyard was half frozen mud, but the sun was out and the drifts of snow were melting. Obahn determined not to wait for better weather and called everyone to pack and gather together to leave. Lord Elmanan was more than relieved to get rid of his barbaric guests.

In a long black dress much like Zerain's', and wearing a fur lined coat and gloves, Jhan stood amid the milling confusion of animals and people and tried to make sense out of her world. Ahlen and Sael she could remember steadily now. Zerain, belly swollen with child, was a mystery. Ixien, awake at last and stretching milk pale hands to the sunlight was known and distrusted. Togo was a smiling, reassuring stranger. Minyah...

Jhan smiled and patted Minyah's fury head. "Good doggie," She said and couldn't think why a dog shouldn't have a man's face and most of his body. Minyah was startled, but he grinned back at her as if he had finally found a companion to share his simple- mindedness.

"Doggie?" Togo repeated. "What is a doggie?"

"A..." Jhan shrugged. The confusion could hurt sometimes and this was one of them. "I don't know. I just know that he looks like one."

"You don't look well," Togo commented worriedly. "You're speaking strangely. What happened? We were given a bed in the cellars and we were hardly allowed out of them. A servant did tell us that you were to be Lord Elmanan's wife."

Jhan replied absently as she looked about at the wet ground, "I almost died. Now I'm Sael's wife." Jhan frowned. "I'm not supposed to be speaking with you, with any man. Sael told me..." She trailed off as she became distracted by her search.

"Wh- What are you looking for?" Togo's voice was choked and small.

Jhan looked up at him and saw that tears were running down Togo's face. His expression was stunned, sick disbelief. "A stick," Jhan replied uncertainly. "I was looking for a stick. I wanted to throw it so the doggie could chase after it."

Jhan sank her hands into her pockets and stared down at her feet.

"What now?" Togo wondered.

Jhan frowned. "I've forgotten."

"Forgotten what?"

“Everything,” Jhan mumbled and walked away from him to find Sael. She knew that she was supposed to be with him. He had told her enough times.

The imala and the baku were honking and flapping ears, anxious to stretch their muscles in the sunlight. They hardly balked at the heavy loads being thrown on their backs and Sael was having an easy time saddling them. When Jhan approached, he seemed calm and content.

“I’ve padded the saddle horn so that you can lean on it if you have to,” Sael told her. “I’ve also rigged some leather straps. I’ll tie you on if I must.”

It didn’t make any sense to Jhan, but she nodded any way.

“If you feel the pain of a fit coming on you, tell me,” Sael instructed. “If we prepare for it, you will still be able to travel, perhaps without Obahn noticing.”

Again Jhan nodded without understanding. It was as if Sael were spouting abstract concepts to her. She didn’t have the strength to attempt to figure them out.

Ahlen handed the reins of Jhan’s baku to her. She scratched the beasts’ nose and then looked at the reins. Ahlen took them from her after a moment and turned the beast so that Jhan was facing the stirrup.

“Get on,” Ahlen ordered.

Jhan reached up, but the back of the baku was far too high. Her joints shot pain and her leg refused to raise high enough to get her foot to the stirrup.

“Cover her.”

Jhan stopped her struggles and turned to look up with wide eyes. She knew this man. She knew that she was frightened of him. Obahn’s expression was set and hard. His eyes bored into Jhan’s and the scars on either side of his face stood out sharply.

Sael rounded the baku and took the red scarves that Obahn handed to him. He braided Jhan’s curly hair with difficulty. Obahn stood as if he didn’t have anything better to do but to wait until it was done. Finally, Sael tied the bottom of the braid off. He began to drape the larger scarf over Jhan’s head, but Obahn fended it off for the moment.

“You are not well,” Obahn said to Jhan. “Your eyes are odd. Your skin is pale. You move as if you were broken. I would finish this pitiful life of yours now, but for what my Bhakali has done to you. He broke our laws by treating you, his wife, as he did. You are owed satisfaction. Since I need him, I can’t punish him for this. Instead, I will look aside from you. I will allow him to keep you with us... until you prove that you are hindering us. I can do that much, but nothing more. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Jhan replied uncertainly. “You aren’t going to kill me.”

Obahn flicked a look at Sael that said a great deal, but then he was motioning for Sael to complete

his task. Sael nodded and placed the veil over Jhan's head. He pinned it there and then helped Jhan up onto the baku.

The world became a haze. Jhan could make out the landscape, but nothing of color or detail. This was the life that Zerain led. The veil separated Jhan from everyone and everything around her. It made her defenseless, needy of others to watch for her and to make certain that she didn't come to any harm in this self-inflicted exile of cloth.

"You will ride beside me," Sael was saying to Ahlen as they mounted their beasts. "That is the place for an oath-brother. Together we will protect Obahn if the need arises."

Ahlen didn't reply to that. Jhan had taught him too much to protest that he wouldn't be able to fight. Instead he said angrily, "I'm not one of your people. I only did it for Jhan. If I could, I would leave you and all your perverted people behind!"

"You've made that clear enough times," Sael bit back.

"As much as you insist on schooling me in your customs, I doubted that you had been listening," Ahlen retorted.

They began riding out of the courtyard and onto a road. Jhan stared at the countryside and the blue sky with its bright sun. It felt good to be outdoors at last and doing something. Her aches and pains were forgotten and her hallucinations and nightmares seemed powerless under that clear sky. Still, confusion nagged at her.

"Are you well?" Sael asked absently, his eyes on the road ahead.

"Yes, I suppose," Jhan replied. She tried to see him through her veil. He was a distant, red-tinged figure.

"This will be good for you, I think," Sael told her. "Exercise and clean air will heal you better than those dank, narrow rooms of Lord Elmanan's."

"Is that what you think will heal what we did to her?" Ahlen demanded angrily.

They began arguing. Jhan tried to listen, tried to understand, but her confusion only had one question and she kept it close for long minutes until the two men ran out of energy and fell silent. Finally she voiced it, but then couldn't understand the heavy sighs that followed.

"Where are we going?"

Winter had lost its hold on the land, but the trees were only half full of leaves and only a few hardy

flowers poked up through the patchy snow. Still, the air was growing warmer. The bone chill was gone and the streams they passed or crossed were flowing with chunks of ice in their currents.

The ride was uneventful. Jhan bore it silently, not imagining anything else to do. Her companions were of a like mind, riding lost in their own thoughts. When they stopped for the night, there was almost a collective reluctance to dismount and be trapped indoors once more. Without any voiced agreement, the tent wasn't put up. Instead, they lit several fires and placed their bedrolls and supplies at their center, warm and comfortable.

Zerain fried some meat strips and noodles over her brazier. Her pregnancy made her awkward, but her stiff back dared anyone to accuse her of weakness. Still, when she had served everyone their meal, she lay down almost at once and Jhan heard her utter a muffled moan.

That disturbed Ahlen. He was sitting cross legged next to Jhan and Sael, hunched in on himself and eyes hot and agitated. It was obvious that he wanted to ask Zerain if she was all right. It was also obvious that the looks he gave Obahn were dripping with anger. Obahn was the one forcing Zerain to make the journey.

Obahn was oblivious. He didn't consider Ahlen a serious threat and therefore never watched him for it. Instead, Obahn was speaking with Sael, as if they hadn't seen each other for most of the winter.

"This forest is long and deep," Obahn was saying. "Lord Elmanan has told me that traders and pilgrims alike often disappear. We must be diligent and stand watch at night. I can't allow you to care for your wife where it conflicts with that duty."

"She is better already," Sael was quick to reply. "She won't be a problem, my Lord."

Obahn scowled. "I will believe that when she isn't eating dirt, Sael Ruon!"

Sael exclaimed and turned. Jhan had put her hand down in the mud. Not knowing what else to do, she was attempting to lick her fingers off. Tasting grit, she brought up her clean hand to wipe it off her tongue. Sael grabbed both of her hands while Ahlen snatched up a rag, one that he kept close to hand now, and wiped her fingers off.

"We are both out of shape from our confinement in Lord Elmanan's house," Obahn continued. "We must take time to practice with our swords and gain strength again."

Jhan attempted to pull off her veil, but the pins and Sael's hand kept it on. It felt stifling. Finally, Sael was done struggling with her. His Lord's words were more important. He shoved her aside.

"Watch her Ahlen," Sael commanded.

Ahlen's attention was on Zerain. She had put a hand to her belly as if the child had kicked. Jhan stood and wandered away, pulling ineffectually at the veil. Ahlen didn't follow.

Togo was seated with Minyah almost in his lap. He was pulling burrs from Minyah's fur. Minyah saw Jhan and his ears cocked alertly.

"Little Jhan play now?"

"Where are you going, Jhan?" Togo called at the same time.

Jhan stared at them. They were flickering shadows through her veil. She didn't remember them anyway and she didn't know the answer to Togo's question. She simply felt the urge to walk and to keep on walking.

"I have to pee," Jhan heard herself say and then giggled incongruously.

Togo puzzled over that and then realized what she meant. "Oh, you are going to pass waste. We didn't intend to disturb you."

"Play later?" Minyah begged.

"Play later," Jhan repeated and gave him a smile he couldn't see.

Jhan continued walking and the entire conversation faded as if she had never had it. Her feet found a little forest trail and the darkness grew almost complete. Still, she didn't stop. There was just enough moonlight to cut through the trees and flicker on her veil. It mesmerized Jhan.

The trail ended at the lip of a deep ravine. The bottom was pitch darkness. Trees overhung it as if they were staring curiously into its depths. Jhan didn't stop. She didn't see it.

"Wait!" A hand snatched at Jhan's arm and brought her up short. Someone large was standing next to her, a warm presence smelling of imala and campfire smoke. "You nearly fell into that hole!" the man continued, and Jhan felt him pull her back.

There was a clear sound of a sword being drawn. "Leave her!" Sael barked from the darkness.

Another sword was drawn just as quickly. "I don't wish a fight!" the strange voice replied. "This woman nearly fell into that ravine!"

"She is my wife!" Sael exploded. "Take your hands from her!"

The hard grip on Jhan tightened uncertainly and then released her. Another hand, Sael's, took hold of her and pulled Jhan a few feet back with a painful jerk. Jhan heard harsh breathing as neither of them moved. It was a standoff.

"I'm alone," the strange voice announced in attempt to calm Sael down. "I'm a traveler looking for a place to camp. I don't mean you or your wife any harm."

"Go your way!" Sael exploded. "I have companions in shouting distance."

"I've been traveling through rough weather," the man continued. "I assure you, I'm not in any condition to fight you." He paused as if swallowing pride and then he begged, "If you could offer me

rest by your fire, instead of the sharp end of your sword, I would be most thankful.”

Sael regained his composure, but his voice was still wary. “That would be for my Lord Obahn to say.”

“Take me to him so that I can greet him properly. I am a lord as well.”

Sael became more respectful, but he wasn’t ready to trust yet. “You will walk ahead of me. I am oathed to Lord Obahn. His life is in my keeping.”

“I understand. I will do as you say,” the man replied.

Sael’s grip was cruel as he pulled Jhan along with him, the stranger and his two imala walking ahead. Sael didn’t say anything to Jhan. In a matter between two men, she was nothing and not worthy of notice.

They entered the camp. Obahn drew his sword. Togo and Minyah rose; alert for trouble. Ixien faded back into the shadows as if he would run. Zerain rose unsteadily, ready to get out of the way if there should be a fight. Ahlen went white as he stood.

The stranger walked straight to Obahn as he sheathed his sword. It was obvious that Obahn was the lord. His stance and challenging manner didn’t leave any doubt. The stranger gave him a short bow.

“I am Kile Helarion Dor, son of Duke Dor of Sarvoy,” the man announced with the tone of a diplomat.

Obahn studied him intensely. “I am Hyjar Obahn Om Sukhelan, Lord Kile. What is your business in these lands?”

Sael thrust Jhan down by the brazier. “Keep her close,” he ordered Zerain as he went to stand by Obahn’s side.

Jhan lifted up her veil to see what the stranger looked like. He was very tall and broad, she noticed with a thrill of fear. His arms were burlled from long use of a sword and his legs were like tree trunks, heavy on their tops from a great deal of riding. He wore thick sweaters and a heavy cloak over a thick jacket. His pants were worn and his boots were warped from snow and mud.

His face... Jhan felt startled, though she didn’t know why. His face was broad, the chin firm and square. His hair was a tousled, unwashed tangle of hot gold curls. His eyes, even in the shadows of the campfires, were obviously a clear, sky blue. He was a handsome, confident man, but he looked worn to the bone by grief and difficult travel.

Zerain jerked down Jhan’s veil.

“I’ve been riding a long time,” Kile was saying. “I’ve been searching for my wife.”

“You’re wife?” Obahn’s lips went tight. The narrowing of his eyes revealed what he thought of a

man bothering with such a thing. “Did she shame you?”

Kile shook his head. “No, she disappeared one night. I don’t know what happened to her. I’ve found several people who saw her, but the trail has been growing cold. I’m not sure where to go next.”

“Your ways are strange to me,” Obahn said with a shrug, but there was a challenge in his voice as well. “To bother so over a woman...”

“She is worth bothering over, Your Highness.”

Obahn considered Kile thoughtfully. “We are traveling to the desert, to the Sun God’s Temple. I have need of an extra sword.”

Grief made Kile’s face hollow and distressed. “I-I’m not certain where to go next, Your Highness. I suppose any way, at this point, will hardly matter. If you will permit, I would travel with you. I’ve been told that these forests are dangerous.”

“Swear to me then,” Obahn commanded. “I will not let you travel with us otherwise.”

“Swear?”

“I need to know that your sword will be mine in a battle.”

“I have sworn to the King of Pekarín,” Kile admitted. “It’s to him I owe loyalty, but I will swear that I will fight by you as long as your journey is honorable and follows my own trail.”

Obahn stared at Kile, for what seemed like, an eternity. Finally, he nodded. “I accept your sword.”

Kile bowed. “Your Highness, I thank you.”

Obahn motioned to the brazier. “Sit and eat.”

Kile bowed again and went to settle a respectful distance from Jhan and Zerain. He didn’t look at them, his eyes modestly looking down. When Zerain served him his meal, he sat quietly and ate.

Togo and Minyah came forward to crouch by the fire, but Sael stood by Obahn and they spoke in tones too low to hear. Ahlen kept to the shadows and, when Jhan looked idly around, she saw that he was gone altogether.

Kile was staring openly at Minyah and Togo. He didn’t seem frightened, only curious. It was Ixien’s pure alien nature that made him nervous. The Caefu was sleepy from the dark, but he gathered close to study their new companion as if sizing up his worth. Finally, coming to the conclusion that he was only an ordinary man, Ixien slipped back into the darkness to seek his bed.

“You’re not all from Obahn’s land, are you?” Kile finally asked.

“No,” Togo replied, “but our origins are complicated. Suffice to say, that we are also on a journey to the Sun God. We’ve been told that he has great healing powers. Our reasons for seeking them are self evident,” he finished deprecatingly.

“Is it?” Kile wondered. “I don’t think I know enough about you to judge.”

“We wish to be normal,” Togo clarified, as if he suspected that Kile was making fun of him.

Kile shook his head and his mouth twisted as he tried to contain his grief. “In the last year and a half, my idea of what’s *normal* has been shaken considerably.”

“No, my Lord!” Sael suddenly erupted. Jhan flinched and huddled in on herself.

“It is my right,” Obahn countered, just as loud. “You have said that she has healed. What I ask is possible.”

“I could be wrong!” Sael argued hotly. “You might harm her again!”

“My wife is unavailable, and you are my sworn man.” Obahn looked disgusted as he asked, “Unless you are offering to stand in her place?”

Sael seethed, hands turning into fists and body trembling furiously. “I am no longer Ekhal and you know that isn’t what you want!”

“So you say,” Obahn countered, “Yet you still wear the scarf.”

Sael avoided that as if it stung. “I say she is not able, my Lord.”

“Then she is not a wife and never shall be again,” Obahn replied tightly. “She has had long enough to heal.”

“I thought,” Sael choked and tried to steady his voice. “I thought that you intended to take another wife in Bairkun?”

“Strange customs,” Obahn snapped angrily. “They value their women more than gold and wouldn’t part with one even with my title of Hyjar. A man could have a whore on every street, but not a wife, it seems.” He looked at Sael intensely. “I will take your wife, now.”

Jhan looked up as Obahn was suddenly towering over her. Kile seemed shocked by such open talk of sex, and Togo and Minyah were looking just as angry as Sael. When Obahn took Jhan’s arm and lifted her to her feet, she saw Zerain, stiff and angry, turn her veiled face away with hands clenched in her lap.

Obahn led Jhan towards the woods, uncharacteristically shy of performing in front of the others as was his usual style. Jhan heard Kile speaking to Sael, sounding almost outraged. “She seems too young...”

“Silence, stranger!” Sael erupted. “It does not concern you!”

Obahn only went into the trees until the darkness covered them. He pushed Jhan down and she lay on her back, uncomprehending of what the man wanted from her, even when he gave her an explicit order.

“Spread your legs, Ikhil.”

Jhan did, staring up at the dapples the moonlight made on the trees overhead. She lost herself in it and began recalling a song she had heard some time in the past. She hummed the tune, stopping and starting uncertainly when she forgot bits and pieces of it.

Obahn jerked up her dress and smoothed warm hands over her bare legs. Jhan heard him fumbling with his own clothes. “In the dark, everyone is the same,” he said in a deep, lust filled voice, “even an Ikhil. I will not hurt you, but you will feel a man on you, not two rutting boys. Don’t fight and it will go easy for you. I only wish to relieve my need, not truly keshun with you as if you were a woman.”

Jhan reached up a hand, trying to grasp at the dapples of moonlight. She smiled sleepily, enjoying Obahn’s hands as they pushed her legs wider apart to accommodate himself. That gave Jhan an unexpected stab of pain in her still healing hips. As he lowered his weight onto her and began to push, several more pains struck like lightning all through Jhan’s body. She kicked out with a booted foot and caught Obahn hard along his side. He grunted and shoved her down roughly with one, big hand. Distracted, he lost his position. His weight came down on Jhan’s pelvis as he sought an opening, hips grinding.

Jhan’s sleepy reverie shattered and her world became the barn again, memory cutting through the damaged haze of her mind to bring it back to the here and now. She was once again struggling with Sael and Ahlen, bodies entering her in any way they could, while she shrieked at the mingled pain and pleasure as they nearly killed her.

Obahn made a mistake. Surprised at Jhan’s noise, he raised himself up, perhaps truly concerned that he was hurting her. It was all the space Jhan needed. She exploded out from under him and ran shrieking back into camp. Her hips protested and her legs were weak, causing her to stagger drunkenly as she finally threw herself down by the fire and wrapped up tightly in a blanket. She continued to shriek for a full twenty minutes, while she rocked herself with her arms clutched about herself; ignoring Sael’s shouted demands for her to stop.

When Jhan finally ran out of energy, she fell silent and lay weakly, shivering uncontrollably until the memory slipped away once more and she was left with only a blank, throbbing numbness where thoughts should have been.

“She was poisoned,” Sael was explaining to Kile as if he were trying to keep the man from violence. “She hasn’t been well, or in her right mind since. My Lord Obahn would not hurt her, stranger. It is against our laws. I think she was only frightened.”

“She is just a child!” Kile protested.

“She is my wife, to give to my Lord as I please,” Sael replied with warning to his voice.

Obahn finally came from the trees reluctantly. His face was set as hard as a rock and he looked deeply embarrassed, as he was forced to make an accounting to Sael.

“We did nothing,” Obahn admitted in a deep growl of anger. “Her mind is gone, my Bhakali. She is worthless.”

Kile stood and faced Obahn. “I’ve heard of your people, Your Highness. I know some of your customs. I-I find that I can’t agree with them. I think it is best if we part company.”

“Pursuing a woman and so easily disturbed by a man taking a woman,” Obahn sneered, “Are you Ekhal then?”

Kile’s shoulders bunched, but he held himself still. “I won’t stand and watch violence against children!”

“Children?” Obahn snorted as if at a good joke. “Sael’s wife is small, but certainly not a child. I take offense at your accusation that I hurt her in any way.”

Sael supported his claim, speaking as if he were surprised by the fact. “He has been most lenient with my wife, stranger. You don’t know how badly her mind is damaged. Another man would have demanded that I cast her aside long before now.”

Kile seemed to clench his entire body, trying to push down anger and disgust, and see reason. Finally, he nodded stiffly. “I guess I was startled by her screaming. You understand why I thought you had hurt her, Your Highness? Please don’t take offense at my ignorance.”

“You have changed your mind?” Obahn asked hopefully.

Kile nodded again. “Yes, for now.”

“Good. Rest yourself, Lord Kile. Leave my honor to me.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Sael went to take first watch, positioning himself on a patch of higher ground and facing outwards at the dark forest. Obahn took Zerain with him into the shadows, but they only curled up and slept. Togo and Minyah lingered, eager to get to know Kile. He sat by the fire with them and Jhan huddled in on herself close by.

Kile was staring at her, eyes shadowed and pained. “He truly did not hurt you?” he finally asked in a very low voice.

Jhan tried to remember. She recalled warm hands and a song about the moon. She found herself shaking her head no, but her throat was too sore now to speak. Kile seemed to accept her answer, sighing self deprecatingly.

“That’s always been a fault of mine,” Kile grumbled. “I never think, just react. It wasn’t any business of mine. Any idiot would have known that! I’m lucky Prince Obahn didn’t try to gut me!”

“You shouldn’t speak to her,” Togo warned in a worried whisper. He shot a look towards the oblivious Sael. “They don’t like other men noticing their wives in such a familiar way.” He shrugged with a guilty grin. “I always manage to forget, but Sael has been lenient with me.”

Kile’s eyes went wide when he noticed Togo’s sharp teeth. “This is a very strange company. I’m not certain I want to continue with you.”

“Strange, but harmless for the most part,” Togo assured him. Curious, he asked, “I heard you say to Obahn that you were looking for your wife.”

Kile nodded grimly, eyes going hooded with pain. “She disappeared one night. We found a body floating in a lake, but I couldn’t believe that it was hers! I’ve been searching for her ever since.” He looked up at Togo as if Togo might be wondering at his sanity. “She was everything to me,” he explained softly. “I couldn’t just forget her.”

Togo was amazed. He was eager to understand. “These men... they treat their women like their beasts, taking, using, casting them aside when it suits them.” he nodded to the silent Jhan. “When we first met, Sael’s wife was brave, intelligent, and whole. You see what they’ve done. They broke both body and mind and covered it with a veil to hide their work. I-,” Togo stumbled, trying not to sob. “I would like to know if it is different elsewhere. Is there a place where such things don’t happen?”

Kile thought for a long moment, choosing his words carefully. “In my land, we treat women with respect, but they are still subject to a man’s will. My wife,” he smiled, but it faltered quickly. “She was different. She believed that women should be equal. She tried to change things in Pekarín. She didn’t get much success. It always saddened her.”

Togo was sensitive to Kile’s sorrow, saying quietly. “She sounds like a good person. I don’t wonder that you still search for her.”

“She was bad tempered, hard headed, ill mannered, and completely contrary!” Kile growled and then laughed, short and sharp. When Togo looked surprised, he amended, “but I loved her for all of that and more. She was the other half of me.”

Togo smiled and gave Kile a comforting squeeze on the shoulder. “I hope that you find her.”

“Talk! Talk!” Minyah complained and yawned. He stretched, long claws flexing, and pulled at Togo. “To bed, brother.”

“All right!” Togo agreed and rose. “A good night to you, Kile.”

“And to you,” Kile replied.

Left with a silent Jhan, Kile began to rise. Jhan caught hold of his cloak and stopped him. “Blue, blue eyes,” she mumbled in a hoarse voice unrecognizable to Kile. “Just like the sky!”

Kile smiled indulgently as he slowly pried Jhan’s fingers away. “Yes, like the sky,” he replied and then, as if he were speaking to a child, he asked, “What color are your eyes?”

“Don’t remember.” Jhan giggled. “Don’t remember anything! Want to look?”

Kile grew serious. “I think your husband would be upset.”

“Not here. Not now,” Jhan sobbed. “So far away! Never catch up! Never!”

“What-” Kile began to ask worriedly, but Sael was suddenly there taking hold of Jhan’s arm.

“Forgive her, Lord Kile,” Sael said as he pulled Jhan to her feet. “She often babbles nonsense. I’ll take her now.”

“Of course.” Kile backed up respectfully and turned to take care of his beasts and make his bed.

Sael led Jhan away to a blanket and covered her carefully with another. As he crouched and made sure she was comfortable, he said absently. “Dor has the same name as you do, wife. It must be common.”

“That’s not my name,” Jhan replied mistily. “I can’t remember what it is... oh, yes, Kevelt. My name is Kevelt, not Dor.”

“Your Princely name?” Sael was sour. “I don’t think anyone would let you claim that now.” he brushed it aside, saying, “You should have let Obahn keshun with you. He is our lord. It was your duty.”

“Duty,” Jhan echoed and shook her head, not understanding.

“Yes,” Sael persisted. “His temper will grow worse with each day he is denied it. Now that I’m not an Ekhal, he won’t have any means of release.”

“Not Ekhal? Why do you wear the scarf then?” Jhan wondered, growing unexpectedly lucid.

Sael blinked, as stung as when Obahn had asked the question. Slowly, he reached up and pulled it off. His naked face was white, a tan line marking the edge of where his scarf had protected his skin from the sun. Crumpling the scarf in one hand, he said through gritted teeth, “There, it is done. I have renounced Ekhal.”

“Can I take my scarf off?” Jhan asked plaintively.

“No,” Sael replied. “Now, more than ever, I need you to be by my side as my wife.”

“It isn’t fair!” Jhan complained bitterly as she settled down to sleep.

“Not for either of us,” Sael agreed and went back to his watch.

Jhan relaxed into her blankets, but continued to watch the stranger. His gold hair glittered in the

light of the fire and his handsome face pricked uncomfortably at memory. Once or twice, he cast a look her way, as if drawn against his will. Each time, he frowned guiltily and bent back to what he was doing. Jhan fell asleep, watching his strong hands moving, like a dance, as they did their work. For some reason, they made her feel safe.

Sunlight streamed down through a break in the canopy of the forest. It struck Kile full on the face, but the man was so weary that he didn't wake up. Jhan lay on his chest, staring at his strong chin, hand idly brushing the smooth sweep of his golden eyebrows. He was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, she thought, and he fascinated her in a way she didn't understand. She felt that she should somehow know that scar along his jaw, or the way his nose bent ever so slightly from some long ago break. If she stared long enough, she felt that she would understand.

"This is intolerable!" Sael shouted and Jhan was jerked hard off of Kile. The man groaned as he awoke, eyes blinking blindly at the light while his hand automatically went to his sword hilt.

"What? What happened?" Kile sat up, bones popping and creaking in protest.

"Slut!" Sael continued to shout as he threw Jhan to the ground and stood over her. "What were you doing? You have shamed me with this man!"

"Sael!" Ahlen came forward nervously, head bowed as if he wanted to avoid looking at Kile.

"Surely you're not going to blame her? She can't remember from one moment to the next!"

"Do you think that is an excuse I can accept?" Sael exploded.

"You cannot," Obahn agreed as he came from where he had been standing watch. "She has shamed you, Sael Ruon."

"She isn't well!" Togo came forward with Minyah growling beside him. "Tell him," he pleaded to Jhan, "Tell him what you were doing."

Jhan was beginning to realize that she was in some sort of danger, but she couldn't think what to do about it. She could see Sael's angry face through her veil and Ahlen standing tense beside her. Something had definitely gone terribly wrong. "Pretty hair," she replied in her ragged, hoarse voice. "The sun makes it glitter. Don't you think it's pretty? I just wanted to touch it."

"You were lying with him!" Sael shouted over her words. "I saw it. Everyone saw it! I am shamed before everyone, even my Lord Obahn!"

Kile was standing now, realization dawning. He rubbed sleep from his eyes and tried to come fully

alert. “She’s confused, that’s obvious,” he reasoned. “I wasn’t awake. Nothing happened, Sael, I swear it. My honor is important to me as well.”

Ixien came forward, oddly concerned. His crystal eyes were level on Sael. “What do you intend to do?”

“You are a man and my Bhakali, Sael,” Obahn said, ignoring Ixien. “You know what you must do.”

Ahlen became agitated. “What are you talking about? You can’t hold her responsible for this! She has the mind of a baby! It’s our fault she’s that way, Sael!”

“No!” Sael exploded and shoved Ahlen away. “It isn’t our fault! A witch priestess did that to her, not what we did.” He shook his head sharply and his jaw jumped as he ground his teeth together, saying through them, “It doesn’t matter. She must die for this. It is our law.”

“What!” Ahlen went white and stricken, his eyes going wildly to where Zerain was still sitting among her blankets, silently watching the tableau. His eyes expressed his anguish for her, knowing that she could suffer the same fate. It made him turn and defend Jhan fiercely. “You can’t do this!”

“You can’t!” Togo agreed. “This is madness! You’ve used her, handed her to other men, and damaged her beyond repair. What does one more man matter? Why is he,” he jabbed a finger at the stunned Kile, “different?”

“Because, he is not my lord!” Sael ground out like a harsh lesson. “He is not my kin! She did not have my leave in any way to be with him!”

“She must die,” Obahn intoned gravely and drew his sword. He gave Kile a hard look, but it wasn’t accusing. “Stand back, Lord Kile. This is not your concern. It is clear to me that you didn’t have any knowledge of her actions. I absolve you.”

Minyah raked his claws on the ground, trembling. “No!”

Obahn’s sword tilted towards Minyah. “The law must be executed, or you must challenge Sael and take her from him and her fate. Do you challenge?”

Sael looked around viciously, but his eyes were betraying his real anguish. When he drew his knife, his hand was trembling. When he pulled at Jhan to ready her for a death stroke, he fumbled and could hardly manage it.

“Stop!” Kile stepped forward and drew his sword with a loud sliding of metal against metal. His face was set and troubled. “Nothing happened! Didn’t you hear me?”

“She was with you, on you,” Sael replied. “That is all that matters. Are you challenging me?” his voice held hope that he could barely conceal.

Kile let out a long sigh. "I don't know what else I can do. This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't fallen in with you. I-I can't let you murder this confused girl."

"Then it is challenge," Sael intoned and sheathed his knife. He pulled Jhan up and thrust her into Ahlen's arms. "You are my sworn man. You will stand with her. If I win, and yet still die, I will trust you to carry out the law and kill her."

Ahlen went even whiter as he gently took Jhan aside. "You don't even know him, do you?" he whispered to Jhan.

"Who?" Jhan mumbled back, watching the flash of the morning sun on sword blades as Sael drew his sword as well.

"I thought of running away, but I didn't," Ahlen admitted. "Kile must not have any idea that a flute player stole his wife, but when he sees you, finally takes off your scarf, he'll know. If he survives this fight, he'll try to kill me." He swallowed hard and looked from Jhan to Zerain. "After all that I've done, I think I'll deserve it."

The fight was ludicrously short. Sael and Kile made several testing passes, blades snaking together, clashing, and then separating slowly. Sael was panting and sweating. Kile was at ease and assured of his own skill. He proved that skill in the next moment. He suddenly shifted his weight and brought his greater strength and longer reach to bear. He slipped easily through Sael's surprised guard and disarmed him effortlessly.

The point of Kile's blade rested against Sael's chest. Sael stood straight, staring into Kile's eyes. He expected a death blow and wasn't going to show any fear. Everyone waited silently, holding their breaths. Kile shifted his stance and lowered his blade. "I have clearly won," he announced as he sheathed his blade. "I don't need your blood. Simply yield to me and promise that you won't harm the girl."

"She is yours," Sael panted as he wiped at his sweaty brow. "She is now your wife, not mine. It is your decision to harm her or not."

"Wife?" Kile was startled. "I'm already married!"

"A strong man may have many wives," Obahn said in a conciliatory manner. He looked very pleased, his grin almost feral as he clapped Kile on the shoulder. "Jhan is not a prize, by any man's standards, but she may offer you some amusement. If she doesn't, dispose of her as you will. That is our law."

"Jhan? My real wife's name is Jhan," Kile mumbled, too shocked to think much more than that, as Obahn turned him away and motioned for Sael to join them. "Is it short for something?" was Kile's

last, distressed comment as Obahn began speaking to them in low tones. It was clear that he wanted to reconcile them. He didn't want two good warriors at odds.

Ahlen was shaking his head. Jhan had crouched and was playing, with childish concentration, with a stick and a spot of mud. "Your Kile isn't too smart, is he?" Ahlen said, but then he worried his lip, adding. "Tenacious though, to have searched so far for someone he must have believed is dead. He'll find out soon who you are. And then.... I've made too many people pay a high price for my sister's life. It's time I pay now."

Jhan didn't understand. Her head was beginning to ache and her left side was going numb. She let the stick stand up by itself in the mud and sat down. The world went black.

CHAPTER FOUR

(Ghosts)

"My flower queen," Kile was laughing.

Jhan smiled, warm and content in a field of wildflowers. Kile had placed a wreath of them in her black, curly hair and dropped a handful into the lap of her white dress. He crouched before her; his blue eyes the perfect color of the sky overhead and his sun browned face filled with his love for her.

Jhan felt thin, too thin, and light enough to blow away in the small breeze that was ruffling her hair. The last illness had been a close one. It made this time alone together more precious than ever, both of them too aware of how quickly it could end again.

Kile saw Jhan's suddenly pensive look and he sat down, drawing her into his lap. He caressed her face with his big hand and kissed her gently. "Tired?" he wondered. "I could carry you back."

Jhan shook her head and then forced the question from where it had been sulking deep inside of her for some time. "Am I enough for you, Kile, truly?"

Kile was a soldier, a man of action and strong passions. He never thought too deeply and it didn't often occur to him to soften a response or to lie. "It's been hard for me, waiting, being careful..."

"I-I wouldn't mind if you-" Jhan swallowed and tried not to let her emotions come into her voice. "I would feel better if you found comfort elsewhere when you- when you need to."

Kile smiled, shrugging. "I don't need a woman for that, my Jhan. Are you so innocent?"

Jhan smiled too, but she couldn't shake her pain. "Idiot! You know what I mean. I-I just want you to know... it would be all right."

"You have daggers in your eyes!" Kile was laughing now. "Daggers for any woman I would dare-"

"Kile! This is serious!"

Kile did grow serious, and intense, as he assured her. "I did try. It was hard to wait, I will admit it. There was this little lady from Sarvoy, a dark eyed beauty with large... well," Kile sighed as Jhan's mouth went into a thin, tight line. "She wasn't you, little love. I just couldn't. You've spoiled me for anyone else. I just have to wait and be patient. I'm not an animal, after all."

"What was her name?" Jhan asked, hurt.

Kile put a finger to her lips. "Stop! It doesn't matter! She called me names, and questioned my manhood, after I left her lying naked in the grass for anyone to find."

“Hmm,” Jhan let her anger go and smiled against Kile’s finger. “You seem to like the outdoors. Maybe we could be careful and-”

Kile replaced his finger with a warm kiss and then sat back away from her. “I can wait.”

Jhan blinked out of the dream and found herself walking in forest loam along side her baku. It so startled her that she went down on one knee, unable to keep her balance.

Kile put a hand to her elbow, but didn’t pull her up. The baku was attached to others and it kept walking past her, flicking its tail at insects. “Sit down,” Kile ordered. He sounded irritated, tired, and at his wits end.

Jhan did sit down, her feet out in front of her. Kile kneeled and began looking at her ankle, making certain that she wasn’t hurt. He noticed the lumps. “You’ve broken this before.” He released Jhan’s leg before he reached her ankle and its many joints.

“Baku fell on me,” Jhan replied, remembering that.

“Lucky you’re alive, then.” Kile pulled her to her feet. He seemed relieved. “You haven’t spoken for two days. I was beginning to wonder if- well, Ahlen assured me that it happened to you all of the time. He’s been taking care of you, though Obahn and Sael have been barely able to control their outrage that I allow it.” he shrugged. “I’m not a good nursemaid.”

Jhan tried to keep the dream in her head. It made her temples throb. There had been flowers and Kile. Kile had been... what? It slipped away and she felt a moment of frustration. She must have tensed. Kile misunderstood.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Kile assured her. “I’ll find a good home for you. I traveled this way when I was very young. I know a few families, good families, who might need a servant, even with your limited, uh, capabilities. They have good hearts.”

Jhan looked around. The forest was very thick, so thick that everyone was walking. The sun hardly penetrated the gloom. “Where are we going?” she wondered. “Who are you?”

“Kile,” Kile replied as he helped her begin walking to catch up to the others. “I joined your company a few days ago. I challenged your last husband and won you. They tell me you are my wife now. I don’t know how I’m going to explain that to my first wife. She has a very bad temper and hands that are deadly! It’s best for you, and me, if I get rid of you as quickly as possible.”

Jhan understood only one phrase and that was, *get rid of you*. She threw her arms around Kile and pressed her face against his ribs, feeling suddenly lost and adrift amid a sea of confusion. Her brain

began to flutter, discarding memory from second to second. Finally, she didn't remember what had even frightened her.

Kile's hand brushed along her veil to comfort her. "I'm sorry I said that. It was stupid."

Jhan had been distracted by the bone buttons of his cloak. She began picking at them, totally entranced. Kile pushed her off with an effort.

"Stronger than you look," Kile commented as he guided her towards the others.

It was hard to walk. Had she been doing it for two days? Jhan couldn't remember. Now that the pain registered, she limped and dragged her feet. Her hand rose to her hip as it throbbed and stabbed along her nerves. Her healed, broken leg began a counter throb, still sensitive to that much stress. Both pains rose to a fever pitch, but she didn't know what to do about it. When she faltered, Kile or Ahlen took hold of her and forced her to keep moving, unaware of her trouble.

Sael was strangely relaxed, as if Jhan had been a burden he had needed but was glad to have been forced not to have any longer. He seemed friendly with Kile, as a man would to his savior. He was even ready to offer advice.

"She is alert," Sael said. "Now you can consummate your marriage."

"Now?" Kile was sourly amused. "Obahn won't mind?"

Sael considered and then nodded. "You are right. Tonight, I will take your watch."

"Why so eager?" Kile wondered, loosing all amusement now.

"Lord Kile?"

"Sael is Ekhal," Ahlen explained tersely. He was walking on the other side of Jhan, eyes looking ahead and not even giving Sael a glance. "Or thekling, we say. He was pretending that Jhan was his wife. He is also pretending that he isn't a thekling. I think he's decided that a shameful wife isn't good enough now to take before the Sun God. He wants to make sure you claim your *rights* so that he won't have any chance of having her back."

Sael didn't say anything, but his look at Ahlen was murderous. He turned on his heel and strode back up the line. "That wasn't wise," Kile muttered.

"I'm tired of trying to be," Ahlen snapped back. "He's pretending to be normal so that he can join his dead lord. He has to make himself worthy in front of the Sun God. You heard the story from Obahn. The man is going to commit suicide as soon as the Sun God permits it. I think that day can't come too soon! After what he did to Jhan and what I-" Ahlen cut himself off with a shake of his head that was more a nervous tick of emotion. "You would do well to leave us. We have all committed crimes of one sort or another. Take Jhan away from all of this; away from us."

"I don't know where to go and the land is dangerous," Kile replied, at a loss. "I have a wife I don't want or need that must be cared for like a baby, and a hopeless quest without any clues as to how to proceed. I'm forced to stay, at the moment."

"You will have to take her, you know," Ahlen was very serious. "Those people," his voice was dripping with anger, "Obahn and Sael. They'll hurt her again if you don't make your claim clear."

Kile gave Ahlen a long look. "If you care so much for her, why don't you make her your wife? I won't stand in your way."

Ahlen turned his face away, emotions suddenly more than he could control. He began walking ahead, leaving Kile behind. "You'll find out that she deserves better," was all he said.

Jhan sat down on the ground and Kile stopped, crouching down to help her up again. Jhan pulled away. "Hurts," she finally complained.

"What hurts?"

"Everything."

Kile ran a hand over his face. "They won't tell me what happened to you. It must have been very cruel. I wonder what you did to deserve it? It must have been short of being found with another man, if that merits death."

Jhan found an unexpected fury rage through her. She grabbed Kile by his leather vest and pulled herself very close to him, voice seething with anger and anguish. "Nothing! Nothing!"

Kile's compassion was acute. He pried her fingers off, saying quietly. "I can believe that, even after being with them only a short time. They don't seem to need much excuse for violence." He patted her hand and then lifted her up in his arms, shifting her until she was balanced. "Don't worry. We'll do what we have to, so that they won't be able to get at you again. I have a good reputation with women in that area and... I don't think it will be worse than what you've already suffered with them."

It was good not to walk, Jhan thought, and she relaxed against Kile, forgetting her anger. Her aches and pains slowly faded and she dozed contentedly, even when Kile passed her back and forth between himself and Ahlen to carry.

They made camp just as the sun began setting, making the forest impenetrable black. Minyah balked at going into it to hunt, saying that the deep loam and the rich smelling sap from the trees confused his senses. They contented themselves with older meat, fried well by Zerain and rolled up in flat bread with some spicy grain.

Afterwards, they sat about the fire, Obahn and Sael talking in low tones about the trail up ahead, Ixien already asleep, Togo and Minyah talking and finding something to laugh at, Zerain curling up

around her precious burden, and Ahlen poking at the fire morosely with a stick.

With only a little flush of embarrassment, Kile stood at last and picked up a blanket. "Come, Jhan. We have to-have to consummate our marriage." he was forced to say it loudly.

Sael gave him a look with hooded eyes, jaw tight, but he continued his conversation with Obahn. His look was a warning. He didn't want Jhan hurt, but he was unable to say so by his constricting customs.

Togo wasn't bound by that and he stood anxiously. "Please, don't! She's suffered enough! The way she screamed last time.... can't you see how it frightens her? Why won't you all let her go? Why can't she be free of this?"

"He has to," Ahlen grated out. "You know that. Don't worry, Togo. Lord Kile is a good man. He won't hurt her. He's going to help her, you'll see that soon."

Kile was puzzled by Ahlen's dead tone and his white, face. He cleared his throat and tried to reply to their concerns. "I am an honorable man," he said. "I've never hurt any woman."

Obahn suddenly laughed. "You've never had this kind of woman before, Lord Kile. You may change your mind afterward about even having her for your wife."

Kile was exasperated. "What are you hinting at, all of you? Again and again you make remarks about her as if she were deformed beyond what a man can bear. Is that true? Have you hurt her so badly?"

"You will see." Obahn motioned to a small lantern with the supplies. "Light that and take it with you. You will see for yourself what you have won."

Kile touched the hilt of his sword. "All of this is unnecessary! None of you want her. Why do I have to stake my claim in this fashion as if we were all imala? I don't need another wife! I intend to leave her in the care of someone else as soon as possible. Your customs don't mean anything to me!"

Obahn was serious. "If you don't, she will become free for any man. I can't have that disruption. I will urge Sael to take her again and he will have to keshun with her to reaffirm his claim. He may try to avenge his dishonor once that claim is proven. I may even take her. My needs are strong and my wife is too heavy with child. Either way, Jhan will be spreading her legs for someone. You won't save her that by refusing, Lord Kile."

Kile was furious. "I'm leaving in the morning. I don't like your ways, your Highness."

"They are hard," Obahn agreed, "but in the land that bred them, they are necessary. I need your sword. Once you have keshuned and put it behind you, once you see what you truly have in a wife, you may understand us better and remain."

“I don’t think that can happen,” Kile replied biting.

Kile lit the lantern and, balancing it and the blanket he pulled Jhan up with his free hand and headed for the trees.

“I wish to hear to confirm your claim,” Obahn told him. “Keshuning makes distinctive sounds, as you know. Stay just outside of camp.”

Kile was shocked and embarrassed now. “Is it a show then?” he wondered. “Is all of this just for your amusement?”

Obahn gritted his teeth. “It isn’t amusing, Lord Kile. Knowing what Jhan truly is, only makes it disgusting.”

Kile was cursing under his breath as he took Jhan into a line of bushes. Putting down the blanket, he sat Jhan on it. Placing the lantern close by, he then stretched out full length on his back, staring up at the dark tree tops with a hand rubbing at his forehead.

Jhan stared at him, the flickering lamplight making him even more handsome. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“For what?” Kile groaned and replied in a whisper. “Do you even understand what we have to do now? I don’t think I even can! For you, it’s probably different. It’s obvious they’ve handed you around among themselves. This won’t be any different, except that I’m a stranger.”

“You care. They don’t, not really,” Jhan was surprised that she could keep together such a coherent thought. “That makes it different.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“It hurts.” That could have meant many things and Jhan couldn’t decide what she did mean.

“I will be careful,” Kile promised. “My wife was very small. She hurt easily. I know what to do.” but he didn’t do anything. Instead, he continued to lie there, closing his eyes as if he had decided to sleep instead.

Jhan couldn’t remember any time in the near past when she had been able to simply look at a man who wasn’t trying to force her to his will in one way or another. It felt odd to be able to look at every line, every twitch of muscle as if he were a particularly dangerous animal that was deciding to be tame for now.

“I had a dream about you,” Jhan said, remembering it suddenly.

Kile opened his eyes then. “Did you?”

Jhan struggled. “I think it was a dream.”

Kile reached out a large hand and touched the hem of Jhan’s veil. He ran the material between his

fingers, but decided not to remove it. His hand lowered to her dress, touched the buttons as if still undecided.

“If I don’t, you won’t be free,” Kile reasoned, as if Jhan were arguing. “They are on a long journey. The way they’ve been treating you... even if Sael didn’t kill you for shaming him, you probably won’t make it. Your only chance is with me.”

Kile undid a button. Jhan watched, fascinated.

“Just a few moments,” Kile continued softly. “It’s nothing. I can do this. We just have to... long enough to satisfy Obahn.”

Kile undid the top of Jhan’s dress, suddenly becoming determined to do it. His large hands pushed back the material as he sat up. When his head bent forward, and his lips began to suck and his tongue to caress Jhan’s breasts, she felt a shock of confusion.

“What are you doing?” Jhan wondered, her hands sinking into Kile’s gold hair as she tried to move his head enough to see what he his tongue was so expertly doing.

“I don’t want you to be afraid,” Kile mumbled. “We’ll go easy.”

Jhan wasn’t afraid, only perplexed. This wasn’t the expected attack that always happened when a man took her into the darkness. This was an odd, teasing pleasure that kept her mind from fading or her body from recoiling.

Kile loosened his pants and then lay down again. He pulled Jhan on top of him, rearranging her skirts so that she was straddling him, bare flesh against his obvious growing excitement. His hands continued to caress her, even slipping between them to touch her between her legs. He rubbed there, hand warm and gentle, and Jhan felt a thrumming pleasure start that was almost acute enough to be pain.

“Can you do this?” Kile asked at last. “I’ll let you lead. If there’s pain, we’ll stop. We’ll think of another way.”

Jhan didn’t understand until she felt him pushing against the tenderest part of her. He wanted in and it was up to her to allow it. When she did nothing, Kile realized that he had expected too much from her damaged mind. Reluctantly, his big hands took her by the waist and began pushing her down, cautiously, looking for a signal from her to stop.

It hurt. Jhan moaned very softly and continued to moan as he stretched and entered into her. She gripped his hands. Tears started in her eyes, but she couldn’t respond enough to do anything. Finally, the inexorable spear of pain ceased. They were together.

“All right?” Kile asked. When Jhan didn’t respond, he began caressing her again, hands moving

every where but under her veil.

The memories didn't come. This gentle play, though painful, wasn't anything like what had happened before. There weren't harsh hands forcing her under hot, cruel bodies intent on ripping her apart. She was free. Jhan knew that, if she said so, those big hands would let her go. This would end.

Kile began moving beneath her, so slow and gentle, she hardly noticed. The pain was constant, but bearable. The pleasure was far greater. It didn't want her to stop. As Kile began surer motions, she stretched her body atop his and put her cheek against his broad chest, letting his big arms hold her, bracing her against even stronger motions.

"Gods!" Kile suddenly moaned, and then louder. "Gods! This is- This is incredible!" he shuddered and twitched, his eyes becoming glazed and his lips stretching in a smile of utter pleasure.

Kile rolled and came up on top of Jhan, hips working rhythmically as he groaned and cried out. His weight was on his strong arms and his knees. He never forgot himself enough to put his weight on Jhan's fragile hips, but he was as hard as iron and too long denied release. He couldn't help the wildness and he couldn't stop even when Jhan began to scream as she reached a sudden, horrendous pinnacle of sensation.

Release came for Kile in a flood and a choked exclamation. He rolled aside and lay, panting, body bare and spent to the lamplight, hair wet and tangled with sweat. It came to Kile all in a rush and he couldn't move, couldn't believe it even when he couldn't think of any other explanation.

Very slowly, Kile rolled onto his side, still breathing hard. He blinked at the sweat in his eyes, wiped at it, and then reached out to Jhan's veil with a shaking hand. Jhan was lying on her back, riding shockwaves of sensations that were making her mind skip and fire wildly. When her veil was pulled off, the lamplight shone in her eyes, dazzling her.

"Jhan," Kile said it with every ounce of his soul and then caught her up into his arms, crushing her against him, weeping into her hair. "I've been so blind!" he lashed himself. "I should have seen, should have known at once! I even heard your name- Ah, Jhan, forgive me! Forgive me for being the most brainless soldier that ever lived!"

"Hurts," Jhan protested, pushing at him.

Kile eased his grip, looking deeply into her eyes. He searched there long and hard, trying to regain his wits. His voice was rising with his fury. "What have they done? You don't know me. You look... your face is odd, worn to the bone, older. One of your eyes is dilated. They've taken away everything that made you what you are! They left this mindless husk, this submissive ghost of my beautiful, hot tempered wife." his face went hard and dark. "I'm going to kill every one of them for this!"

Kile buttoned his clothing and stood. Jhan stared up at him. Was he angry at her? Was he going to hurt her? He was so very strong, much bigger than even Obahn, whom she feared without the memory of why. She thought that she should appease him somehow. Did he want her again? It hadn't been so terrible; not like the other fearful times. She thought that she could do that for him again and not scream. Very carefully, Jhan lay back and opened her legs, looking up at Kile tensely.

Kile stared at her in horror. He looked as if he were going to vomit. An animal sound erupted from him, but it wasn't loud. He choked on it, gnawing on his own lip, until it was nearly a whimper. He didn't want to give himself away before he was close enough to kill. He turned blindly and thrashed through the bushes back into camp.

"You are a man of strong passions, Lord Kile!" Obahn said. "You kept us, and the entire forest, awake with your noise! I didn't realize the little creature was so skilled. My Bhakali said as much, but I've only been treated to her screaming nonsense."

Metal slid against metal.

"I think he has discovered that he didn't bed a woman, my Lord," Sael commented dryly and there was the sound of two more swords drawn.

"No," Ahlen interjected. "I think he has discovered that his new wife is, in fact, his old wife. He means to kill me."

"What?" Sael exploded. "This is the man you stole Jhan from? Then he has a clear right to avenge himself. I won't interfere!"

"Where's Jhan?" Togo asked worriedly. "Lord Kile, you didn't hurt her? If she is the woman you say you cared so much for--"

"She is in my safe keeping at last!" Kile grated. "I will die before anyone harms her again. I intend to kill all of you for what you've done to her!"

Obahn laughed, but it had a vicious edge to it and a note of disgusted disbelief. "You traveled all of this way to reclaim a freak, an emasculated prince that you perversely took as a wife in your lodge? What man are you? Are you Ekhal? I can't believe that even an Ekhal would do such a thing for a creature that is less than nothing!"

"We didn't harm her!" Sael shouted furiously. "We took her when she was dying in the snow and kept her with us. We cared for her time and time again when anyone else would have thrown up their hands and left her for the Gods! I even took her as a wife so that no other man could harm her! You have nothing to complain of us, Lord Kile. Your quarrel--"

"Your good charity doesn't seem to have done Jhan much good!" Kile whipped back. "There is

nothing left of my wife for me to take home again!”

“She was poisoned,” Sael continued doggedly. “A priestess took offense and tried to kill her. She drugged Ahlen and I. We...”

“When I found them they were rutting on her like beasts,” Obahn broke in as if purposefully trying to goad Kile to violence. “They would have continued, I think, until they were all dead. As it was, I had to knock them unconscious and have them dragged apart. Unfortunately, the damage was already done. Still, I allowed Jhan to stay with us even then. You know our people. You know that we don’t tolerate such weakness. Sael is right that you don’t have anything to complain of us. Your true quarrel is with Ahlen Kantori. He made all of this possible, not me and mine. We will not interfere. You are worth far more to me than an untrained flute player.”

“Worth more?” Kile was incredulous. “My quest is done, your Highness. I’m not continuing with you any further! Once I kill you all, and I will, I’m taking Jhan home!”

Obahn was confident as he replied. “Oh, but you will, Lord Kile. We are going to the Sun God. Tsarianna is purported to have great healing powers. If you came so far for your cut boy, then what does a few more months travel matter if you might possibly see him fully restored to you? Kill Ahlen, and we will speak of this more calmly.”

“Calmly?” Kile echoed and then laughed savagely. “When you are all dead, then I will think about becoming calm!”

Jhan heard steel clash together. She was still lying on her back, cold creeping along her legs and lower belly. Kile was very angry, but not, seemingly, at her. That was good, but she didn’t understand what the rest was all about.

A small, pixie face came into Jhan’s line of sight. The face was very pointed and brown; brown like good earth and tanned leather. The eyes were huge and almond shaped. Green, Jhan worked out in the lamplight. The hair was a muss of brown wool that fell all about the face in wild disarray. Leaves were caught in it and one or two sprigs of evergreen were stuck here and there like adornment.

The small face crinkled and the nose twitched. “The scent of violence is strong. Are you harmed?”

“No,” Jhan replied quietly and sat up. Her body ached, giving the lie to her statement. A sharp stab of pain through her groin made her gasp and press a hand there.

It was a woman, Jhan easily guessed. The body was nude despite the still chill air, but it was so brown and spare that it was hard to notice much detail. The voice was compassionate and concerned.

“We will care for you as soon as we take care of the others.”

Jhan reached up and took out a sprig of evergreen from her hair. She twirled it between her fingers,

forgetting everything but that. She wasn't sure how long she was like that, but when the woman touched her arm lightly, the sound of fighting had ceased and dawn was breaking through the heavy canopy of trees.

"You will come," the woman said and tugged at Jhan's sleeve.

Jhan's body protested as she stood, but she let the small woman lead her out of the bushes and back into camp. What she saw there made her stop again in confusion. Minyah, Togo, Ahlen, and Ixien were bound together by strong vines off to one side of a line of cages. The cages, Jhan noticed, were made out of tree roots, as if some power had caused them to rise up and engulf their occupants. In each one stood Kile, Obahn, and Sael, stripped of their clothing and in identical states of anger.

"Jhan!" Kile threw himself against the bars of his cage, wild with concern for her.

"Here," the woman led Jhan away from the cages and motioned her to sit by the foot of a large tree. There were more of her kind there, men and women, sitting and watching their prisoners with amazed, but troubled faces. When Jhan was settled, cross legged, one of them handed her a wooden cup full of some type of juice and a leaf holding a mash of raw meat and something pasty and white.

Jhan ate absently, feeling a growing blankness and a familiar numb tingle begin on her side. It didn't matter that the food was strange and tasting of fresh blood, or that the drink was acrid and unpleasant, she ate without considering that she could refuse.

The woman crouched in front of her, watching Jhan's eyes. Finally, when Jhan had finished and was licking the blood from her fingers, she spoke, her light voice calming. "I am Tevela. My people are the Charia. This wood is ours. We don't allow such violence in our home. We have contained it."

"Oh," Jhan replied, a meaningless sound uttered only because she felt that she was required to say something at that point.

"Your mate attacked these others for attacking you," the woman continued. "That is permitted. We only caged him until his rage passes. The ones that are not in cages, will be released when they gain understanding that we don't mean them any harm. The other two who are caged, shall remain so. We cannot permit their violence in our wood. They must learn. We will teach them."

Jhan stared blankly as a shooting pain began between her eyes. Soon, she knew, she wouldn't have to deal with this. She would fall into dreams again and it would all be resolved without her. She didn't bother responding to Tevela.

"Cheta!" Tevela called softly and a rather heavy male broke from the others and approached curiously. He crouched before Jhan. He smelled of something musky, his brown skin painted with concentric, blue circles.

Cheta didn't need direction from Tevela. He reached out a hand and lightly placed a finger on Jhan's forehead in the exact place where it was throbbing and shooting pain.

Jhan was suddenly engulfed in strange scents. Tree sap smelled overpowering, yet sweet. The bodies around her each had a unique scent, her own body pungent and smelling strongly of sex without the hint of the heat of female to balance it. The earth rose up to slap her senses, as if it were a map of all who had walked that way.

There was a mind within her mind, Jhan realized. It was horrified, yet diligent in its task, defending itself from her memories and recent traumas with expert skill. It touched her inside, shifting and reworking her brain as if it were a computer that needed to be reprogrammed around a system failure.

The invasive sensation went away after, what seemed like, hours and the world reduced itself back to the bland normality of Jhan's human scope. She blinked, the pain gone and her world suddenly clearer. She stared at Tevela and Cheta and actually thought about something. She thought about being afraid.

"Terrible damage," Cheta was saying to Tevela. "There is much that is beyond my skill. This one has been made into a neuter and tormented greatly by the males as if it were female. We should keep it here and heal its spirit as well as its body. Both will take much time."

"Agreed." Tevela replied with a nod.

Jhan was looking beyond them. She was continuing to think, to consider her surroundings. She put her cup and empty leaf aside and stood. She felt tears on her face. She touched them with her fingers as she stared at Kile. Resolutely, she left Tevela and Cheta behind and approached Kile's cage.

"Jhan!" Kile sobbed and reached through the bars to touch her. Jhan stopped out of reach, her face contorting in fury.

"You raped me! You despicable...!" Jhan shuddered and wrapped her arms about herself. "You belong in a cage, you animal!"

Kile was shocked. He had tears in his eyes as well. "I didn't- Jhan, you can't think that! We're married! I didn't force you! I was trying to- My little love!"

"Don't call me that, you-you pervert! I'm not your wife!" Jhan panted in revulsion, "I'm a man!" Her hands went to her face and her fingers were crooked like claws as she went white. "Gods! Gods! I've been cut and used like a whore! I can't bear this! I can't! What is there for me like this? I can't live! I can't!"

"What have you done!" Kile shouted at the Charia.

Cheta was unapologetic, almost religious in his conviction that he had done the right thing. “I’ve taken away the lie. This one must learn to live with what it truly is. We will keep it here and teach it.”

Jhan vomited and went down on her knees, shaking so hard she felt that her body was coming to pieces. She was a man, she realized, all of her careful illusions stripped and laid bare. She was Jhanian Kevelt of Karana, and a woman from another world, and there wasn’t any escape from the fact that the body she inhabited was worse than a eunuch. Pervert, she had called Kile, but she was one as well, allowing him to use her like a woman, allowing the pain and the chance of death, to pretend that what they were doing was normal and right. She was a man and she had lain with men. She was just like Sael. The very thing she had denied for so long.

The Charia didn’t understand. A simple people, reality didn’t need illusions to keep them safe. Cheta couldn’t know what he had done. He didn’t know that a mind could break under the stress of the truth.

Jhan was uttering tortured whimpers, over and over, as she began to pull at her dress, ashamed of it, ashamed of what she, a man, had tried to pretend. Her long hair was torture to her. She pulled at it as well, began ripping some of it out. She crawled while she did this, as if trying to find a place to hide, a place to escape the agony of self knowledge.

“Let me go!” Kile screamed and shook at the bars of his cage with manic strength. “Let me go to her!”

“It was a man, not a woman, and you cannot be its mate any longer,” Tevela explained simply. “Its false illusion of itself has confused you. We will care for it.”

“I don’t care!” Kile screamed impotently.

Tevela blinked at him. “About what?”

“I don’t care that Jhan was a man! I love her! I want to help her! Let me go!”

“When you are calm, we will speak again,” Tevela replied.

Kile shouted incoherently, striving to break the tree roots enclosing him. When Jhan rolled onto her side, clenching into a fetal ball of misery, she glared at him in hatred and self loathing as her mind began slowly unraveling.

Jhan rocked in misery for a long while. She hardly acknowledged Zerain when the woman crouched down beside her and began dabbing at Jhan’s nose with a water soaked rag. There was blood on it.

“This was not a good time to remember that you were a man,” Zerain said softly, not wanting their captors to hear. “My Lord doesn’t need your disruptions. He needs to arrange his release and our safety.

Stay silent, Ikhil.”

Jhan sat up with a moan. Her fingernails clawed at the skin of her arms, tearing at herself in an expression of her emotional upheaval. Cheta came to her at once, touching her forehead as he had done before. He was obviously confused, not understanding why his healing wasn’t working.

“You know what you are,” Cheta said. “You know what you must face and accept. Why do you fight it? Why does your own body madden you?”

“Because you’ve shown me that I am nothing!” Jhan screamed at him, wiping harshly at the tears on her cheeks.

Cheta’s confusion grew. “Your mind still isn’t clear. I can read your thoughts and I can’t understand them. How can you be a woman and yet have the body of a man?”

Jhan fisted hands into her hair and whipped her head back and forth, splattering Zerain and Cheta with the blood from her nose. She groaned low, like a wounded animal. “Who am I? What happened to me? What am I going to do?!”

Cheta looked at Tevela in concern. “I cannot heal this, High One, and I fear it hasn’t enough mind to heal itself. It is only driving itself to destruction. What shall I do?”

Tevela was adamant. “Our laws require peace and order. These flawed beings cannot be allowed to leave us in such states of disruption and cause havoc in the forest. They must learn.”

Cheta was sad now, insisting. “This one cannot, High One.”

Tevela considered and then relented in her fervor, only slightly. “Allow it to forget all but its true state. We will take one step at a time with it and teach it more slowly.”

Cheta was relieved. “That is wise, High One. As it is now, its mind mixes reality with truth and can’t discern which is which. It only causes more damage.”

Cheta put his finger back on Jhan’s forehead. At once, the maddening pressure of memory and certain knowledge was taken from Jhan. Like a tire deflating from explosive pressure, she let out a long, relieved sigh as the mist closed in on her mind and she forgot. Her eyes went blank, the hollow, tortured, expression leaving her face. Jhan became distracted by an insect hovering above Cheta’s left ear. She lost herself in looking at it.

“There is still confusion,” Cheta said sadly as he turned away. “Shall I try with these others? They are not so damaged.”

“Yes,” Tevela was eager again. She led the way to the cages.

Not knowing what else to do, Jhan stood and followed. Her muscles trembled from strain and her head ached, but her feet obeyed her on the uneven ground. When she came close to Kile again, she

didn't recognize him, the memory of their time together a shadowy dream. He looked tortured, eyes red and jaw as tight as a rock.

Sael was huddled in his cage, seated with his knees against his chest and his face half hidden by the arms he clasped about them. He glared murderously at Tevela.

Obahn was like a caged wolf. He paced back and forth along the cage bars, growling and swearing as he tested their strength with furious jerks of his hands again and again.

The others were seated on the ground back to back, resigned to their fate, struggles having ceased long ago. Ahlen looked bruised and dejected, Minyah was whining uncertainly, Togo was quiet and pensive, Ixien was cold, but oddly poised. He looked ready to explode into some action, even though the vines holding them were strong.

Tevela pointed to Sael. "Begin with him."

Kile gritted out, trying to keep his voice calm. "You promised that you would speak to me."

"When you are calm," Tevela answered without looking at him.

"I am," Kile replied.

"You are not," Tevela insisted and then ignored him.

Cheta wasn't foolish. The little brown man stood before Sael's cage and simply held his hand up, well out of range if Sael should try and grab him through the bars. Sael's eyes wilted, but only for a moment, and then he was blinking, startled.

Cheta laughed. It was strained, but relieved. "You may release this one."

Tevela was uncertain. "He held a weapon. He threatened to kill us."

"His mind is gentle," Cheta assured her. "He struggles to hide it, but he abhors violence. He dreams of healing and learning medicine, not holding swords and threatening Charia." he frowned, but was still unconcerned. "He is excited by the naked men about him. He longs for them, but it is his nature. He isn't like this one here," he motioned briefly to Jhan, "who has forgotten what it is."

"He has nothing to learn?" Tevela was disappointed. It was obvious that she had wanted Sael to fail and to need their teaching.

"Only what life will teach," Cheta replied with a shrug, his opinion not swayed by a suddenly cursing, embarrassed, and angry Sael.

"But this one..." Tevela moved confidently to Obahn's snarling face. "He is in need of our teaching. It is plain, even without your Power, Cheta."

Cheta concentrated and raised his hand. After a moment, he flinched and went pale, nodding in agreement. "He is in dire need of our teaching, High One."

Tevela nodded, pleased. “Then, begin.”

Cheta only narrowed his eyes. Obahn was suddenly frozen, face going blank of expression. He slumped and sat heavily, hands lax in his lap. “It is done,” Cheta announced. “He will remain cooperative while we teach him.”

“Good. Release these others.” Tevela motioned to all of the company except Jhan. She faced them and said simply. “Go your way and remember to bring only peace and order into our forests henceforth!”

The roots that made up the cages were stroked by a very small brown girl. They retracted at her touch and slowly sank back into the ground with a creaking of wood against wood. The vines that held the others relaxed as she touched them as well, and Ahlen, Ixien, and Minyah all stood up, flexing their stiff muscles.

Their beasts were brought forward, but none of them moved to leave. Sael spoke first as he rapidly dressed in his clothes alongside Kile. “I will not leave without Lord Obahn!”

“Jhan is coming with me!” Kile said an instant afterwards.

“You may stay until he is healed,” Tevela assured Sael, but she was sterner with Kile. “You cannot take this one.” She put a small hand on Jhan’s arm. “You want it for what it is not. You will get in the way of our teachings.”

“Jhan isn’t staying with you!” Kile insisted as he slammed on his boots and stood before Tevela defiantly, but they were all weaponless now and surrounded by many of Tevela’s people. There wasn’t any telling what other types of Power they might possess.

“You will release us,” that calm voice came from Ixien. He stepped forward, as small as they were, but seemingly more dangerous. “I need these people to help me reach the Sun God. I will not allow you to get in my way.”

Ixien’s hair glittered like glass as he turned and made a small circle, facing all of them. Tevela wasn’t impressed. “You are emotionless and ordered. There isn’t even a hint of violence in you. You may take these others and go-”

“I need Jhan. I need Obahn to lead these others.”

“We will not release them,” Tevela told him resolutely.

“Then I must force you,” Ixien assured her.

“How?” Tevela raised a hand. Her people began moving forward, raising their hands as well as if ready to release abilities they hadn’t as yet seen.

“I am one with fire,” Ixien told her at last. His crystal eyes swept the trees and the winter leaves,

dried and volatile underneath his feet. “I can burn your forest down before you could do anything to me.”

Ixien began to glow, his skin shining and pulsing as if it contained a blue flame. Tevela was horrified. “You cannot do this! Cheta! Stop him!”

“Don’t!” that was Togo. He stepped forward anxiously. “You’ll kill everything and everyone, Ixien! This place will burn too well!”

“Silence!” Kile and Sael both shouted at Togo together and Sael pushed at Togo, moving him away. Minyah growled and threatened him.

“Brother right!” Minyah supported Togo. “Forest burn. Everyone die!”

“I won’t,” Ixien spoke up, voice cold and calculating. “I will walk free.”

Tevela put hands to her face. They were shaking. “We were wrong about you,” she said to Ixien. “You are more violent than all of them!”

“Let us leave!” Kile urge. “You want to teach us, but you don’t know anything about our people! You’ve hurt Jhan! You’ve taken Obahn’s mind from him! Neither of them can be what you want them to be. Even when Jhan was well, she was never calm and ordered! That isn’t our way! Let us leave and we will take our violence and disorder with us.”

“Leave, so that you may inflict it on the world?” Tevela demanded.

Kile was grim. “The world is like us, Tevela, not like you. Surely you’ve met others beside us? Has your teaching helped them?”

Tevela went still, but the fervor never left her eyes. “They failed our teaching. We had to return them to the Earth.”

“You killed them?” Togo was shocked.

“We allowed the Earth to take them back,” Tevela insisted. “We put them in cages and left them in the forest with their violence.”

“Will you do that to Jhan?” Kile demanded angrily. “Look at her! She’s only a witless child! Even your healer couldn’t bring her mind back!”

“Jhan is not a female,” Tevela insisted. “You hide the truth from yourself as surely as it does.”

“Where is the harm in that?” Kile demanded. “Neither of us can live with what was done to her. She can never be a man. She can never be a woman. She is something inbetween. Why can’t she choose what *not* to be?”

“It leads to violence,” Tevela explained. “Lies only last so long and then there is despair. Despair creates violence, to others and to ones self.”

“Jhan wouldn’t commit violence,” Sael suddenly spoke up, very serious, “even to save herself. She endured terrible things... she could have killed me, easily, she could have killed others, she didn’t.” he motioned to Jhan, who was staring at the glow of Ixien’s skin as if it were infinitely interesting. “This is the result of her inaction, her non- violence. I think Jhan long ago passed any test you would have cared to give her as your pupil.”

Tevela considered, her eyes never leaving Ixien’s deadly glow. “You do not defend the other, the bloody one.”

“He is indefensible,” Sael replied starkly, “but he is my lord. I will not leave him with you.”

“And I will not give him back his mind,” Tevela assured him defiantly.

“I did not expect so.”

Ixien grew impatient. “We are all leaving.”

“Then go,” Tevela wished him, “but be warned, we are not the only danger in these forests. You may yet be returned to Earth before you can reach its borders.”

“We want our weapons returned,” Sael demanded.

Tevela shrugged, but she was pleased with herself. “They have been destroyed.”

Sael went white with anger and Kile looked as if he had just discovered that his arm had been amputated. He nervously gripped his empty scabbard. “Even our knives?” he demanded.

“No, you may have those,” Tevela motioned and one of her people came forward to hand them back. “They are for hunting and eating, not violence.”

Her ignorance was blatant, but none of them corrected her as they sheathed their knives. Kile took hold of Jhan’s elbow and led her to the beasts. She went docilely. It was Zerain who stepped forward and confronted her husband. She stared into his blank eyes and then looked helplessly at Sael. Sael didn’t have any words of comfort for her. He helped her pull Obahn to his feet. The man cooperated, and he walked where they led, but his face was blank of any thought or emotion.

“He will stay so,” Tevela told them, perhaps feeling compassion for Zerain’s anguish, “until he imagines something other than killing. He must learn.”

Kile had checked the beasts and found them ready to travel. He nodded to Sael and Sael called to the others. Gathering close, Ixien joined them, keeping his eyes on the Charia threateningly as they moved off into the forest and left them behind.

They walked through the day and only stopped when their steps began to stumble in the gathering gloom of evening. Forced to make camp, they lit a large fire and sat about it nervously, eying the forest for signs that the Charia had followed them.

Ixien was clearly exhausted, but determined to keep glowing, a beacon of threat in the darkness. White hot, everyone sat well away from him, ate their dinner, and then tried to cope with their new problems.

Kile sat, cross legged in front of Jhan. She stared at him, as blank as Obahn, and he found that he couldn't stop the tears in his eyes. It was obvious that he wanted to reach out to her and crush her in his arms, but he held himself still, trembling and grief stricken.

"I thought that I was doing the right thing," Kile explained softly, ignoring the others who sat close enough to hear. "I didn't know that I was raping you. I thought you were accepting me. I-I would die rather than ever hurt you, Jhan. I love you. You're my wife. I've come all this way to find you. Please- Please tell me that you don't hate me for what I've done."

Jhan frowned. He was disturbing her. It was painful. She was two people in the same body. The Charia hadn't understood that her spirit was female. Making her acutely aware that her body was male, and denying her any illusion to the contrary, she felt as if she were thinking with two minds and dealing with two separate reactions to Kile. One was interested in him, appreciating his beauty and his gentleness. The other side of her was perplexed. That was the man side. It didn't know what Kile wanted. What it suspected, it didn't want. It was faintly ashamed and fearful of Kile's power.

"Why are you bothering talking to her, Lord Kile?" Ahlen crouched by them, face daring some violent response from Kile. "Jhan doesn't understand you. She doesn't even know who you are. Those Charia have probably taken what little wit she had left. I don't think you even remember that he had you, do you Jhan?" he leaned close to Jhan's blank face. "Do you remember Lord Kile sticking his manhood in you? No? There must have been some pain. He's a big man. Can't you remember? No, I thought not."

Ahlen looked at Kile blandly. "You must not have been very exciting. She still remembers when Sael and I had her. That's why she screamed when she and Obahn went to keshun together. He must not have been as gentle as you were."

Kile's face had been suffusing with blood, his lips drawing back over his teeth and his blue eyes glittering savagely. Only sheer disbelief kept him rooted in place until the very last of Ahlen's words, and then he erupted off of the ground and leapt onto him, bringing his knife to Ahlen's throat. He paused there, relishing the moment and wanting it not to be a quick death. Kile wanted satisfaction.

"Do you want to die?" Kile seethed through gritted teeth.

Ahlen was afraid, but resolute. "I think I do," he admitted. "Do you recall what Jhan screamed when the Charia made her know what she was? She screamed out, *I can't live!* Maybe I can't live,

knowing what I am; what I've done. It doesn't matter that I was drugged, I still did them. I still raped a gelded man almost to death. I still- I still forced Sael under me and did the same to him. I stole your wife from you and dragged her through terrible pain and misery. What was it all for? Was it for my sister, or myself? Neither of us was worth so much. Go ahead. Slit my throat. I deserve that."

"You are a foolish boy," Sael muttered to Ahlen as he helped Zerain lay Obahn down and cover him with a blanket. "A dead man can't make amends. You were able to care for Jhan far better than me. You could stop her fits. Why are you depriving Kile of the only man who can help her make this journey to the Sun God?"

Ahlen said nothing. He simply stared at the knife edge, waiting for death. The blade tensed, once, twice, and then flicked away from Ahlen's juggler as Kile emitted a tortured groan. He shoved Ahlen back and retreated to Jhan's side.

"Why won't you do it?" Ahlen asked in a voice constricted with emotion.

"I won't do it, because I love Jhan more than I love my revenge!" Kile seethed. He pointed the knife at Ahlen. "You will care for her and you will teach me how to do it. When I know enough, then I will kill you!" He glared at Sael as well. "If you're lying, if this Sun God can't heal Jhan, I will deal with you too!"

"I would expect nothing less," Sael replied stiffly.

Kile sat moodily staring at Jhan, the knife still bared in his hand as if he hadn't quite made up his mind not to do violence. Ahlen watched him, but his words were for Sael. "Why? Why did you stop him?"

Sael sighed as he twitched some leaves from Obahn's hair. "You stole a man's wife without challenging him fairly for her. That is shameful, but not something to die for. You feel disgust because you keshuned with Jhan, but you thought of her, as now, as a woman. She is this man's wife. She was mine. You feel disgust and shame because you were with me, making you wonder if you are Ekhal even though it was a drug that made you do it."

"I told you," Ahlen grated with haunted eyes. "I can't believe that even a drug can make a man so forget himself."

"Do you want me now?" Sael demanded.

Zerain grumbled at such a question and moved away. Kile scowled at them blackly.

"No," Ahlen replied tightly.

"When you saw me naked, in that cage," Sael persisted. "Did you want me then?"

"No!" Ahlen snapped.

Sael was frank. “I wanted Kile and Obahn. Even though I was in mortal danger, I still looked at them. That is my nature, as the Charia said. It isn’t yours Ahlen. Without the drug, you don’t want me or Jhan any longer. There isn’t any reason to die for such foolishness.”

Ahlen shook his head sharply. “Then dying for the singular crime of having brought Jhan to this in the first place is my reason.”

“I don’t think that’s enough for you,” Sael insisted.

“It is for me,” Kile spoke up. It was obvious that he was barely containing himself after having listened to their open conversation about such perverse things. “I’m the last man to judge any of you for being what you are, but I will judge anyone who hurt my wife. Nothing excuses that. Not even a drug, as Ahlen said. Once my wife is healed, I will avenge her.”

Sael smiled grimly. “Obahn has already paid, Lord Kile. When I reach the Sun God, I will sacrifice myself and be beyond your reach. If Ahlen lives so long, he will be the one left for you to deal with.”

“He is the one I most want,” Kile told him and turned his back on them.

Ahlen rose and paced the boundaries of the camp. Ixien continued to glow, staring wide eyed into the dark as if he could see things they couldn’t. Zerain settled by Obahn with her blankets and went to sleep, hoping against hope that her husband would recover himself in the morning. Minyah yawned and stretched out on his side like a great fur rug by the fire.

Togo was suddenly there by Sael as Sael moved away from Obahn and Zerain to give them some privacy. Poking at the fire idly with a stick, Togo looked up at Sael with eyes flickering with firelight. Jhan watched them curiously over Kile’s shoulder, intrigued by the play of shadow and light on them both and the intense emotion on Sael’s face. It was obvious that Togo wanted to say something to Sael, but his jaw was tight on the words, refusing to utter them.

“I don’t want these clothes,” Jhan finally said, breaking the silence.

“What?” Kile replied distantly, still lost in his own angry, roiling thoughts.

“I don’t want to wear a dress. I’m a man.”

Kile’s attention was on her then as he sheathed his knife and looked ready to weep again. “Why do you think that?”

“It’s the truth.”

Kile was blunt and unintentionally cruel, “There isn’t any part of a man left to you. It was all cut away, don’t you remember? Shall I show you?”

Tears started in Jhan’s eyes. “I am a woman, but this body is a man’s. I shouldn’t dress it as if it weren’t. I can’t pretend any more. I can’t.”

Kile rubbed at his face as if he would tear at his skin. “Why did they do this to you? It will drive you mad! It will drive me mad!”

“They showed me the truth,” Jhan insisted and began unbuttoning her dress herself. Her fingers fumbled and her mind couldn’t keep her thoughts coherent while she attempted it. Her words became disjointed as memory flashed and faded like bits of shattered glass catching the light. “My mind can be anything it wants. This body can only be a man. You can’t have it. I’m not a thekling. I’m not anything. I don’t feel. That’s truth too. Why should I pretend that I do? Why should I let any of you pretend? That drug... It showed me the truth before the Charia. It made me feel. I *wanted*. I *wanted* a woman; Saleoch. If I could have, I would have used her as Sael and Ahlen did me. She showed me that I am a man.”

Kile had put his hands on Jhan’s shoulders, shaking her as if that could bring her to her senses. “I don’t want you as a man! I can’t do that Jhan! You can’t insist on this! I’m not a thekling!”

“It wouldn’t matter if you were,” Jhan replied. “You can’t have me. Nobody can. I don’t have anything to give anyone.”

Kile pushed Jhan’s hands from her buttons and began doing them up again. Jhan tried to undo them again. It became a struggle of emotions as well as strength. Jhan lost to Kile, easily, and also lost her grip on her mind. When the pain arced through her forehead, she cried out and collapsed to the ground, her body going numb and dead.

“What a mess they have made of you.”

Jhan sat up in a world of swirling purple skies reflected in a purple lake. Everything was clear here, falling into place and making sense at last. She sighed in relief. It was like finding sanctuary in a storm.

“Yes,” the bodiless voice continued. “Here you aren’t encumbered by the parts of your brain that have been damaged. Here there is only the dream and an essence of your self.”

“I want to stay here,” Jhan said resolutely. “I don’t want to go back to that thing I’ve become.”

“The Charia deal in absolutes,” the voice told her thoughtfully. “That’s easy to do when your world isn’t very complicated, but you and your kind thrive on complication. Your illusions about yourselves keep you balanced and sane. You wanted to believe that you were still a woman, even after you lost that body and was given another one. You would have accepted it, eventually, but you were

given fuel for your illusion. You were given a body mimicking a woman and a man that accepted your illusion as truth. Now, stripped of that illusion, both of you suffer greatly. It will be interesting to see how you solve your dilemma."

"I can't solve it." Jhan balled her hands into fists and stood up, turning slowly around, but not finding anything but the rolling landscape to look at. "I want my illusion back."

"Chicks don't go back into their shells," the voice admonished. "The truth is inescapable once it is learned, but it can be interpreted in many ways. You chose to believe that you are a man. That's only another illusion. In fact, you are neither. You are a neuter. Knowing that, you must learn to live with it. You must find a way, Jhan, to live with being neither male nor female."

"Why?" Jhan asked dejectedly. "Why must I? Why can't I just give up and stay here?"

"Because, I need you."

"Need me?" Jhan was angry and bitter. "I can't even help myself. How am I going to help you?"

"I will tell you when you finally arrive."

"Why should I even go?"

The voice was confident. It knew that it had what Jhan most wanted. "I am endowed with great medical knowledge and capabilities. I have been given extensive training in all psychological areas. My molecular reformation abilities are phenomenal. I can give you almost anything you wish."

"Almost?"

"I know what you most want, but making you a complete woman is beyond my abilities," the voice explained regretfully. "I can't remake you as if you had never been a man. I cannot give you the eggs to carry life. What I can do, is make you well again, but it is critical that you reach me soon. Your mind is suffering damaging seizures. What little healing the Charia accomplished will soon collapse. Your hormonal imbalances will soon begin to damage your body as well."

"What?" Jhan grasped at that. "What are you saying?"

"I know that Selaya healed your body. It's skill in that area was meant for emergency use only. It didn't possess the knowledge to understand that your body was in a delicate balance and had been changed to operate with very little hormonal activity. Selaya turned on systems within your body that are slowly causing it to reassert the greater hormonal activity of a young man. Your body will be unable to withstand it. Your heart will fail, eventually."

Jhan touched her face in a panic, feeling for the first growth of hair there. "Will I-Will-,"

"No," the voice assured her, "but you may start to grow again, or your bones may simply become brittle and break. It is difficult to tell. You will also begin to suffer internal ills without your genitals to

regulate hormonal activity. Do you wish me to explain further? You are distressed."

Jhan gripped at her face, taking deep breaths to calm her horror and think clearly. "I don't need you to explain any more. I know what Dagara did to me. I know, to the last piece of bone and flesh, how he made me into his neuter toy. I think I guessed, after Selaya healed me. I knew something wasn't going to be right. Another illusion gone; I don't think I can lose many more."

"I can turn this off again," the voice assured her. "I can make you as normal as you can ever be, but you must come where I am."

"Where I go isn't up to me," Jhan replied bitterly. "I don't have any mind left. They'll rip me apart long before I reach you. They already have."

"You've endured so much. You are very strong. Don't doubt that strength."

"Gently," a voice warned. "You must get her attention gently. You aren't punishing her, you're just trying to make her aware of you so that she stops whatever she's doing. If you startle her, she may become agitated enough to have another fit."

Cold water splattered Jhan's face. The little droplets beaded and began a slow trek down her face, dripping off her chin. She blinked and focused on Kile, crouched before her with a handful of water. His free hand poised to dip into it and splatter her again. Ahlen was standing beside him, bent over and staring at Jhan intensely.

Jhan had something in her hands. She looked down and saw that it was the flail like tail of a baku. Looking aside, she saw the beasts' hooves within kicking distance. The beast itself was looking back at her curiously, deciding how to respond to the tugs on its tail. It was just now deciding to get angry and Kile and Ahlen had been too afraid of tipping the balance to approach further.

Jhan dropped the tail, having that much sense, but she was sitting on the ground and her mind couldn't figure out how to get her out of such a dangerous situation. Sael saved her. He tipped a bag of grain at the baku and shook it to get its attention. Flapping ears in interest, the beast plodded forward, away from Jhan.

"Gods!" Kile breathed and lunged forward to pull Jhan further out of harm's way.

Jhan submitted docilely, listening to Kile's soft curses as he brought her back to the fire. It was smoldering embers and the morning sun was just breaking through the forest canopy. Obahn sat there, as still as death, staring at nothing while Zerain patiently spooned grain into his mouth.

Jhan remembered her dream, but awake, her mind couldn't make any sense out of it or anything

else. Her senses seemed overloaded, every flicker of sunlight, or even brief movement around her, breaking her concentration. One thing did stick in her mind. She remembered that she wasn't a woman.

"I'm sorry," Togo was saying to Kile. He looked guilty and drawn, standing by several packs. "I was- I thought to help Zerain. The child within her makes her weary. I know I should have watched Jhan, but she has been as still as Obahn all night."

"We must go!" Ixien was pacing. He looked gaunt, his skin a sickly sheen. "One more day and we will be out of this forest. One more day and I can rest."

Minyah was looking as agitated as Ixien. "I smell odd things in the trees. Bad animals. Careful. Must be careful."

Kile swore. "Knives will be a poor weapon if we're attacked!"

Sael went to stand by Obahn. He looked from the catatonic man to Zerain. Her shoulders slumped as if Sael had said something devastating. Very slowly, she pulled off her veil. Sael unwound the red scarf from his hair. Both of them stuffed them into their packs.

"What is it?" Togo wondered in concern. Sael was looking so grim, that Togo even reached out a hand as if to comfort him. He drew it back when Sael flinched from it and turned resolutely to everyone.

"Lord Obahn has gone from us," Sael announced. "Our oaths are broken. We will let the forest have him." he nodded to Zerain. "You are now my wife, as is custom."

"What about my child?" Zerain demanded.

"We both know the truth of that!" Sael grated. "I don't have to protect Obahn's honor any longer and he will not be there to claim your child before our people. I will claim it, but you know how long my life will be once we reach the Temple of the Sun God. Perhaps Ahlen will take pity on you then-"

"I would rather be wed to an Ekhal than a foreign boy!" Zerain snapped fiercely.

"Without a husband to claim your child," Sael told her cruelly, "you will be outcast when you return to our people, just as my mother was."

"I will not be outcast," Zerain replied confidently. "I will kill the child as soon as it is born, as your mother should have done to you!"

"How can you say such a thing?" Ahlen shouted incredulously. He faced Zerain as if he would attack her, bent and trembling with his outraged fury. "How can you say that you would kill our child?"

"Our child?" Zerain mocked. "You don't know that, boy. You will never know that! I will kill it."

"I won't let you!" Ahlen screamed at her.

"I won't let you either," Togo joined in, face full of horror.

"I certainly won't stand by while you murder a baby!" Kile exclaimed. "Give it to my wife, if you don't want it! She has been longing for such a blessing!"

"Give it to your addled, Ikhil *wife*?" Zerain lashed back. "Why would I let two men, and one of them mad, no perhaps both of you mad, raise a baby? It is better off dead!"

"This is monstrous!" Ahlen cried out as if his heart was breaking. "I will take the child! I have sisters and a mother to raise it!"

"Stop this!" Ixien staggered into their shouting group. "We must go! We must go at once!"

"Must go!" Minyah agreed, distressed by the danger he sensed and the terrible conversation they had been having. He crouched on all fours, looking even more like a beast, tufted ears cocked as he tried to listen to the forest all around them.

Zerain turned away and began finishing her packing with confident movements. Togo helped her begin putting them on the beasts. Ahlen grabbed Sael hard by the arm, saying fiercely, "Say something to her!"

"What shall I say?" Sael asked coldly. "She is within her rights."

Ahlen shouted defiantly as he went to get his baku. "I will stop her!" he promised. "I will be there when my child is born!"

Kile crouched by Jhan, looking into her eyes and trying to be calm. "We have to go now." He paused and then asked softly, "Do you remember me?"

"Yes," Jhan replied distantly. "You want me to be your wife."

"You are my wife," Kile insisted as he helped her stand. "We've been married for over a year now."

"I'm not a woman," Jhan replied. "Are you a thekling?"

Kile's jaw worked. "If it will make it easier for you, I'll say yes."

"I'm not a man either," Jhan replied.

Kile stared and then shook his head. His big hand rubbed at his forehead and he looked ready to collapse with grief. "What do you want me to say?" he demanded. "Just tell me what will make you love me again and I'll say it! I'm not smart enough to work this out for myself, Jhan."

"I-I don't know," Jhan admitted. "I don't know the answer. I don't remember you enough to give you one." She groaned and swept the clearing with her eyes. "I have to go to the Sun God. He has the answer."

Kile was puzzled. "Why do you think that?"

"I don't know."

Kile paced in a tight circle around Jhan and then he faced her again, taking hold of her. “I’ll take you there. I wasn’t sure before, but, now I am. You seem lucid enough now. I believe you know what you’re saying.”

“Then you are as mad as she is,” Ahlen said as he came up beside Jhan with the baku, anger still burning in him. “Jhan spouts nonsense continuously sometimes, and some of it seems to make perfect sense, until you realize that she’s dreaming it all and doesn’t even know you’re there. In a moment, Kile, she won’t remember that she even spoke to you. Why don’t you go back home with her and spare her this journey?”

“I would have to kill you before I go,” Kile warned murderously.

“So you would,” Ahlen said without a blink of fear.

“She *does* know what she’s saying,” Kile was adamant.

“Does she?” Ahlen snapped his fingers above Jhan’s head. She looked up, distracted, and the sun sliced across her eyes. She winced and then lost herself and her thoughts. When she looked down again, she knew only a few things. She was nothing. Kile was tormenting her. Ahlen was a stranger.

“Jhan?” Kile asked worriedly.

Jhan bent and became intensely interested in Kile’s boot laces, saying nothing.

“I have to-have to-”

“I know,” Ahlen said, suddenly compassionate. “I will watch her.”

The boot laces jerked out of Jhan’s hands and Kile strode away to recover himself and to hide his weeping from the others. Ahlen helped Jhan straighten, buttoning her coat and saying softly, “I do deserve to die for what I’ve done to the both of you.”

That needed a response. Jhan knew that it made her angry. Still, she said nothing. She watched everyone finish packing and gather together in a ragged line. Obahn had been left conspicuously by the smoldering fire.

“You intend to leave him?” Togo was outraged.

“He is dead already,” Sael muttered and began walking. He was taking the lead as if it were natural. A dark figure in his long black coat and black gloves, his loose hair and unveiled face made him seem too young, yet his steady eyes kept anyone from arguing with his authority. Zerain didn’t challenge it. She followed in his wake, her unveiled face bitter.

“This isn’t right!” Togo burst out. Sael looked back with a raised eyebrow. Togo was panting as he strode to Obahn. “Selaya taught us that life is to be cherished. You speak of killing babies as if it were nothing. You leave someone to die as if they were worn out harness! I won’t let you do this! Obahn

isn't dead!"

"Then you care for him," Sael replied diffidently. "We aren't so cruel. We know that Obahn wouldn't have wanted to live this way. You only shame him by doing this."

"I don't think he will notice," Togo snapped back as he lifted Obahn to his feet. Obahn responded automatically, as if he were sleepwalking or hypnotized. He began walking when Togo led him forward, and he kept on walking with hardly any guidance.

Sael was irritated, but he shook his head and didn't put a stop to it. "We are a perfect target," was all he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

(Fire Dance)

The trees began thinning out, and the temperature began warming, as the sun was finally able to reach them through the forest canopy. Ixien reached up and drank the sunlight in like a starving man, groaning in pain, but still unwilling to stop his defensive glow. He grew almost wild when they stopped at midday to rest.

“It is only a little further!” Ixien’s uncharacteristic emotions showed how truly agitated he was. “We must go on!”

“Yes,” Minyah was clearly afraid. His hair was bristled and he was flexing his claws as he paced the clearing they had stopped in. “Must go. Danger! Smell it, Togo! I smell them very close. They have been following!”

“The Charia?” Togo wondered as he had Obahn sit. He unstopped a water skin and gave the man a drink. Obahn swallowed only half, the other half ran down his face.

“No!” Minyah went to his brother and tugged plaintively at his clothes. “Little people not follow. Animals come. They hunt. I smell blood!”

Sael was listening. He was dismissive as he sat on a rock surrounded by ferns. “Animals will be wary of us, Minyah. They’re probably following to pick up any scraps of food we leave behind.” He looked up at the scant treetops. “You could fly, Togo, and look about, just to be sure.”

Togo scowled. “If I leave, you might leave Obahn behind. Promise me that you will not.”

“I won’t do that,” Sael declared angrily.

Togo wiped at Obahn’s mouth with a rag. “Then we will just have to be careful not to be surprised. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jhan watched the sunlight play in Kile’s hair. She reached out once or twice to touch it, but he pushed her hand away irritably, thinking that she meant to pull on it. He was sitting next to her, her back to a great trunk of a tree and he facing her. He had some dried jerky in his lap, slowly pulling it apart as he worked through something in his mind.

“Are you going to hurt me?” Jhan finally asked.

Kile looked up with a frown, studying her eyes and maybe trying to see if she was being lucid. “No, I would never do that.”

“What are you going to do?”

Kile puzzled over that. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Are you going to keep me?”

“Is that what you want?” Kile wondered.

“I can’t choose. No one will let me.”

“I will. Tell me-Tell me what you want.”

Jhan studied his handsome face. He was both comforting and frightening. Sometimes, she almost remembered who he was, but then it would slip away from her grasp, leaving her with this giant of a man she absolutely didn’t know.

“I don’t want you to touch me,” Jhan finally replied.

“Did it hurt so much? Was it so terrible?” Kile asked in anguish.

“What?”

“When we were... together; when we made love. Is that what you mean?”

“Made love. What’s that?” Jhan asked.

Kile’s face was flushing and he struggled through his pain to reply. “When I- when I put myself in you. Do you understand that?”

“That’s making love?” Jhan asked. When Kile nodded, embarrassed, Jhan did understand. She nodded to the others. “That’s not what they call it. They call it rape. They are ashamed of it, sorry for it, because they did that to me instead of with a woman.”

Kile scowled. “Who told you that? If you still remember it, it can’t have been long ago.”

“That one,” Jhan nodded towards Ahlen. “He keeps telling me how sorry he is.”

Kile shook with his anger, but Jhan reached out before he could rise and release it on Ahlen.

“He’s right,” Jhan told him. “That’s why I don’t want you to touch me. The Charia made me see it. That voice in my dream told me too. I’m nothing. I don’t feel anything. I can’t remember anything. I can barely think. I’m not a man or a woman that anyone should touch me. I’m nothing.”

“Stop saying that!” Kile seethed. “You’re everything to me! Everything! It never mattered what your body was or wasn’t. I accepted it and you were able to be a woman even when you were clearly a man! Why can’t you do that now? What’s changed? Why does it matter at all what you choose to be?”

“I was pretending,” Jhan replied. “The Charia took that away. The voice in my dream-it told me I had to learn to live with it.”

“Voice?” Kile sighed and looked away. “Ahlen is right. I can’t believe anything you say. You’re just spouting nonsense!”

Jhan managed to capture a few locks of Kile’s hair. She ran it through her fingers and he closed his eyes as if she had chosen to caress him. It startled her. He was being absolutely submissive to her. His head was bowed, as if he feared to make her stop by moving.

“What do you want from me?” Jhan wondered. “I don’t have anything to give.”

Kile still didn’t move, but his voice was small and helpless. “I won’t take anything from you,” he promised, “that you aren’t willing to give, but I can’t live without you, Jhan. Even if-even if you can’t be healed, I’m going to stay with you. Even if you don’t want me, or want me to touch you again, I’ll still stay. What you are- man or woman- I don’t care. It’s the person inside that I love.”

“Who are you?” Jhan asked, losing herself in the sparkle and feel of his hair.

Kile opened his eyes and met hers. “I’m Kile Helarion Dor, Jhan. I’m your husband and the man who will always love you. Never doubt that. I’ll repeat it every morning and every evening so that you never truly forget.”

Something moved behind Kile. It was a pattern of stripes and splotches that distracted Jhan from the golden hair she held in her fingers. She narrowed her eyes, trying her utmost to concentrate. Something deep down told her that this was important somehow, more important than anything else. She forgot her emotional words to Kile, forgot Kile, forgot the pain of her self knowledge, but couldn’t quite forget to keep watching the odd creature that moved from the thick ferns.

Like a Tasmanian tiger, was Jhan’s only thought, but she couldn’t fathom what that meant. The memory that went with it was burned out of her like so much else. The creature’s long snout, and rat-like body, was as large as a big dog, and its thick tail was almost comically out of proportion. Its rows of sharp teeth, and razor like claws, were meant for killing.

Jhan was moving without thought. Her body uncoiled like a spring, ingrained impulses overriding still damaged joints and her misfiring brain, to throw herself at the charging beast. Unseeing, Kile was pushing past Jhan at the same time, springing in the opposite direction as he shouted and pulled out his long knife. The camp was being attacked by a pack of the beasts.

The beast’s jaws ripped at Jhan’s coat, sinking and tearing into her arm as her free hand chopped down and cracked its spine. It fell, still gnawing in its death spasm, and she was forced to rip her arm out of its jaws. Blood flew and splattered as she spun at the screams and shouts of beasts and men.

One of Kile’s imala had fallen, its throat torn out. The beasts were trying to drag it off, snapping and snarling at the men who were trying to drive them away. Several of the beasts, thinking that they were going to be cheated of their prey, attempted to bring down more. None of the men could get near enough to sink a knife in them.

“Let them have the beast!” Sael shouted as he avoided snapping jaws. He slashed with his knife as he backed away towards Zerain to protect her.

“No,” Minyah growled. “They will come back for more!” He charged them with claws and teeth,

as much a beast suddenly as they were.

The animals retreated, cowed by Minyah's rush at their pack leader. That animal went down with flying blood and didn't rise again. When Minyah barreled into another, claws raking open its side, they fled, making ear splitting, screeching noises.

Togo rushed to Minyah's side, but Minyah hadn't been harmed. Togo put arms around him and it was clear that Minyah was shaking and distressed by his own show of violence.

Kile hadn't gone far from Jhan, thinking he was protecting her. When he turned and saw the dead beast, with Jhan standing by it with blood dripping down her torn arm, he swore furiously and came to her side.

Pulling off Jhan's coat and unbuttoning her dress, Kile hurriedly pulled it down and off of her wounded arm, swearing in a running stream. "I didn't even look around! I should have known! Animals always attack those furthest from the group. We were off here by the ferns, not even thinking, not even considering danger. Stupid! Stupid! I should know better! I'm a soldier!"

Jhan was staring at Kile, not at her wounded arm. He was almost on top of her, taking clothes Zerein handed him to wipe at the blood so that he could see how badly Jhan was wounded. He smelled of sweat and panic, his muscles tensing and bunching anxiously.

"She broke its back!" Ahlen whistled in amazement as he stared down at the dead beast. "If I had known that she still had that much skill, I would have been more careful before now!"

"Help me!" Kile barked at him. "Get me some water!"

But Ahlen was coming over and leaning down. "Her coat was thick enough to take the brunt, Kile. Those are just shallow slashes." He narrowed his eyes. "In fact, I think she did some of that to herself yesterday."

Kile's hands on Jhan tightened along with his growing anger. "I've had enough from you!" he exploded at Ahlen.

"Look!" Ahlen shouted back. "You're hysterical! She isn't hurt that badly!" Ahlen grabbed Jhan's arm to turn it to some light coming down through the tree tops. "You can see that the blood is slowing already."

Both of the men were panting and sweating now, their anger washing over Jhan as their grips tightened on her. Jhan suddenly felt as if she were going to be pulled apart between them at any moment. The memory that followed was hardly that, disjointed and out of focus, but it was still full of enough pain and terror for Jhan to understand what she had feared from them all along.

Ahlen glanced aside and saw Jhan's face. He immediately released her and backed away, hissing

for Kile to do the same. Not understanding, Kile continued to shout. Jhan wanted away from him, as if he were as dangerous as the beast that she had just killed. Jhan felt herself uncoil once more, automatic and unstoppable. Her hand cocked to lash out with deadly force as her feet gathered beneath her to propel her away; two different reactions out of balance. It gave Ahlen enough time to react.

Shoving Kile out of the way, the edge of Jhan's hand merely clipped his head instead of breaking it open. In her mad scramble to get away, Jhan didn't stop to see what effect that had on him. She huddled against the huge tree trunk, arms wrapping about her aching head and body tucking as far into itself as she could manage, as if she could avoid an assault that way.

They didn't come for her, but Jhan continued to wait, muscles clenching and becoming bands of pain that shot along every inch of her along with her throbbing head. When she finally dared to look, she could hardly believe what she saw. Everyone was preparing to leave again, slowly shaking off their shock from the attack, but knowing that they had to get away from there before the animals grew bold enough to attack again. Sael was shouting orders. The dead imala was stripped of its harness and packs. They were all ignoring her, as if she didn't exist, and that was the best thing they could have possibly done.

Kile was stretched out before Jhan, one hand to the rising bruise where she had struck him. He too was ignoring her. His eyes were grim and his jaw was set, but he lay quietly and didn't even look at her. Again, Jhan was struck by his submissiveness to her. She had imagined him attacking her. Now, she couldn't. He seemed purposefully making himself defenseless against her, almost daring her to hurt him mentally or physically.

Jhan was on the verge of another, mind damaging seizure, but this relaxed, calming posture of Kile's teased her away from it. He was like an anchor that kept Jhan from falling into a whirlpool. When he, very slowly, reached out and put a sparkling bracelet by Jhan's feet, she didn't react, but it pulled her even further away from the seizure, her mind mesmerized by the sparkle of tiny jewels and the glint of gold, so like Kile's hair.

Kile turned on his side. He didn't distract Jhan by coming any closer. He simply reached out as far as he could, took hold of the bracelet, and then, very gently, he clasped it around Jhan's wrist. She brought the wrist closer to her eyes, totally entranced now.

"It's working," Ahlen said close by. He moved cautiously from behind a tree. "I think she's calm now."

Kile sat up, still rubbing at his forehead. Jhan wanted to look at him, see what he was going to do, but the bracelet refused to stop being fascinating. When Kile became confident enough to begin

treating her wounded arm, she didn't remember why she had been afraid of him.

"You didn't have to give her such an expensive thing," Ahlen was saying. "A handful of colored leaves did the trick before. She'll only ruin that or lose it."

"It's hers," Kile bit back, trying to stay calm. "It was my gift on the first anniversary of our marriage. I found it in the stables while I was getting a pack harness from the tack room. It must have fallen off while she was struggling with you."

"She didn't-," Ahlen stopped, swallowed. "I drugged her. I never hurt her, not then anyway."

"Does it really matter now?" Kile replied.

"No," Ahlen sighed and looked ill with self loathing.

They left the forest as the morning sun began breaking over a line of hills. They had all silently agreed to travel through the night and now they were exhausted. The landscape stretching out before them, arid and dotted with sparse trees and thorny bushes, wasn't welcoming. When they happened on a pool of water, clean and clear, it was a barrier they couldn't bring themselves to cross.

Ixien was the first to decide to stop. He staggered to a flat rock, warm with sunlight, and stretched out on it full length as he finally allowed his glow to die. His white hair and gaunt white skin, made him seem like a corpse.

Sael was staring at Ixien. "I suppose that means that we are out of the Charia's range," he surmised and then turned to Minyah. "Are we still being followed by those beasts?"

Minyah shook his head, relaxed now. "Gone. Don't like open land."

"Good." Sael sat down heavily and began taking off his boots. "I need to bathe the stink of that forest off of me. We'll rest here, get our bearings, and eat before continuing."

They kept the animals away from the water while they filled their skins and Zerain filled her cooking pots. Once that was done, Sael pulled off his clothes and dove into the pond. He surfaced with a contented sigh. The water was warm, the rocks that formed its banks keeping it the temperature of bath water despite the cool air of the night.

Togo checked to make certain that Obahn was comfortable and then he undressed as well. He and Minyah joined Sael in the water, laughing at the wonderful feeling and the cessation of worry.

Ahlen nodded, agreeing with their actions, but, instead of joining them immediately, he crouched and began unbuttoning Jhan's dress. Kile was outraged.

“What are you doing?”

Ahlen wrinkled his nose. “Bathing Jhan as I have done ever since she became like this. She stinks, she’s dirty, and her wound needs cleaning.”

Kile was livid. “You are not going to undress my wife in front of everyone!”

Kile’s anger made Ahlen apprehensive, but he didn’t stop undoing Jhan’s buttons and he didn’t stop from replying cuttingly, “What modesty do you suppose Jhan has left to protect, Lord Kile? Half of us have been between her legs and every one of us has seen her naked already.”

Kile went white. He looked as if he was having one of Jhan’s seizures, but his hands turned into fists, going as white as his face, and he didn’t attack Ahlen as he so obviously longed to do. Instead, he said with tight control, “Leave her. I will care for her now.”

Kile pushed Ahlen out of the way, but it wasn’t violent. He didn’t want to upset Jhan. Ahlen was critical. “Care for her? How will you do that? The Charia made Jhan see the truth of what she is, Lord Kile, but you must learn to see it too. You can’t help her if you don’t accept what she has become.”

Kile’s voice was furious, but still tightly controlled and mocking. “Shall I be as cold and as cruel as you are? How does that help her?”

Ahlen wasn’t daunted by Kile’s dangerous stare. “She doesn’t need your pity, your weeping, your attempts to make her remember what she will never remember, Lord Kile. She needs you to be calm, emotionless, and yes, cruel when you have to control her for her own good. Let her dream. Let her babble. Let her forget her own name, if she hasn’t already! She will never be as she was no matter how you try. For her sake, stop trying. Undress her in front of everyone, bathe her, and take care of her as she needs, or let me do it for you and turn your back!”

“She told me not to touch her,” Kile said and his face trembled with emotion.

“That’s one of the cruel parts,” Ahlen responded bleakly. “You can’t do what she wants. She doesn’t know what’s good for her now.”

Kile looked as hard as the stone all round them, for a long minute, and then he nodded. “I will do it,” he said and pulled off Jhan’s dress.

Kile led Jhan over to the bank of the pond. Sitting her down, he began washing her, using some of the grittier sand as soap. Jhan had heard their conversation, had even followed it a little. Kile’s sad face made Jhan suddenly compassionate. She started to touch his face, but her bracelet chose that moment to jingle. Fascinated, she shook her wrist, making it jingle again and again, and forgot all about Kile.

Kile was staring at Jhan, his eyes following every curve of her body and studying every mark and blemish on her skin as he washed her. “Something’s wrong,” he said after a time.

The jingling stopped. The bracelet had become tangled. Jhan shook it plaintively and Kile patiently untangled it until it jingled again.

"You're still curved like a woman," Kile continued, "but you're all muscle." His fingers traced the washboard pattern of Jhan's stomach. "That's more like man, not a woman. You have more hair. Your skin isn't as soft. I remember-I remember when you grew. Dagara stopped it that time. Is it happening again?"

"I'll watch her." Sael was still naked. He sat on the sand and stretched his legs out towards the water, resting back on his arms. He shook his wet, black hair and smiled like a lazy cat. "Go, Lord Kile. You may not get another chance."

"I'll dress her," Kile said distrustfully.

"Let her dry first and relax," Sael replied. "Trust me. Like Ahlen, I've been caring for her for some time. I know what to do."

Kile reluctantly nodded and then went to undress. Togo came to sit on Jhan's other side. They both watched Kile undress, Sael with faked disinterest. It was Togo who was the first to say something.

"He is very handsome."

Sael nodded and then looked across Jhan at Togo in surprise. Togo's eyes were wide with appreciation, his lips slightly parted. Sael looked back at Kile and they both watched the man slide into the water and begin bathing.

"Like a piece of the sun," Togo murmured.

Sael's reaction was more evident, but he didn't hide it. His people weren't embarrassed by displays of their virility, whatever the cause. Instead, he sat up and tried to distract himself. Unfortunately, he chose to look at Togo. The man wasn't as beautiful as Kile, being lanky with youth, but he was charming in his innocent way and beautifully endowed where Sael thought beauty mattered most. He was also as moved by Kile as Sael was himself and Sael was very impressed.

Togo was more modest. He snatched at his clothes and dressed with quick motions, turning away from Kile and Sael as if he had revealed something he didn't want to. Sael knew what it was.

"You're Ekhal," Sael said bluntly.

Togo didn't turn. "I don't know. I'm too new to these feelings."

"I know," Sael assured him.

"He's not a thekling," Jhan said suddenly, meaning Kile. The bracelet had tangled again and she was finally able to focus on what they were saying. "He won't want you. He doesn't really want me now."

“Is that the clear perception of the mad?” Sael mocked, angry that Jhan had interrupted him. Now that he wasn’t oathed to Obahn, celibacy was something he could choose or discard if it suited him.

“He thought that I was a woman,” Jhan replied seriously, brows knitting as she watched Kile swim. “He sees now that I’m not. He won’t be able to accept it. He won’t.”

“That should be a relief to you,” Sael said, giving her his attention impatiently, “but to me, it only means that I will soon be taking care of you, along with Ahlen, once more.”

Sael looked over to start speaking with Togo again and then swore under his breath. The man was already walking away to help Zerain with their packs.

“Are we still going to the Sun God?” Jhan asked.

Sael glared at her, almost suspecting that she was questioning his honor. “You recall that, do you? Your memory is painfully selective, Jhan Dor. You should concentrate more on recalling the man you supposedly loved.”

“Maybe you should too. What was his name? Hagen?” Jhan stared into Sael’s shocked eyes with an innocent expression and then blinked and said on a completely different tangent, “Are you going to rape Togo as you did me?”

“Very painfully selective,” Sael repeated grimly and then let out a hissing breath. “You don’t know what you’re saying, but you’ve managed to remind me of my duty. I’m free of Obahn, but not free to be a man.” He looked after Togo and sighed again in regret.

Kile left the water, dried and dressed. He came back to Jhan, nodded thanks absently to Sael, and then led Jhan away and put her in a clean dress. After doing up the buttons, he decided to take a small rest. He lay down with Jhan and tucked her into his arms against his chest, throwing one leg over her to keep her from roaming away.

“Try to sleep,” Kile said. “We’ll have to leave soon.”

Kile fell asleep as quickly as a child, snoring ever so softly. That kept Jhan from becoming alarmed when she squirmed in his grip, but couldn’t get free. Using his great forearm as a pillow, Jhan resigned herself, continuing to play with her bracelet. When that lost its novelty, she turned her attention to Kile. She lightly ran a hand along his muscled arm. His hands were lax now, in sleep, and she was easily able to turn it and feel the rough texture of a palm used to swinging a sword and holding the reins of an imala. There was a scar there, thin and white.

Memory came, halting, but clear. The sun shone through the window of her home, pooling on the hardwood floors. Jhan stood in that pool of light and tried, unsuccessfully to close the new clasp of her

cloak. Kile was there, smiling, and trying to take it out of her hands so that he could help her.

“Let me,” Kile asked.

Jhan was smiling too, pushing his big hands away as she jokingly replied, “No, you big oaf! I can do it.”

“But you’re not,” Kile insisted, again trying to take it. “I can do it in a moment.”

Jhan scowled as he fumbled, the sharp pin of the clasp refusing to bend enough to snap closed. She pulled away, but Kile wouldn’t release his hold. “I can do it,” Jhan repeated. “You’re going to break it like that!”

“Why are you angry?” Kile wondered, his smile dropping now as well. “Just stand still so that I can do this!”

Jhan grabbed the clasp, furious now, and jerked it out of Kile’s hand. “I’ll do it!”

Blood flew and Kile swore out at the same time, hugging his hand. The clasp pin had raked his palm open. His look of astonishment had made Jhan cry out in horror and remorse. She had thrown herself into his arms and pressed the wound to her, kissing it and him urgently, uncaring of the blood.

Kile’s free hand had caressed Jhan gently and he had said, “It’s all right, Little Love, I know that you didn’t mean to. It will heal and it will remind you to keep your temper.”

In the here and now, Jhan blinked at tears and kissed the white scar gently. Kile wasn’t snoring any longer. His hand smoothed lightly along her hair and cheek. He said ever so softly, “I guess that small wound has done more than make you remember to keep your temper. It’s all right. Get some sleep.”

Kile’s words had the power to make Jhan obey. She snuggled down further into his arms, feeling safe, though she didn’t know why. Nothing more of memory came to her and she still didn’t know Lord Kile as anything other than a footnote in her damaged mind. Jhan wanted to know more. She tried to search for it inside of herself, but the pain struck almost at once and she fell into uneasy sleep with his hand still caressing her.

Sael allowed them only a few hours rest and then he was ordering everyone to get on their beasts. Jhan sat up, yawning, and feeling as if her mind had gone numb. Kile rose to get his imala as Ahlen came to watch Jhan. He had bathed and his skin was clean and healthy, his bronze colored hair drying in the heat. Instead of in a better mood though, as they all were, he was staring morosely at the pond as if he were contemplating drowning himself in it.

“Seems you like Kile’s company,” Ahlen commented after a time, “I didn’t hear any screaming.”

Ahlen didn't expect an answer from Jhan. He didn't get one. Jhan was watching the blue sky and the white clouds reflected in the surface of the pond. Ahlen turned to watch Kile as if urging the man to hurry. He didn't appear to be in a mood to nursemaid anyone.

"That's some knot on the head you gave your husband," Ahlen continued. "That dead animal... I saw how you snapped its neck clean. It seems that you still remember your skill."

"If you knew how she learned it," Kile said as he approached with his imala, "you wouldn't wonder. I don't think she needs to be aware of it. It's been ingrained into her blood and bone. I'm more surprised that she didn't kill you when all of you raped her," his voice grated on the words, holding back violence. "She's killed several men who tried to do that to her that I know of."

Ahlen's face became very dark. He clenched his jaw and then replied, "Sael and Obahn crushed her between them. She didn't have the spirit left to help herself. They made her too frightened, too sure that they held her life in their hands." He swallowed and then continued. "She told me once that she wasn't a killer. She simply couldn't do it. Not to them. Not to me, despite how I've hurt her."

Kile touched his bruised head. "Not until she's driven nearly out of her mind, by one thing or another."

"Yes," Ahlen agreed. "I've seen that happen."

Ahlen stood, looking down at Jhan. A thought was occurring to him. Kile watched as Ahlen leaned over and suddenly aimed a blow at Jhan's face. His hand was held flat, like a blade, chopping at Jhan like an axe. Jhan countered instantly, not even blinking as her own arm deflected the blow neatly. She followed that up by rocking and then aiming a booted foot at Ahlen's leg. He hopped back before she could break it.

"What are you doing?" Kile demanded, outraged.

"Testing an idea," Ahlen replied, keeping his eyes on a furious Kile now. "She taught me a little of her skill while we waited the winter out. I wanted to see if she could still react and use it."

Daring Kile's anger, Ahlen approached cautiously, and then aimed an openhanded blow at Jhan's head. It was broad, sweeping, and primitive and she didn't react. Ahlen stopped it before it could connect and then drew back his hand with a frown.

Kile was intrigued now as well, once he understood that Jhan wasn't being harmed. His hand left the handle of his knife and he grunted his surprise. "She didn't react to that. She's not protecting herself, she's only reliving her training with Dagara. That could be dangerous. Who knows what she might consider training?"

"You're missing the point," Ahlen said patiently.

“What point are you trying to make?” Kile bit out.

“We only have small weapons,” Ahlen replied.

Sael had been listening. He stepped forward nodding. “We need all the weapons we can get. If Jhan still remembers her skill. We may need her.”

“If we can get her to use it when we need it,” Ahlen sighed.

“I’m not going to let you use her!” Kile argued hotly.

Ahlen shrugged. “She may be all we have, Lord Kile. She’s told me herself that she could kill all of us, even armed, before we could think to defend ourselves. If I can get her to use that skill-”

“She’s suffered enough!” Kile erupted.

“And this may be the only way that she won’t suffer further!” Sael whipped back, bare face challenging Kile with his snarling lips and grim black eyes. “Do you think someone else, bandits or more people like the Charia, will treat her well if they capture her? She would be better off dying defending us than suffering that, Lord Kile!”

Kile didn’t want to agree, but he knew that they were right. “I won’t let you harm her.”

“I won’t,” Ahlen assured him, “and I may not be able to do anything with her anyway. I can only try.”

Sael saw Kile back down and he was clearly relieved. “Begin as soon as you are able,” he told Ahlen.

CHAPTER SIX

(Akebi)

The landscape continued to turn rocky and arid over the next few days, the sun warming to the point of being uncomfortable. The imala took it in stride, but the heavier baku sweated and protested. Everyone's skin burned, adding to a general irritability that had everyone on edge. The increasingly gravid Zerain did her duties poorly, serving them often inedible meals with sullen words. Togo was fast becoming exhausted caring for Obahn, but unwilling to let the man die. Minyah sweated and groaned at the weight of his fur under the sun. Only Ixien, energized by the sun and restored to health, was eager to go on.

"We must be nearing the desert," Ahlen said hopefully.

Kile knew better. "They way will become very difficult. Even a short distance will take weeks of climbing in and out of canyons and over harsher land than this. I never traveled further than Huyoh, in the Northwest, but even that was dry as a bone and filled with the broken backs of old mountains."

Ahlen's face went bleak. That pleased Jhan, though she didn't know why. Riding beside them on her sweating baku, and listening to their conversation, she only knew that she hated Ahlen and that hate was deep and abiding. It was especially intense when, at their camps, he forced her to defend herself against him, trying to make her attack. Over and over again, she had easily swatted away blows that had seemed as slow and as clumsy as a baku. Once, she had even had the odd thought that she could have killed Ahlen when ever she chose.

"When that man trained Jhan, Dagara was his name?" Ahlen asked. Kile nodded, his face setting in hard lines of anger. "He must have used certain words, certain phrases while he taught her."

Kile blinked at Ahlen. "What do you mean?"

Ahlen shrugged. "You've told me that Jhan was out of her mind then. He must have been able to control her somehow. He gave her orders. You're a soldier. You tell me what those might have been. When you train, what phrases did your teachers use?"

"You mean like, halt, or turn wide, wheel left, that sort of thing?" Kile was doubtful.

"Yes," Ahlen replied.

Kile rubbed at his face with one hand and then glared at Ahlen. "He called her Moonflower. He put red coats on his own men, so that they looked like Pekarín soldiers, and he made her want to kill them."

"How?" Ahlen persisted.

"He let them torture her," Kile replied. "Surely she's had a nightmare or two while she's been with you? She talks in her sleep, sometimes she screams."

Sael was riding close enough to hear. His eyes looked haunted. "I've heard them. She has said that name, Moonflower, before."

"He trained her," Ahlen stressed, ignoring the sympathy Kile was trying to make him feel for Jhan. "She won't attack me. She only defends and that minimally. There must be some way to make her attack, something we have to say."

"You think too much," Sael growled. "Why does it have to be so complicated? As Kile says, she hated them enough to want to kill them. Even after all we did to her, she didn't hate us enough to want that. You may be just wasting your time."

Ahlen shrugged. "What else is there to do?"

Ixien was walking a few feet behind them. Curiously, he jumped into the conversation, his bland features giving nothing away as to his reasons. "She has Power. Why don't you try to get her to use it? That would be a much more potent weapon."

"She could never use it," Kile was adamant. "The Sahvossa would stop her."

"The Sahvossa?" Ixien prompted.

"Creatures of great Power who live in Pekarín forest," Kile explained. "They say they are the balance that keeps Power in check. Jhan's Power can destroy the world if she uses it. It can't be controlled. They make sure it stays locked up within Jhan." Kile studied Ixien's calculating eyes. "Would you set the world on fire to protect a few lives?"

Ixien's reply was chilling. "The Caefu can't be harmed by fire."

Kile exchanged worried looks with the others, but they were used to Ixien's disregard for anything other than himself and his secret mission. They ignored him. Kile couldn't. It was one more danger he had to be wary of if he was to save Jhan and bring her back home.

When they stopped at sundown by a trickling stream, they were glad to only make a small fire and stretch out their blankets in the cooling air. While Zerain made a passing meal of fried bread, and slivers of some animal Minyah had caught among the rocks, Ahlen continued to try and unlock the secret of Jhan's skill.

Kile was bored with it, only standing by in case Jhan overwhelmed Ahlen's small abilities. Aching and hot, he longed to sit down. It made him irritable and he found himself complaining.

"How long are you going to persist in this?"

Ahlen smiled tightly. "I think it's good for Jhan. She may not be able to think or remember, but her body still needs to do something beside sit on a baku's back! If I'm willing to risk my life, and suffer a few bruises, where's the harm in that?"

Jhan didn't agree, but she didn't say so. She was as aching and hot as Kile, and everything within her longed for nightfall and the softness of her bed. Ahlen's antics were too distracting though, and she found herself following him with her eyes, despite herself, as he bobbed lightly in front of her, hands up and ready to strike at her.

There was something different. Jhan's eyes caught on it only after a long moment. There were flashes of red on Ahlen's clothes. He had tied Sael's veil and scarf onto his shirt.

"You're tempting death," Kile was saying, but it was only a statement, not a warning. He would have happily watched Ahlen die, if not for the fact that it would be Jhan's hands dealing the death blows.

"Concern?" Ahlen was incredulous.

"Concern that I won't get the pleasure," Kile clarified.

"Ah, I thought so." Ahlen neatly evaded a lightning quick blow of Jhan's hand. He flushed. It had come very close to his neck.

"This is pointless," Kile finally grumbled.

"Pointless until we know how to make her attack," Ahlen corrected him. "Maybe you should try and give Jhan an order. She's been your wife. She should be used to that. Say, Kick, or chop, unless you can think of something better."

"I can," Kile replied impatiently. He turned to Jhan. "Kill him!"

Ahlen's eyes went wide and he went into a defensive crouch, but Jhan didn't respond. She frowned at Kile's shout, startled into saying, "I don't want to do that."

"Are you with us again, Little Love?" Kile asked softly. "We can end this if you want to."

Jhan wiped at the sweat on her brow with a shaking hand. "You talk as if I weren't here."

"You aren't, most of the time," Ahlen replied.

"But I am," Jhan protested. "I can hear you. I-I just can't do anything. I can't think of what to do."

Ahlen was eager to get an answer from Jhan before she faded away again. "What did Dagara say to you to make you attack someone?"

That hurt. Jhan felt the pain in her forehead. She shivered and shook her head. "He made me kill."

"We know that," Ahlen replied impatiently. "Tell us how."

"I don't want to remember. Don't make me."

"We won't," Kile assured her, giving Ahlen a warning look. "We're done for the day."

Ahlen wasn't. He touched the red scarves tied to him. "How do these make you feel?"

Jhan shook her head again. "I don't know. Will they hurt me?"

“They’re just scarves,” Ahlen assured her. “Come, once more, and then I’ll forget it for now.”

Kile wanted to protest, but he knew how important it was. He nodded grimly and stood ready. Ahlen bobbed towards Jhan. More alert now, she lightly circled away to avoid the confrontation.

Togo watched in appreciation. “Like a dance,” he said loudly enough for them to hear.

In a quick blur, Jhan flipped towards Ahlen, once, twice, and then spun like a tornado as she came upright again. Her booted foot swept in a perfect arc with force enough to crush Ahlen’s head. Her bones bent and twisted at impossible angles, giving incredible force to her blow while maneuvering her into another position in case Ahlen should avoid the first one. He did avoid it, by falling backwards.

Jhan anticipated the move. She was already coming down with her elbow to smash Ahlen’s windpipe. Kile saved him at the last possible moment. His body hurdled into Jhan’s and sent them both crashing and rolling to the ground. Coming back on top, he allowed his weight to pin her full length against the sharp stones.

Ahlen was standing over them, whispering the word, “Dance.”

Kile looked up at him murderously. “If I’ve hurt her because of you-”

“Togo discovered the word,” Ahlen interrupted. “It’s so obvious. Her fighting style is a dance, of sorts, a dance of death.”

Jhan was hearing another voice, one from deep within her ruptured memory. It was oozing darkness, caressing her with cruel, maddening fingers while it whispered in her ear, “Dance, my Moonflower. Dance until you’ve killed them all.”

But she had failed. Ahlen was alive. Kile had her pinned to the ground. Failed. She knew what came next.

Jhan fell into the darkness and came out again in a filthy barracks full of stinking men in red coats. She was a he again and Jhan’s head was pinned between the hairy legs of one man while he gripped Jhan about the waist and faced what the others were doing, cruel and inhuman things, to the other end of Jhan.

The man was laughing, enjoying Jhan’s torment, oblivious to Jhan’s strangled, muffled screams.

Released suddenly, Jhan lay limply on the stones amidst their bloodied instruments of torture, but they weren’t done yet. They tied a rope about Jhan’s ankle and then doused him with cold water. It woke Jhan from his faint and he was completely aware when they dangled him outside of a window. Leaving him there, he bled down the wall. The view of snow capped mountains moved crazily as Jhan swung like a pendulum upside down. Slowly bleeding to death, it took Gyven a long time to find him. He was

almost too late; almost.

Jhan was still screaming as she came out of the nightmare memory. A voice was speaking persistently, calm, but ragged. A big hand was caressing Jhan's face and she was enfolded in someone's arms. She burrowed into the man's shirt, pushed her face against the warm skin of his chest. It wasn't enough. Her hands tore at clothing and she wrapped her legs as well as her arms about this body that was offering her safety. In Dagara's fortress, there had never been even a hint of remorse from anyone, ever. Hands never touched except to inflict torment. This man was offering her Heaven in the deepest depths of Hell and she wanted it, begged him for it; begged him not to let her go.

"Let go!" Kile was begging in return, voice hissing as if he couldn't get any air. "Little Lady, you're crushing me!"

Jhan couldn't let go, but her bones ached and refused to lock in the vise grip that would have killed Kile. He endured the torment when he realized this, willing to suffer that to give her comfort.

When the numbness overtook her, and she faded from the world, Jhan heard Kile shouting angrily, "I'll face the entire world with my bare hands before I'll let you do anything that makes Jhan suffer those memories again!"

Jhan came back to the world days later. She was riding on Kile's imala, cradled against his chest by one of his big arms, his face pressed close against her own as he murmured nonsense in her ear to soothe her.

Jhan pulled away, confused, seeing horrors superimposed on the arid landscape all about them. She trembled as the sun seemed to burn them away, making them fade and disappear like so much mist, as she came fully awake.

"Hungry," Jhan managed to rasp and then, "Water."

Kile gave her both and she recovered a little more after refreshing herself.

Ahlen was riding on one side of them. Togo was bobbing in the air slightly above him, a whirlwind that was giving them a welcome breeze. Minyah loped at the feet of Ahlen's baku, miserable in the heat. Zerain rode beside Obahn, holding the reins of his imala. She looked very weary, slumped in her saddle. Ixien was walking ahead of every one, white hair and skin shining in the sun as he took one tireless stride after another.

“Do you remember me?” Kile asked.

Jhan blinked at him vacantly. “No.”

Kile sighed, muttering in self recrimination. “I should never have allowed you to touch on her training! It’s always been a source of grief for her.” he was speaking to Ahlen, but it was Sael, riding behind them, that replied.

“We are nearing Tohami,” Sael said. “We will have enough to buy either supplies or weapons. Being so close to the desert, you don’t have to guess which one I shall choose. Knowing that, you must understand why we need Jhan more than ever.”

“You heard her!” Kile snarled. “You heard what she said! You heard her screams! They made my blood run cold! Are you saying you felt nothing?”

“It was only a memory,” Sael replied. His voice was steady but his eyes betrayed his inner anguish, “a memory, you said, she suffers only when she loses. Hopefully, when we do need her, she will not lose.”

“Where are we going?” Jhan wondered.

“To find someone who can help you,” Kile replied automatically.

Ahlen was looking very ill. His hands were clenched like iron on the reins of his baku. “I can’t forgive myself for any of this!” he finally exclaimed. “I will never be able to!” He kicked his baku so that it surged ahead, but he couldn’t leave his guilt behind so easily.

“Hurts,” Jhan complained and touched her arms. She was wearing a loose shirt and a pair of pants. The shirt sleeves had been rolled up and the material was soaked in sweat.

Kile examined her arms. “You’ve been burned by the sun.” He rolled her sleeves down, feeling helpless. “I don’t know how Ixien manages, but your pale skin doesn’t have any protection. You aren’t tanning at all, just getting redder and redder.”

Sael dug into his back and rode up beside Kile. He handed him a red veil. “Put this over her head. It will be hot, but I think the sun will begin to harm her soon if you don’t.” he added with a shrug. “It is a hyjar’s color, but there isn’t any shame in this foreign place in using it.”

Kile fingered the material. “I know your people like your women covered. Why doesn’t Zerain wear your veil color now that she’s your wife?”

“I am Ekhal, or was,” Sael replied. “I am also a no man’s child. I don’t have a color and she is shamed already by being my wife.”

Kile studied Sael as he put the scarf over Jhan’s head. He pinned it reluctantly in place when Jhan tried to pull it off again and look at it. “Ekhal. Thekling. I still don’t understand, I guess, what’s going

on. Why were you married to Jhan if... did you consider her a man?" That bothered Kile a great deal and he seemed on the edge of violence.

Sael replied carefully, wary of the man's strength and skill. "My Lord Obahn's son and I were oathed together before he died. I am going to the Sun God to beg to join him in death. To do that, I must not be Ekhal. I must have a wife and be a warrior. I must be worthy to join Hagen."

"That's why you took the position as leader," Kile surmised. "That will help you become worthy."

Sael nodded, but he added, "I know more about where we are going than anyone else. I at least, have seen a map. Even Obahn didn't bother with that."

"Where's my dress?" Jhan asked suddenly. "It was cooler to wear than this."

Kile's mouth set bitterly as he explained, "You ripped it when you fell on the stones and then you tore it when you- when you dreamed. The other is filthy. This is all I had to put on you."

"Dreamed?" Jhan puzzled over that and then she became confused. "Where's Jaross?"

Kile stiffened, his arms tightening on Jhan. "What?"

"Jaross," Jhan repeated. "I had a dream. You and he were in a tent...."

"It *was* real, I knew it!" Kile erupted. It was a long moment before he could reply through his astonishment. "Jaross refused to follow me. I don't blame him. I walked into the teeth of a storm after I had that vision of you. He thought I was trying to kill myself. I thought so too, but I managed to survive."

"He is my cousin, or Jhanian's," Jhan told Kile as if he didn't know.

Kile studied her, trying to discover where her thoughts were taking her. "Jaross will be glad to know that he was so irritating to you that you can still recall him, even when you've forgotten me."

Jhan felt a sharp pain and one of her eyes went dim. She blinked at Kile and asked distantly. "Who's Jaross?"

"Ahlen!" Kile called abruptly.

Ahlen reined back at once. "What is it?"

"Jhan," Kile replied anxiously. "I think she's going into another fit. One of her eyes is dilated."

Ahlen observed Jhan clinically, as if determining how to proceed. Seeing something in Jhan's demeanor, determined his next action. He took a wad of leather cords from his pocket and tossed them into Jhan's lap.

"Could you please string these together Jhan and make them into one long cord?" Ahlen asked. "Your fingers are so neat and small. I just can't manage it with mine."

Jhan took up the knot of cords, frowning. It gave her mind one single thing to concentrate on,

allowing her to shut out the overwhelming stimulus around her and a stressful confusion of dream and reality. Methodically, she began untangling the cords and carefully knotting them together.

Kile didn't thank Ahlen. His jaw tightened instead. It was a warning to Ahlen to ride ahead again and Ahlen didn't hesitate to get out of range of the man's anger.

"You could have done that," Sael said suddenly. "When are you going to kill that man?"

"I thought you two were friends," Kile grated.

"Never," Sael retorted. "He's a foolish boy and, well, he hates what I am. Caring for Jhan was the only thing that kept us from tearing each other apart during the winter."

"Jhan remembers him more often than not," Kile told him. "He calms her because she knows him."

"But that bothers you too," Sael noticed.

"I don't understand why she's forgotten me," Kile replied. "Anyone would think that she would forget the man who hurt her, who did this to her, before she would forget the man who loves her."

"But you're hurting her more than Ahlen," Sael told him, daring Kile's rage. "She forgets you, most likely because she can't be a wife to you. She's broken, maybe beyond repair. It's possible that she can't bear to face that, and you."

"Insightful for someone from such a cruel people," Kile mocked, "but I don't believe it. I don't think she can select what she forgets or remembers. Her mind..." Kile swallowed and didn't look at Sael. "I think her mind is slowly destroying itself."

"She's getting worse?"

Kile nodded. "And her body... it's changing. I don't know why."

"Changing?"

Kile nodded again. "She was always so soft and rounded before. Now she's becoming hard and her breasts are shrinking." Kile flushed in embarrassment, but he felt that he had to talk about it to someone and Sael had told him that he had once been a healer. "Her bones have been hurting her, the joints especially. The-the hair beneath her belly; it's beginning to grow upwards. I don't understand. Why-why this? Poison couldn't cause it, could it?"

Sael understood and he frowned. "I told you that we had been trapped in the mountain by a demon named Selaya. Jhan helped release her into the world and saved my life. Selaya healed her, though I'm not certain what she healed. Jhan's heart was stronger afterward, and her endurance was far greater than it had been before. Selaya might have thought to help Jhan be a man again, as much as Jhan could be without any manhood; not understanding that it could do her harm."

"That's what the voice said," Jhan spoke up, even though her hands were still stringing cords of

leather together.

“Voice?” Kile echoed it absently, his thoughts still with what Sael was saying.

“It said that Selaya had healed me and that healing was going to kill me if I didn’t go...”

“Go where?” Sael asked, perplexed.

Jhan lost herself in a particularly stubborn knot. Kile wanted to shake her. His fists clenched and he gritted his teeth.

Sael swore lightly and then shrugged. “She could be saying nothing. It just seems to go along with what we were speaking about.”

Kile didn’t believe that. “You don’t understand,” he told Sael. “She had the Power to reach me without her body. I thought they were dreams, or madness, but now I know they weren’t. If she’s talking about a voice telling her to go somewhere, I’m going to listen.”

“There’s nothing to listen to,” Sael growled. “She’s gone again.”

“I have to get her to tell me, somehow,” Kile insisted.

Jhan kept her silence, ignoring Kile’s buzzing voice in her ear. The pain in her head slipped away and her eye cleared just as they reached the outskirts of a village. The village and the colorful, flowing robes the inhabitants wore pulled her attention away from the leather rope she had created in her lap.

The buildings were of sand colored mud, springing up in a haphazard fashion from the rocky ground. Windows, without glass, were cut into the buildings at irregular intervals and the tops of the buildings were decks where people could sit or sleep in the cooler night air. Shops were only canopied stalls shoved up against the walls of the buildings, vendors hawking their wares to the people passing by on the dusty street. Those people were tall, their skin a bronze color and their eyes palest blue.

Sael brought them to a halt at an inn, of sorts, on the outskirt of the town. It was more of a long pole barn affair, with a raised bed platform that ran the length of it. An open brazier, and a grill, served as the kitchen and a trough of water was a communal bath. The animals were stabled on a rope string hardly a few yards from where everyone was expected to sleep.

“Don’t look at anyone. It’s against custom,” Sael warned them as they dismounted. “I wouldn’t chance staying, but it’s only a few coppers to spend the night, and we’ll need the rest before we head out into harsher lands. This will give us a chance to check our beasts and to gather supplies and information about the trail ahead.”

“I need to bathe,” Zerain announced wearily as she pushed her black hair from her eyes and lowered her growing bulk onto the stone bed. Her eyes swept the open space about them, despite Sael’s warning. Several barbaric looking men, in flowing red robes hung about with golden charms, stared

back in interest.

Jhan stared as well as Kile sat her on the stone bed and then turned to help with the beasts. The glitter of the sun on their charms fascinated Jhan. She had an urge to go and touch them, but, without even looking at her, Ahlen sensed it and took hold of her arm while he spoke to Togo.

The men seemed more interested in Jhan, though she was veiled. Either they were dismissive of Zerain because of her pregnancy, or wary that her bare face meant dishonor, it was hard to tell. Their women went about veiled as well. Jhan saw the men lean close to each other and talk with serious expressions. After a time, they rose and walked away like men with a purpose.

“I feel like we are two women with babies in our care,” Ahlen was muttering to Togo.

Togo nodded wearily as he loosened Obahn’s shirt and examined the man for sunburns. Obahn was becoming gaunt and his muscles were losing tone. Even Togo, in his ignorance about such things, knew that Obahn couldn’t live long if he was deteriorating that quickly.

“The desert is still so far away,” Togo said worriedly. “If this Tsarianna can heal, it may be too late for Obahn by the time we reach it.”

“*If?*” Ahlen shot a look at Togo. “I wouldn’t say *if* to anyone else. Everyone is expecting miracles, including myself.”

“Not Sael,” Togo replied darkly.

“Especially Sael,” Ahlen corrected him. “He believes Tsarianna can call up the dead for him.”

“So that he may kill himself,” Togo added, “for one he thinks he loves.”

“Thinks?” Ahlen narrowed his eyes. “I think he does. He’s come a long way to prove it.”

Togo looked where Sael was haggling with the innkeeper. “Maybe I can make him think otherwise.”

Ahlen’s face set hard. “He’s infected you with his perversion.”

“I don’t think it is a choice,” Togo replied absently. “It’s just the way I feel when I’m near him, or any man, it seems.”

“I don’t want to hear this!” Ahlen snarled as he took hold of Jhan and pulled her off of the bed. “It’s disgusting!”

“It isn’t what I want,” Togo told him thoughtfully. “I won’t be able to breed like this and that saddens me. Still, at least with Sael, it is more than wanting to copulate.”

“To what?” Ahlen blinked, but he knew and was only mocking Togo, feeling nausea and wanting to retaliate in some way. “Rut with him, you mean, like some sort of twisted animal that can’t tell a male from a female? Maybe you’re like Jhan; too addled in the head to know what you’re doing, or

what's right?"

Togo was stung, looking at Jhan to see if Ahlen's words were registering with her. Jhan had heard, but her attention was still on the men who were now in the distance, speaking to some other men.

Togo finally replied calmly, "It doesn't engender progeny, but it is something I can't change. It is biological, not mental. When you're speaking in those terms, there isn't any what's right."

"You're a freak," Ahlen stabbed deep with his words. "Like a baku born with two heads instead of one. In my land, we slay animals like that." He looked Togo over with false concern. "Maybe it's just the way Selaya made you, or ill made you. I suppose I can't blame you for being, like your brother, part beast and, like your sister, part woman."

It was obvious Togo hadn't considered the last. His eyes went wide and then he nodded to himself as he turned to stare at Sael thoughtfully again. "You could be right."

"That you're a freak?" Ahlen retorted.

Togo frowned. "No, that I may be too much a part of what my sister is. Still," his eyes on Sael became longing. "It doesn't explain this other feeling I have for Sael. Copulating has nothing to do with that. It's much stronger."

Ahlen had enough. He swore in disgust and pulled Jhan away. Going to the trough of water, he jerked off her veil, unmindful of the pins that took some of Jhan's hair with them, and dunked her head into the water.

Jhan spluttered when he pulled her back out and began cleaning her off with a rag. He was rough and uncaring as he pulled off her shirt as well, leaving her bare above the waist for anyone to see. Blocking the view to the street with his own body, he washed her, only the innkeeper seeing Jhan's shrunken breasts before Ahlen was throwing another, clean shirt onto her.

The shirt was long, hanging to Jhan's knees. It gave her concealment when Ahlen removed her boots and pants. Washing her quickly below the waist, he soon had her completely dressed again and sitting down on the bed, much further away from Togo this time.

Kile hadn't seen his roughness, but when he turned and saw that Ahlen was bathing Jhan, he seemed only relieved to be spared one duty among the many he had to do for Jhan.

Ahlen was muttering darkly to himself the entire time. "A band of freaks! Men mating with men. Men mating with gelded men. Animals walking and talking like men. Walking dead. Walking mad. I'll go mad if I stay with you much longer!"

"Poor Ahlen," Jhan said suddenly, looking him angrily in the eyes. "Is all of this too much for you?" At that moment she remembered his abuse keenly and his crimes against her. His cruel dunking

of her head had startled her thoughts into coherency. She leaned close to him, nose almost touching his nose. "What right do you have to complain? What have you suffered?"

Ahlen went sickly pale. "I didn't know--"

"Didn't know what?" Jhan demanded. "Are you trying to make excuses now?"

Ahlen shook his head sharply exclaiming, "No!" and then more softly, "No." His face burned with shame.

"You've taken everything from me," Jhan groaned and huddled in on herself, rocking. "I can't remember that all of the time, so don't you forget it too."

Everyone bathed, except for Ixien, and ate. Sitting at their leisure on the bed, they were glad to relax in relative safety. People passed them by on the street and stared curiously, but they were all too exhausted to care. The innkeeper had a few guards stationed to keep order and they weren't afraid of being accosted.

Jhan curled up in her blankets near Sael and Togo. She had her head on Kile's leg, easy enough with him to use it for a pillow. He allowed it, stroking her hair while he stared out at the lowering gloom and the laughing, talking, swirling crowds that were coming out in the cool of the evening.

"A beautiful people," Sael was saying. He had washed his hair and it hung damply over his shoulders. Togo settled behind him and boldly gathered it in his hands.

"Shall I tie this for you?" Togo asked softly. He lifted the wet hair and his hands gently brushed the skin at the back of Sael's neck. He was leaning close, near enough to Sael's ear for his warm breath to fall on it.

Sael closed his eyes, swallowed, and then resolutely pulled away. "Don't."

"Don't?" Togo echoed.

"Gods know that I want to, but I'm not free. I swore oaths, not just to Obahn, but to myself."

Togo's pain was clear, but he backed away and sat facing the street. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you. I'm new to this. I don't know your customs."

"Ekhal!" Zerain had heard and that one word conveyed even more disgust and outrage than Ahlen had managed. "I thought you had given up that life! What has become my husband?"

Sael lifted a hand as if to strike her. Zerain didn't flinch. Sael regained control and lowered his hand with an angry growl. "When you have delivered your no man's child, I will show you that I am a man and your husband."

"Will you?" Zerain dared. "Do you think keshuning with an Ikhil makes you able, Sael Ruon?"

Sael sprang from the bed as if he were a released spring, striding away into the dark before he did

violence.

“You tempt him to hurt you,” Togo said to Zerain. “Why?”

“Because I want him to be a man,” Zerain replied angrily. “If he must be my husband then he must be able to defend my honor and his.”

“What does it matter?” Togo asked bleakly. “He intends to kill himself.”

“That is a long way still,” Zerain replied and then lay down to sleep.

With new supplies and refreshed animals, they rode out of the town at dawn. The land instantly became worse, turning into broken slabs of stone baked by the sun and thorny bushes that caught and pierced the skin of the unwary. Up ahead, they could see plateaus, red and black, standing against the sunrise like giants.

“At least there will be shade,” Kile commented sourly as he wiped the sweat from his brow. He had veiled Jhan again, against the sun, and almost wished he could do the same for himself.

Sael squinted up ahead and then looked skeptical. “In this land, I doubt that will prove true. We will need to be sparing with our water. We may sell some of the animals in the next village. The baku were never meant for this kind of heat.”

That depressed Kile, but he always tried to see the bright side of any situation. “At least there won’t be enemies out here. Where could they hide and why would they bake themselves in the sun waiting for travelers to rob?”

“Why indeed?”

The strange voice seemed to come from the ground. As if appearing out of nowhere, their red robes blending perfectly with the red rock, eleven men stood with notched bows and drawn, curved swords that glittered dangerously in the sunlight.

They quickly ringed the company as one man stepped forward.

He was shorter than his fellows, but his red robes were richer and his gold charms were more numerous. His face was sharp and tanned like old leather, blue eyes confident and cunning. “You will get down from your beasts or we will begin to kill you.”

Kile drew his knife, ready to fight, but Sael was getting down, angrily resigned. “What do you want?” he demanded. “Will you rob us?”

The man grinned. He had one front tooth missing. "Among other things. I will let you keep your lives, though, if you do all that I command. My first command has yet to be obeyed."

No one moved.

The man expected that. He nodded to an archer. "Shoot the beast man. After that, if they still don't obey, kill the pale one with the long hair." He faced them with dangerous intensity. "I will command him to kill one of you every time you disobey my order. Shall we begin? Get down from your beasts."

The archer was aiming carefully at Minyah. Minyah was crouching and whining. Togo dismounted and put himself in front of his brother. "Don't!" He cried and then looked frantically at the others. "Get down! Do as he says! We don't have anything to fight them with!"

Sael's face was furious, but he knew that Togo was only speaking the truth. He motioned to everyone. "Get down. Do as he says, for now."

"For now?" the man arched an eyebrow. "Brave, aren't you?"

Kile looked ready to fight to the death or to at least flee. He had hold of Jhan's bridle, watching in agitation as everyone dismounted. With a groan, he realized defeat as the archers turned their arrows on his chest.

Kile dismounted and went to pull Jhan down as well. Holding her close to protect her, he joined the others in a tight huddle, waiting to see what the man intended to do with them.

"Your weapons," the man ordered and pointed at a place on the ground.

That took longer than dismounting. Everyone gave up their knives as if they were cutting off their hands. It was clear that Sael was considering dying in an attempt to stab his enemy to death. It was what any one of his people would have done in his place. Fortunately for Sael, he wasn't enough like them to actually do it. He tossed his knife down last and watched in self disgust as his enemies gathered them up and took them away.

The man smiled. "Good. Now, take off all of your clothes."

"What!" Sael exploded, incredulous. "You would so dishonor-"

The arrows and the blades ringed him. He cut off his words in midstream, whitely furious.

"All of your possession are now mine," the man informed Sael. "I promise you, if you obey, you will keep your life."

"My dishonor will make that worthless!" Sael exploded.

The man shrugged, unsympathetic. "That is nothing to me."

"I will not do it," Sael replied.

"I won't either!" Zerain exclaimed. "Better death."

Ahlen and Kile exchanged looks and then began grimly undressing both themselves and Jhan. Togo was already undressing himself and Obahn, Minyah was taking off what little clothing he wore, and Ixien simply pulled off the colorful scarf about his hips and let it drift off on a hot breeze.

“You would die for a few pieces of cloth?” The man was incredulous.

“We will die anyway if you leave us without supplies, beasts, or clothing,” Sael snarled back. “We are too far from the town to easily make it back on foot, Without money, they would hardly help us anyway.”

The man smiled again. “I don’t intend to leave you,” he replied and then repeated as if Sael were simple, “I give you my word that you will have your lives as long as you obey me.”

Sael stared into his eyes. His jaw worked as if he were grinding his teeth to powder. Finally, he began taking off his clothes. Zerain was watching in disbelief. “Coward!” she shrieked at him. “I will die! I will not be a wife to such a-a-”

Sael grabbed her and popped the buttons of her dress as he struggled with her. In the end, she stood, as naked as the rest of them with her head bowed and her hair loose from its braid. It covered her face, but her shaking shoulders revealed that she was weeping.

“Good,” the man said again and then nodded to his men.

A rope was brought out. It was made of leather and looked like a horse tether, long lines trailing off of the main line. The men expertly strung the company together, hands tied behind their backs in intricate knots.

“Good,” the man said yet again and he smiled. “You are now slaves. I am Mekhet Jalwaya. I am not your master, but we shall be meeting him soon.”

Kile erupted, swearing in outrage. Everyone else simply stood still in shock.

“I’m afraid that we have to walk you a long distance,” Mekhet continued, unperturbed. “The previous city outlawed slaves. We must go to Jaihenerou in order to sell you. On the way, I’ll teach you all how to be obedient slaves and prepare some of you,” he looked regretful, “in ways you surely won’t enjoy.”

“We will be going to the plateaus?” Ixien asked suddenly, face as emotionless as ever.

Mekhet looked over his shoulder at them and then turned back to narrow his eyes at Ixien. “Yes.”

“That is the way I wish to go,” Ixien said.

Mekhet wasn’t certain what to think of Ixien, so he warned him, “Don’t think of escaping. I’ll cut off your feet.”

Ixien didn’t reply to that. Mekhet considered him cowed and turned back to his men. “Secure the

beasts and we will go!”

The imala and baku were strung together. The slavers had their own imala, thin, long legged versions with very short hair that had been invisible with their sand colored hides. They had lain flat against the stones, like their masters, well trained and silent. Now they rose up and shook themselves, honking at the new arrivals.

The beginning of the rope was tied to a saddle and that man urged his beast forward. Kile struggled and so did Sael, shouting furious curses at the slavers. Mekhet didn't have them punished. He didn't need to. They were secured tightly and in such a manner that their struggles were painful. The inexorable progress of the imala wasn't to be thwarted either. They were all pulled along, despite their struggles, until finally heat and weariness took their toll on their rebellion.

The slavers rode at their ease, not hurrying, calm and talking amongst themselves. They ignored their new slaves, treating them with the same regard as their imala and baku. Jhan understood that sort of treatment. When they stopped at nightfall, collapsing in heaps as their masters made camp, they were given pans of water without having their hands untied. Jhan automatically bent over to lap it up, but the others cursed and struggled, fighting with their thirst to keep their pride. Jhan already knew how useless that was and they also realized it soon enough, finally bending and doing as she did.

They weren't given any food. Jhan was expecting that too. She lay on her side beside Sael and Minyah, and tried to sleep. The cries of outrage from the others kept her from it.

“Will you starve us?” Sael demanded.

“I thought you wanted to die, for honor's sake,” Mekhet laughed from his seat by the camp fire. He was chewing on the leg of a roasted fowl. He stood with easy grace and slowly sauntered over to Sael. He motioned with the meat at Jhan. “You should follow that one's example. Here, I'll reward her for her good behavior.” He pulled off a piece of meat and handed it to Jhan. She ate it from his fingers without hesitation. “This one knows how to be a slave.”

Sael's reply was to spit on Jhan's body. Kile shouted in anger and started to rise, but a man standing near to guard them lifted a sword tip to his throat. Kile sat down heavily, hands fisting on rocks, almost daring to throw them.

Mekhet tossed the bird leg aside and another man caught it deftly. He wiped his hands on his robes and faced Sael squarely. “You have fire,” he said appreciatively. “I can see you won't break easily.”

“Break?” Sael echoed acidly.

“You'll see,” Mekhet chuckled, smiling down at Jhan. “She knows, don't you little one? I can see it on your face. You've been broken before. You won't fight your training.”

“I will die before I let you make me like her!” Sael snarled.

“They all say such things in the beginning,” Mekhet shrugged indifferently. “I’ll die. I’ll kill you. I’ll never break. They are all just words. In the end, the body always wants to stay alive no matter what.” His eyes looked over Sael’s body in the gathering darkness. “You have a lovely body. I think my men and I will enjoy it before I have to cut the fire out of it. Come.”

Several men stood up, standing ready. Sael braced himself to fight, but Mekhet flipped the tie that held him to the others and then jerked it. It came loose as if by magic and Mekhet was suddenly pulling Sael sideways and off balance. Even when Sael tried to get to his feet to attack, his bound hands made him ungainly. Mekhet enjoyed himself by jerking Sael about, always keeping out of range. Finally, tiring, he jerked Sael into the arms of his men. Smiling and laughing, they pushed him down on his back by the campfire. Settling about him, two men grabbed Sael by the ankles and forced him to assume a position that was degrading and didn’t leave any doubt what they intended to do with him.

Jhan stared after them, and then huddled in on herself with her eyes turned away when she saw what they were doing. Sael cried out and cursed them until they gagged him, and then it was just the obvious rhythmic sounds of bodies coming together, a man grunting and groaning in pleasure, and the soft laughter and talk of the others who were waiting their turn.

“You should have made sure to get more women,” one man said clearly. “I don’t enjoy such games.”

“We have two, though not choice slaves by any means,” another replied. “Take the little one. She knows her place.”

Mekhet broke in, stern. “The pregnant one will fetch a high price. The little one Akebi will want to see first. You would be wise not to touch either of them until Akebi gives you leave. Close your eyes, Inyanan,” he urged the first man, “and get some sleep, or close your eyes and give this slave any face you wish. See, Hyka is done and he is satisfied with our rebellious slave. Take your turn and enjoy him. I will wait. When you’ve tired him and he’s given up fighting, best will be last.”

Hyka wasn’t reluctant for long. There was a groan from Sael and the sound of bodies coming together again, the slapping rhythm that was unmistakable, continuing long after Jhan had turned away and covered her ears.

Jhan awoke to a searing sun and another pan of water. She lapped it up greedily before sitting up

and looking around. Sael was sitting beside her again. His face was as hard and his eyes were hollow under scowling brows. His skin was marked as if he had been whipped and a bruise marred one cheek, swollen and split. Remarkably, when Mekhet inspected their line, Sael grinned at him, teeth clenched and still defiant.

Mekhet was annoyed at his insolence. “Do you need another lesson in humility, Slave?”

Sael’s reply was quick and cutting. “If you can find a teacher of greater size and skill to give me the lesson.”

Mekhet fetched him a backhanded blow that reopened his split cheek. Sael continued to grin, unnerving the man. Mekhet aimed a kick that was low and Sael doubled over retching. When he aimed yet another in the same place, it was Togo who staggered forward on his knees in protest.

“Do you want to kill him?”

Mekhet glared. “Perhaps I do. Nobody wants a slave that won’t take orders.” He gave Togo a critical look. “I think you need a lesson as well. Slaves don’t question their masters.”

Mekhet twitched the line and freed Togo. He forced him to kneel and he used Togo’s back as a step to mount his imala. Pulling Togo up on his feet by the tether, he tied his end cruelly tight to the imala’s saddle.

“You’ll be sorry you tried to defend that one,” Mekhet told Togo with a bit of humor. “After he stopped fighting, he seemed to enjoy himself last night; offering himself like a whore for our attentions when he realized we weren’t going to harm him.”

Togo looked wide eyed at Sael, but Sael was looking down, avoiding everyone’s eyes. Mekhet laughed and urged his imala into a trot. Togo was forced to try and keep up.

They were all forced to walk after them, the hot stone burning their bare feet and the sun beating down on their unprotected bodies. They were given a bowl of some sort of sticky balm to slather over their tortured skin, but it didn’t block the heat. They complained bitterly, but were ignored. When they tried to speak to each other, one of their captors rode up and used short blows from his riding whip to silence them. Kile took a few lashes trying to call to Jhan, three places up, to ask if she was all right.

Jhan didn’t reply. She ached and her skin was on fire, but Sael and Zerain were having far much more trouble than she was. Sael walked with a limp, hissing between his teeth at some pain, and Zerain kept her hands on her swollen belly, looking ready to collapse. Mekhet showed mercy to her, at least. He ordered his men to help her onto a baku. He didn’t want to loose a slave, even one not born yet.

Togo was let loose from Mekhet’s imala after an hour and tied back with the rest. He stumbled, exhausted, and Minyah, behind him, tried to help him. When they halted for a rest at midday, the

plateaus hardly seeming to have come any closer, Togo leaned against Minyah's side and panted, sweat running down his face in a stream.

"You didn't need to do that for me," Sael told him under his breath, sounding angry. "He wasn't kicking hard."

"Were you enjoying that too?" Ahlen snarled, too loudly, in disgust. One of the men gave him a glare of warning and Ahlen bit his lip to keep himself silent.

"Not as much as when I was with you in Bairkun," Sael struck back with the same, brittle, but challenging smile he had given Mekhet.

Ahlen went green and turned away, hunched in on himself.

Jhan bowed her head to her knees, letting her long hair cover her body like a cloak. She didn't feel sorry for Sael. She had only been glad that the men hadn't taken an interest in her. That he might have enjoyed it, puzzled her enough to bring her up out of her numb state.

"Did you like it?" she wondered and Sael darted a look at her and frowned.

"It has been years for me," He replied offhandedly, but there was an edge to his voice too; shame.

Jhan felt a coldness grip her and she felt it shiver over her skin despite the heat. "I don't-," she began, but Sael cut her off.

"Look at them, Jhan," he said, meaning their captors. "They have long, lean bodies the color of dusk and their eyes are as blue as your Kile's. They have strength and heat. They need just like me, a constant torment that never quite goes away. Even as they walk about their duties, they're probably remembering last night, feeling that need again and wondering how they can get to me, you, any of the others and sink themselves in, quench that need even for a few moments. What I did... I needed to do, but the truth is, I was simply trying to keep them from doing what I did to you. I won't die that way. It's the most dishonorable thing that can happen to a man," he paused as he remembered what Jhan was and then added, "or the second."

"Don't fight them," Jhan said, as if agreeing, but it was obvious her thoughts were elsewhere. She wasn't seeing the slavers, but the broken collage of the past. "That only makes it worse. They like you to fight. They want you to have hope, pride, out rage, anything they can take away and replace with pain. Better not to feel at all. You can escape them that way, if you try hard enough."

Kile had been listening. He lowered his face into his hands. He knew what she was saying. He had been a guest of Dagara Ku Ni. He had seen, first hand, how the man had liked to torment his victims with their own hopes. He knew that the slavers were doing the same thing to them, grinding them down to powder, making them malleable with misery before playing on their hope of something better.

Tormented enough, a man might consider slavery and obedience. Walking through the rest of that day, starving and parched for water, it was easy to have traitor thoughts that it might be preferable.

They stopped when the sun began painting everything around them in varying colors of red light. Again they all collapsed in a heap, but Jhan was better off than some of them. She hadn't fought her ropes or refused to drink even when Mekhet had poured the water into his hand and teased her with it. She had sucked it off his skin and his expression had been close to lustful when she had even licked drops off of his fingertips. After he had walked away, Sael had spat on her again.

"Do that again, and I'll kill you, no matter what the consequences!" Kile shouted.

"You should be saying that to you wife!" Sael shouted back.

They were both whipped for their outbursts, but one of the men had to strike Kile hard across the face before he would sit quiet again. It left a red mark. Kile glared over it at Sael, his eyes like molten, blue lava.

They were thrown small chunks of meat, scraps from the meal their captors were eating. They hit and rolled on the stone, gathering sand and debris. Like the water, they were expected to eat it off the ground like animals. Minyah didn't balk and, after a hesitant look at Sael, Jhan didn't either, but the others stared sullenly, fighting with the last dregs of their pride. Togo was the first to break, and Ahlen the second, but Kile, Sael, and Zerain waited the longest. When small, desert animals came out of hiding to try and snatch their meal, they relented and ate before it could be stolen. Zerain had tears in her eyes. Only Ixien was spared the humiliation. He was already asleep, well fed on the bright sunlight.

Seven riders came out of the darkness. One was obviously the leader. He was richly dressed in white and blue, a turban like hat of red on his head. He hung with gold earrings and a gold ring was in his nose. His face was sharp and dusky. His eyes, unlike the others, were sparkling black. He stroked a black goatee and his hands flashed with jeweled rings as he dismounted and approached the string of slaves.

"A good catch, Mekhet," the man said, pleased.

Mekhet beamed and bowed, hand to his heart. "I am honored by your praise, Master Akebi."

"They look suitably cowed," Akebi continued. "I think you may safely leave them with me now. Return to your watch. I still need four more women for that General lordling's household."

"As you will, Master Akebi. Good trading to you." Mekhet bowed very low and retreated. He shouted orders to his men and they were soon riding out of camp.

Master Akebi hadn't ceased looking at his new slaves. His eyes traveled over each one of them, as if searching for attributes or flaws, and making mental notes of each. When his eyes fell on Jhan, he

frowned.

“What are you?”

Jhan simply stared up at him, watching the firelight twinkle on his jewelry. The man crouched and pushed Jhan’s legs apart. He motioned for a man to bring a small lantern close to inspect Jhan better. Kile was stiff, tensed for violence. He was deciding to die to help Jhan, when Akebi allowed Jhan to close her legs again.

“How did you survive that, little slave?” Akebi wondered. “I’ve had customers who wanted it done, but I was never successful. There are always complications later on, even when the slave managed to survive the cut.” He spoke aside to one of his men. “Keep an eye on this one. I would like to know how it manages to pass water. The others couldn’t.”

“Yes, Master Akebi,” a man replied from the darkness.

“You are most beautiful,” Akebi said, releasing Jhan’s hands so that he could look at them and touch her skin. “A few five days to fatten and clean you up and you should soften again.”

Jhan leaned forward and touched the man’s charms. They tinkled together. Her mind was captured and she forgot everything, even fear, to make them tinkle again and again. Her face relaxed in wonder, her blue eyes wide and very childlike. She captivated Akebi all in an instant. It was clear to see he had never had a slave so unconcerned with his status as master. It made him laugh. His laughter was throaty and pleasant. Jhan found herself smiling as it made his earrings dance together like glittering gold fire.

Jhan leaned forward and then climbed into Akebi’s lap, needing to be closer to the beauty of the sparkling gold. She ran her hands along both sides of Akebi’s head while he stared at her in astonishment. She was only looking for more pretty things to look at. His expression made her look at him and then she was captivated by his pointed beard. She touched it and then stroked it.

“Y-You are very...,” Akebi trailed off as if the words had choked him. His hand fumbled and he untied Jhan completely from the others. He rose and led her back to the fire. Once there, he sat down again and pulled her close to him.

“Slut!” Sael growled.

“And what were you?” Ahlen replied tightly. He shook his head. “She isn’t doing anything, Sael, at least not what your filthy, perverted mind thinks. She’s just in love with his pretty gold.”

Akebi was laughing at Jhan, stroking her face and then handing her one of his earrings to play with. “How engaging it is!” he said to his men. “I would never have guessed that anyone had ever harmed the child! So innocent! So simple! So very beautiful! I may keep it myself.”

“Shall I write it off the rolls as your bed slave then, Master Akebi?” one of his men asked with the

familiarity of an old friend. "If you keep taking the best for yourself, we won't make much money."

Akebi was shaking his head. "Bed slave? This child?" he was highly amused. "I don't sell children for that and I certainly don't take them for myself, you know that."

"I don't think this is a child," the man replied thoughtfully. "The hair between its legs and the bones... It's hard to tell in ones who have been cut, but I can see they're the long bones of an adult in this one. If you don't want it, you're passing up a very good sale if you don't give it to someone else."

Akebi sighed. "You're right, of course Tanderi, but at least let me be amused for this evening. I grow so weary of frightened, spiritless slaves."

"As you will, Master Akebi."

"I do."

Ahlen had his hand dug into Kile's arm. The man was panting, muscles trembling as he watched his wife and Akebi interacting like a man with a much beloved pet. The man even wrapped Jhan up in his blanket as he lay down, laughing softly, but not doing anything with her other than allowing her to amuse him until he fell asleep.

When morning came, Jhan pushed herself out of Akebi's arms and moved a little away from him. The sunlight was hurting her eyes and one of those eyes was clouding over. She didn't remember where she was and, when she looked over at the string of her companions, she didn't know any of them. She had almost decided to stand and try to walk away from her confusion, but Akebi and his men were waking as well, rising and shaking out their robes.

"Stand them up," Akebi ordered briskly and walked over to Jhan with a smile. That smile dropped when the sun revealed Jhan's mismatched pupils and her vacant stare devoid of any of the charm she had exhibited the night before.

"I didn't realize," Akebi sighed, stroking his beard and scowling in annoyance. Shaking his head in regret, he walked over to the other slaves. They were forced to stand and line up with prods and slaps of the whip until they were still and obedient.

Akebi ran a hand over Zerain's swollen belly appreciatively, regaining some of his good humor. "You're a proven brood slave and good to look at as well. You will fetch a very good price."

Zerain glared. "I only wait the opportunity to kill you," she snarled back.

"I appreciate being informed," Akebi laughed and slapped her, lightly, but enough to make her bow her head from the sting.

Akebi moved down the line to Ixien. He shook his head. "There's no market for that sort of creature. Kill it," he gestured to Minyah as well. "Kill that one as well."

"No!" Togo exploded and struggled against his bonds as a man drew his sword and began sharpening the edge with a stone. Another man grabbed Togo from behind and held him in a harsh head lock to keep him still.

Akebi faced Togo and grabbed his genitals hard. Togo went instantly still, feeling the painful squeeze. "Men are particularly vulnerable this way," Akebi explained. "That's why we train you naked. It makes you much easier to control." His hand stroked Togo with broad, hard strokes. Togo's face became flush and flustered, but his body responded strongly. Akebi looked down in awe. "Someone will pay well for that, I assure you."

Akebi released Togo abruptly and the man holding him pushed him down to the ground and put a foot on his neck to hold him there. Kile was next. Kile didn't move or protest. His eyes were on the distance as if Akebi didn't exist. When Akebi reached out and examined his body, he flinched only briefly. The touch wasn't crude. Kile kept his tense stance throughout, as if he were at attention.

"A soldier," Akebi guessed and seemed respectful of that. "I'll leave you what you have, if you remain obedient. Fighting skill should not be discarded out of hand when it's coupled with such a prime body. Someone might even use you for breeding stock."

Kile's face tightened, but he kept still. Akebi nodded approvingly and moved on to Obahn. He didn't even pause.

"That one is dead already," Akebi flicked a negligent hand at Obahn. "Make his body realize it."

Ahlen was shaking when Akebi reached him. Akebi eyed him critically and Ahlen stared back in humiliation and fear. Akebi smiled, very small and somewhat sympathetic.

"Geld him."

Ahlen started and then collapsed to his knees, weeping and shouting pleas for mercy to Akebi that went unheard. The man stepped past him to Sael. Sael met his eyes with glittering defiance. The man ignored it, taking Sael's chin and turning it this way and that as if looking at an imala to discover its breeding. He walked about Sael, running a hand along his body until he saw the line of dried blood running down Sael's leg.

"Mekhet took some liberties, I see," Akebi commented in annoyance. "Are you harmed?"

"As far as my honor is concerned," Sael replied bitterly, "I am dead."

“You are quiet handsome for a dead man,” Akebi replied as he pushed at Sael to see for himself if there was damage. “That will save your life for now.”

Sael ground his teeth together and his face suffused with shame. When Akebi grunted, mollified by whatever he found, Sael, like Zerain, was ready to kill him no matter what the cost.

Akebi sensed it. He moved to the front of Sael again. “There is only one way to take down your fire,” he said regretfully. “I would get a better price if you were whole, but I can’t have you killing your new master.” he turned to his men. “Give him the Ajuna root. It will eat enough of his mind to make him forget all about honor and anything but being a good slave.”

Sael swore. “You will not make me like Jhan, or Obahn! I will not be a spiritless doll for your commands and lusts!”

“Shut him up!” Akebi ordered with a flick of his hand at Sael.

The man, who had subdued Ahlen earlier, shoved Sael to the ground and kicked a boot into his stomach. Air driven out of his lungs, Sael could only stare as another man began preparing the drug that would kill him in everything but body.

Akebi stopped by Jhan again. He stared at her, perhaps trying to think of a reason to keep her. When nothing seemed to come to him, he sighed sadly. “Kill this one too.”

Ahlen rose up from his knees, eyes bloodshot from weeping and face covered in the red dust of the ground. Shakily, he gathered his courage and then said two words, loud and clear. “Moonflower! Dance!”

“No! They’ll kill her!” Kile bellowed and surged against his ropes. Men turned to him to subdue him.

Akebi had turned with an angry expression. He began to bark an order, but Jhan was on her feet and in motion already. She snapped Akebi’s neck with one swift motion of her hand.

“Lay down flat!” Ahlen shouted to everyone as Akebi fell dead at Jhan’s feet. Ahlen reached out and began jerking them down as Jhan became a moving blur. That left Akebi’s men standing and obvious targets.

Jhan somersaulted and escaped two whirling sword blades to kill a man who was just realizing what was happening. His face exploded in blood as Jhan used it as a springboard to flip in the opposite direction. The man making the drug for Sael, had his back turned, not even realizing something was wrong, until Jhan jerked his head around and cleanly snapped his spine. As she rushed by him, she snatched his sword from its scabbard. She impaled the blade in yet another man.

Jhan’s motions were as quick as heartbeats. The two still standing were ready, but not ready for her

to do the impossible. She flipped towards them and then came up spinning like a tornado. Their blades tried to cut her and then tangled with each other as she neatly evaded them in midair. Her boot lashed out, crushing the ribs of one man as she came down, hands first, and then flipped over to chop the windpipe of the other man. They tottered, clutching at their death wounds, and then both of them fell, dying slowly on the sharp stones of the ground.

Jhan stood, breathing hard, glazed eyes searching for another target. She saw the others, lying down, the curious imala and baku on their string nearby, but nothing presenting itself as a target. Slowly, her stance loosened, and then she had an incredible expression of relief and peace as she slowly sank to the ground and went very still.

When she failed, Dagara had punished her with torture. When she accomplished her task, she was allowed a great gift, to be alone, to be quiet, and not to have anyone touch her for a short time. In the long days of unending torment, those small moments had been a glimpse of Heaven.

“Gods!” Ahlen swore, looking sick. “I never- I never imagined she could do such a thing!”

Togo had been sick, throwing up all he had in his stomach; bile. Ixien was wide eyed, his face showing some intense emotion that was hard to define. Zerain was dumbstruck, sitting down and hugging her belly as she stared in disbelief at all the carnage. Minyah whimpered at the strong smell of death and held his brother while Togo began to vomit again, this time in dry heaves.

Kile backed up to Sael and they struggled with each others bonds. It took time, long enough for Jhan to grow tired of sitting and to lie on her back, full length, in the blood and gore of the, now, dead men. She hummed some tune, something faltering and half remembered, but strangely cheerful. When Kile finally freed himself, he came to stand beside her, looking down at her blood covered body and the vacant look in her blue eyes. Sael joined him, swallowing and putting a hand to his nose and mouth as if that could shut out the stench.

“I’ve never seen her use her skill like this,” Kile said quietly, gold brows drawn down. “I never dreamed she could-” he looked about them at the dead bodies and then down at Jhan again. “The woman I knew is truly gone. This creature, lying in blood and singing songs, this demented instrument of death without a mind... What shall I do? I promised to always love her, and I shall, but I don’t know if I can bear this... this thing she’s become.”

Sael slid a look at Kile. “*She*. Always you say she, and so do I, but Jhan hardly looks that anymore. Jhan’s neither, just as Jhan said, and it doesn’t have anything for you, Lord Kile. This can’t be a wife to you. It can’t bear sons. It doesn’t even have enough of its mind left to clean your hearth side. Maybe we should follow Ahlen’s lead. Allow Jhan to be this,” he motioned at the blood and corpses, “a sword in

our hand.”

Kile looked about them again. “We have swords, Sael Ruon, swords aplenty now.”

“Their swords,” Sael corrected him pointedly. “Much good they did them. This is all Jhan is good for, Lord Kile. Accept it.” Sael’s expression intensified. “Or are you a man who is strange in his tastes? Does this,” he motioned to Jhan, “move you between the legs? Is this creature better than any woman you have had?”

Kile swung a rock hard fist at Sael. Sael ducked it and stepped back. “What does it matter to you?” Kile demanded.

“Getting to the Sun God matters to me,” Sael told him. “I will use any weapon I can. I need you to let loose of this one and give it to me again.”

“No!” Ahlen stepped between them. He crouched and tugged at Jhan. She groaned and made a whimpering sound. When he pulled her from the corpses, and led her away from Kile and Sael’s argument, she felt her peace shatter.

Ahlen didn’t take Jhan far. He couldn’t use precious water to clean her so he scrubbed at the blood and gore on her with handfuls of sand. It tore at her skin like sandpaper, but she only stared mutely at Ahlen, expecting that and more to follow.

“Forgive me,” Ahlen said softly and there were tears making tracks in the red dirt on his face. “I know you don’t understand and, even if you did, you wouldn’t, but... I was frightened, terrified! They were going to geld me, Jhan. I couldn’t- I was going to let you kill as many of them as you could while I tried to get away. I never expected you to slaughter them all!” he swallowed hard. “No! I killed them. I ordered you! I can’t escape the blame for that either!”

Kile swung at Sael again, but the man was too quick, bobbing back and shouting some more. “You said it yourself just now,” Sael said vehemently. “Jhan isn’t, and never will be, the woman you married. The Sun God will only be offended by it and cast you and it out of the temple, if He doesn’t simply kill you for your outrage. Give Jhan back to me and leave. Tell yourself anything you like to soothe your conscience. Tell yourself that it is dead. It is, you know, as much as Obahn or any of these corpses.”

“Jhan is not an *it*!” Kile exploded.

“No, she is not,” Ahlen agreed, rising and turning to them. “I will take her to the Sun God and I will make sure nobody orders her to do this-this murder again!” He glared at Kile. “You may cast her aside, Lord Kile, but I won’t allow Sael to take her back. I think Jhan taught me enough to challenge him with some chance of success.”

“You ordered her to do this!” Kile took two strides and then halted, not certain who he wanted to

hurt first, Sael or Ahlen.

“What did you think he was doing all of this time, Lord Kile?” Sael demanded derisively. “You knew she was going to be used. You realized the importance of it.”

“As a last resort!” Kile countered.

“And this wasn’t?” Sael shot back. “Zerain a brood slave. Ahlen gelded. Togo and I someone’s Ekhal whore. Everyone else killed. Did it not seem so dire because he planned to let you breed and fight instead of spread your legs or die?”

Kile grabbed Sael by the throat, his face contorted and beet red. Sael pulled ineffectually at his hands, but it was Togo who threw himself on Kile and put him off balance. Kile broke from his grip, but he was forced to release Sael. The Ekhal went sprawling.

“I have grown weary of your filthy mouths and your cruel ways!” Kile erupted as he faced them all. “I’m taking Jhan away from here!”

Sael sat up and rubbed at his bruised throat. His hand sought out and picked up a dead man’s sword. “It’s only the truth that’s hard to hear!” he barked back hoarsely. “There isn’t any pretty way to put it, Lord Kile of Sarvoy! The Charia stripped Jhan of her fantasy of being a woman! Perhaps, they should have had time to take away the many fantasies you seem to have! That thing,” he jabbed a finger towards Jhan. “Will never be what you want it to be! It doesn’t know you, or me, or even where it is from moment to moment.” He laughed suddenly, broken and near the edge of hysteria. “Look! Look at your wife, Lord Kile! Tell me-Tell me with all truthfulness and honor that this is what you want to take back home with you!”

Kile looked and then shouted in an incoherent frenzy as he leapt forward towards Jhan. There were bits and pieces of the dead everywhere. She had picked one up and was carrying it to her mouth, eyes seeing it as only more food that might have been thrown to her.

“Gods!” Kile shouted as he slapped at Jhan. He hit her much harder than he intended. She went flying onto her side, head rocking violently sideways as the bit of flesh flipped out of her hand. Kile stood over her. She slowly recovered, rolling to try and sit up. Her body refused to coordinate. She floundered in a heap. Tried again and had the same result.

Ahlen wept. His whole body shook as he took a shuddering breath and glared at Sael. “It seems your argument is moot. Jhan can’t do anything now.”

Kile had his hands sunk into his gold hair as if he would pull it out by the roots. He spun away from Jhan and took a few, mindless strides as he groaned and swore over and over again. “What have I done?” was the only thing that was clear.

“Made my point far too late,” Sael replied angrily and then sighed as he shrugged. “This is all madness from beginning to end and we are all fools. The Sun God won’t accept your Jhan to be healed. He won’t even look at me. Those men had me and I let them. I-I did enjoy it too. I am Ekhal despite anything I want to do to disprove it. A wife, full of another man’s child, and a failed attempt at celibacy can’t give me enough honor to be accepted into the temple.”

“What of me?” Ahlen interjected bitterly. “I was with you, Sael. I was with Jhan, who is even worse. I ordered men’s deaths so that I could be cowardly. I destroyed lives. If the priests won’t hear you, what chance do I have?”

“None,” Sael replied harshly.

“I’m still going!” Kile barked as he spun on them, hands clenched into battering ram size fists. “They’ll see me and they’ll see Jhan if I have to break down the temple around their ears.” He pointed a rigid finger at Sael and then at Ahlen. “You two are going with me! You will help me fight. Like Obahn, I need your swords! I don’t care about your failings and your whining reasons for not going. If you refuse, I will kill you, here and now, and my skill is considerably better than yours!”

They stared at him, speechless. Kile spun to skewer the others with his fierce eyes, but they weren’t about to argue with him.

“Jhan told me that I shouldn’t want her because she’s nothing!” Kile continued. “You want to make her nothing too. What’s left of her will never be a wife to me, never be the woman I loved, but, especially after the violence I just committed, I can’t turn my back on her now! I have to see this through! I will get her to the temple. I will demand that she be healed!”

“And if there isn’t a Sun God?” Togo asked, ignoring Sael’s and Ahlen’s gasps of anger. “If there isn’t anyone to heal either her, Obahn, or Minyah and I?” he looked at Sael. “If there isn’t a god to let you go to your Lord Hagen?” he switched his gaze to Ahlen last. “If there isn’t a god to restore your sister? What then?”

Kile looked down at the still foundering Jhan. He crouched and reached out to still her motions before she hurt herself. She didn’t recoil from him. Her mind was a gel of their words and the glittering sun on the harsh rocks, not even remembering that Kile had just hit her and damaged her further.

“I’ll give Jhan what love and mercy demands of me,” Kile replied.

“I’ll kill myself on the Temple steps,” Sael replied resolutely. “I intended it all along. I swore it to Obahn. I just-I just wanted someone to tell me that, if I did, I would go to Hagen.”

“I can’t return home,” Ahlen groaned and covered his face with his hands. “What I’ve become... my family, my people, will never recognize.” He rubbed his hands over his filthy, tear streaked face and

his eyes went to Zerain. "I have other reasons for continuing beside my sister's fate."

Ixien's voice startled them. "There is a Sun God," he assured them. "You must go on. I require it of you." They all looked at him. He stared back dispassionately, continuing. "I require it of Jhan as well. I need her."

"Why?" Kile asked warningly.

"What use is she now?" Sael added almost sadly.

"You are fools," Ixien said. "Jhan is the most powerful creature I have ever seen. Even Tagara's fire was only a spark beside Jhan. How can even a god refuse anything you wish when you have Jhan with you?"

They all exchanged looks of consternation. Kile shook his head, dismissing Ixien's words as he took automatic command. Sael didn't like that, but there wasn't time to dispute it as Kile began shouting orders. "Leave the baku, they'll die in the desert! We'll take all of the imala and everything, including the clothing of these dead men. We need to leave this place before the birds begin circling and alert anyone close by that something is amiss."

They obeyed, dressing in the robes the dead men had in their packs. They hung on Ixien and Jhan, but Ixien merely ripped the bottom half of his robe until it barely reached his knees. They eagerly drank water until they were satisfied but, even as hungry as they were, none of them wanted to pause long enough to eat among the corpses, even if Kile had let them. Instead, they gathered all the supplies and rode out at a quick trot towards the plateaus.

Zerain was quickly in pain, but she had been the wife of a prince and she bit her lip, holding onto the saddle with both hands. Kile had to put Jhan in his lap. Her muscles were twitching and unreliable, and she was disoriented and sometimes flailing. Obahn sat his imala rigidly, as if his body, even comatose, couldn't forget his skill in the saddle. Togo kept an eye on him, but he only had to catch him from falling twice before they reached the shelter of the plateaus.

The road was clear, wide, and dusty. The sheer walls, rising up on all sides, gave only a little shade and then none at all as noon approached, scorching and merciless. Kile allowed them only a brief stop to eat, and for Zerain and Minyah, who couldn't ride an imala, to rest. He paced impatiently all the while, only pausing briefly to help Ahlen control Jhan enough to relieve herself and force food into her mouth.

Sael, leaning against a wall with his hands draped loosely over his knees, surveyed the company and then gave a bitter laugh. It echoed against the walls and caused everyone to pause and stare at him.

"What now?" Kile demanded. "Have you thought of something extraordinarily filthy to say or do

you want to try and get me to pretend Jhan isn't a human being again?"

"Do you have a family, Lord Kile?" Sael asked.

"Of course," Kile growled back.

"Of course," Sael echoed. "I don't. Of course is a naive thing to say."

"Just shut-up!" Kile demanded. "I don't care what you have to say!"

Sael laughed again, short and sharp. "I was just curious," he told Kile. "I don't know anything about you, except what Ahlen's told me. If you expect me to die for you in battle, as if we were oathed, then maybe I should understand you better."

"That doesn't sound like one of your people!" Kile retorted.

"I'm not like one of my people. I don't think you're like one of your people either. If you're going to lead," Sael stressed, studying Kile intensely. "I'd like to know whether you're sane enough."

"You've driven me insane!" Kile accused Sael as he continued to pace in agitation. Suddenly, he motioned to everyone. "Get on your imala. We have to get going!"

Sael shook his head as he stood, adjusting his robe. "Look at us," he continued. "Dishonored, misfit, crippled, pregnant, ensorcelled; I'd like to know if I should add insane-

"Will you fight less for knowing it?"

Sael didn't answer as they mounted the imala and began riding again. Jhan, still in Kile's lap, began to struggle. Kile, feeling danger from Sael, still wanted to confront him and assert his leadership. He impatiently handed Jhan to Ahlen. Held tightly in Ahlen's arms, she calmed down as he soothed her with nonsense words.

"You married an Ikhil," Sael said at last, ignoring Kile's hand going to the plundered sword at his side. "Ahlen told me that you had a women birth you twins, yet you chose only Jhan as a wife. When Jhan was stolen from you, you pursued her at the risk of your life. Now," he looked at Ahlen and the nearly comatose Jhan, "that she is clearly beyond reason, you still cling to her. That doesn't seem the action of a sane man. Didn't your family object? Didn't you care about their dishonor, if not your own?"

"Of course they objected!" Kile exploded, Sael touching a still raw wound. "Every day of every moment I was with them. Do you know what my own brothers said to me? They said that they would have found a way to get rid of her anyway, and that I should have been glad for them that they hadn't had to do it! They told me, *Kile, put yourself in a real woman and you'll forget all about Jhan.*" Kile was white, reliving the memory. "They didn't understand! You don't understand! If it's madness, then love is madness. It can't just be put aside because the object of that love isn't... conventional."

"I know what you are saying," Togo spoke up suddenly.

They both looked at him. Togo was staring directly at Sael. Sael swallowed, flushed, and then turned back to Kile as if he were angry. "I have my own madness," he told Kile, "I want to die for my dead lord, after all, and that certainly isn't conventional, but I want to have the chance. I don't want to ride headlong into more slavers or worse, because your madness, your desperation to help Jhan, spurs you to make us hurry. My madness is more even tempered, I think. Let me lead, Lord Kile."

"No," Kile replied. "Do you want to challenge me?"

"I would die sooner and save myself some trouble, but no, I won't challenge you," Sael replied. "I was hoping you would see reason."

"Reason?" Kile's expression turned very dark. "I've commanded men before."

"These aren't soldiers," Sael reminded him. "I know how to handle them better than you do."

"No," Kile replied again and gave Sael his shoulder against further argument. He did take Sael's advice though, slowing them down considerably and riding ahead a few yards to scout the way. That decision kept them from riding headlong into the small caravan blocking the passage up ahead.

Two wagons and imala to pull them, three armed men, and two men to drive the wagons; it wasn't good odds, but they saw Kile before he could drop back and hide. Far from being anxious at his appearance, the man riding his imala at the rear of the line, gave Kile a small salute with his hand. He was dressed in blue robes and had a metal cap on his head.

"We escort the daughter of the King of Idolass," the man announced loudly, as if that should have struck some fear in Kile. "You will hang back and allow us to pass first."

He simply meant that they were the ones going to throw up the dust of the road and Kile and his companions were going to be the ones to follow and eat it. The man didn't expect argument. He rode on and Kile allowed the others to catch up to him before continuing.

"Who's that?" Ahlen asked, sweating heavily as he struggled to keep Jhan in the saddle.

"The daughter of the King of Idolass," Kile replied blandly. He pulled his robe up to cover his nose. "It's going to be a dusty ride."

"Idolass is at the foot of the desert," Sael told them eagerly. "We've made good time, despite everything."

"We aren't there yet," Kile warned. "These plateaus go on for miles and, unless the Princess has come from a far place, they're provisioned for a long ride."

"We can ride with them for protection," Ahlen suggested.

"Our appearance is against us," Kile replied with a shake of his head. "We don't look like we

belong to our clothes or our gear. We look like bandits.”

“A cautious approach,” Sael said confidently. “They will see we don’t mean any harm.”

“With our band of misfits?” Kile arched a sour eyebrow. “I think you’re more insane than I am.”

Sael grinned fiercely. “I might be, Lord Kile, but I think we should try. There isn’t much choice.”

Kile nodded and they followed the tracks of the Princess’s wagons throughout the rest of the day, hanging back so that they didn’t suffocate. When the sun began to set, they found the wagons pulled up on the side of the trail and fires being lit by the men. Kile dismounted, approaching them cautiously, to ask to share their camp.

Two of the men stood, tall and dark, and enough alike to be brothers. One began to say something to Kile, his face relaxed and his mouth obviously forming some pleasantries. The mouth froze and the eyes widened in alarm, looking at something behind Kile.

Kile turned and saw Jhan. She had managed to free herself from a weary Ahlen and she was struggling towards the fascinating flames of the camp fire, staggering and floundering forward. Ahlen was pursuing her. He was going to be too late. Kile flung himself towards Jhan, tripped on a rock, and went sprawling.

Jhan stopped at the fire and quickly reached towards it, grinning vacuously. A hand snatched out, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her back. A woman, dressed in a flowing black robe, held Jhan from harming herself until Kile could get his legs under him and take her himself. Her strength spent, Jhan went limp, her head lolling out of her control and the world spinning crazily. Kile lowered her to the ground on her back and cushioned her head on his lap.

Kile looked up at Jhan’s rescuer, “Thank you- Thank you, Princess?”

“She is Khirena Om Logi, daughter of King Lorian Shu Logi of Idolass,” one of the men announced.

The woman quirked a smile, but she was also frowning curiously. “Thank you Manan,” she said and her voice betrayed that she was younger than she looked. She wore a flowing black robe open from her throat to her navel. Her pendulous breasts unabashedly peeked from the folds, a half moon pendant hanging between them. Her face was round and her skin was the color of an almond skin. Her mass of woolly hair hung with charms and crystal pins.

“Jhan isn’t in her right mind, your Highness. She has been very ill,” Kile explained. “She hurts herself if she isn’t watched closely.”

Khirena moved closer. She looked down at Jhan, and then started, as if seeing her for the first time. “I know this one,” Khirena exclaimed.

“Highness! I don’t think-” Kile began, but Khirena raised a hand and kneeled.

“I remember this one,” Khirena repeated. “It called me into its dreams. Jhan. Yes, that was the name. It had a broken leg and I helped heal it.”

“Heal it?” Kile echoed and then excitedly. “Do you have Power, Princess? Can you heal Jhan- Would you deign to see if you can?”

Khirena raised eyebrows at Kile and then turned to sweep the rest of the ragged company. “There are others who need help as well. I don’t have Power, I’m afraid, but I am an apprentice of the Terenian art of walking minds. I am also a novice of the Hunellan. Their order makes it a mandate to help all in need.”

Manan quickly objected. “Princess! Your Father would not approve! We have delayed long enough. Let them follow, if they can, and allow them to be helped in Idolass. There are a number of charity houses there!”

Kile stiffened, insulted. “I am a Lord!” he retorted. “I am Kile Helarion Dor, son of Duke Dor.” He pointed to Obahn. “That is Prince Obahn Om Sukhelan.” he motioned to Jhan in his lap. “This is my wife and also a Princess of the Kevelt. We will not stoop to charity!”

Manan made a face of utter disbelief and disgust, but Khirena was nodding. “I can hear the truth of your words in your mind, Lord Kile,” she replied apologetically. “If you will join our company, I am certain my father would receive you honorably and see to your noble wounded.”

Kile inclined his head. “I am most grateful, your Highness. We have been through many trials and we still have the desert to face.”

Khirena understood. “You are pilgrims to Tsarianna then?”

“Yes, your Highness,” Kile replied, not seeing any reason to lie. “It’s said that the god is very powerful. I myself am going to Him to pray that He heals my wife.”

Khirena looked down at Jhan again. Very slowly, she lifted up Jhan’s robe and peered underneath. When she lowered it again, her eyes were curious. “It is I remembered,” she told Kile and she was angry. “This one is neither man nor woman. How is it that it is your wife? Are such things done in your land to please men?”

“No,” Kile quickly assured her, his sunburned face turning even redder, “but explaining will take a great deal of time and I and my companions are very tired. May we rest first?”

“Of course,” Khirena straightened and commanded her men. “Allow them into our camp and be respectful. Give them all they need.”

“Princess!” Manan began to argue again, but she cut him off with a royal gesture.

“I am the daughter of a King,” Khirena told him, “but, I consider myself a novice of Hunellan, first and foremost. I will not shirk my duty in that regard. We will help these people, Manan.”

“Princess,” Manan responded in a more subservient tone and bowed to her as Khirena backed away to allow them to approach.

As if floodgates had opened, the company came forward. Zerain sank by the fire with a sigh of relief. Togo brought Obahn there as well and sat him down before turning and helping Sael with the beasts. Kile ordered water and bathed the blood from Jhan that Ahlen hadn’t been able to scrub off with sand. She stirred at his touch.

“Head hurts,” Jhan complained. She smiled at Kile and pushed at his ministering hands. “What are you doing, you big oaf? Can’t you let me sleep late?”

Kile was shocked. His hands hovered in midair, the wet rag dripping onto Jhan’s face. “If you like, Little Love.”

Jhan yawned and frowned, disturbed. “Your brothers,” she said, memory suddenly clear, but misplaced out of time, “They were talking in the hall outside.”

“What did they say?” Kile wondered, still not daring to move.

Jhan felt miserable. “Your mother told them to get ride of me, make me go away. They wanted- they wanted to hurt me, have some fun... beat me up. How can they be your brothers? How did you turn out to be so-so kind and loving, when they are hardly better than animals? I know you love your home. I-I don’t want to make trouble for you, but I can’t-I can’t stay. I’m leaving in the morning for Pekarín.”

“Of course,” Kile murmured, stricken. “Whatever you would like; I’ll never blame you Jhan. Things there were-are just harder than we imagined.”

Jhan nodded, her head lolling again and a twitch beginning in the side of her body she couldn’t control. She sighed softly and closed her eyes. She could hear Kile and Ahlen speaking. Ahlen’s voice disturbed her. Memories fought for clarity, clashed, and became confused.

“She remembered you,” Ahlen was saying.

“In this instant, yes,” Kile grated back.

“I knew she was very unhappy,” Ahlen said, almost to himself. “That’s why I decided to take her. You were so happy with your children and that Lady. Jhan didn’t fit into that. She just seemed to make you and everyone else miserable. She was unhappy too. I thought-”

“That you were doing me a favor?” Kile lashed back. “If Princess Khirena can help Jhan, your usefulness to me will have ceased, Ahlen Kantori. If you want to think, think what that will mean to

you.”

“I know what it means,” Ahlen murmured, paused and then in a low tone, “How does the Princess know Jhan? How did she heal Jhan’s leg? That doesn’t make any sense. She wasn’t with us when that happened.” Jhan could hear him stir uneasily. “She is very beautiful... and unashamed. Her breasts... a woman of my people would have been whipped and cast out into the snow.”

“Quiet!” Kile snapped. “I don’t care if she dances nude, so long as she can help Jhan and the rest of us.”

“I won’t make any promises,” Khirena said from behind Kile. He stiffened and stammered apologies. She shook her head, cutting them off. “It’s not proper, but I understand. You are concerned for your *wife* and your people. Jhan is a powerful walker of minds, even though it seemed unaware of its talent. Jhan drew me across the distances to help it. I may be able to heal it again, if I enter its dreams once more.”

“Jhan is not an *it*!” Kile couldn’t help protesting. “Jhan is... more a woman than anything else!”

“In her mind, at least, I will agree,” Khirena replied. “Come, eat first and refresh yourselves. I will retire to my wagon and prepare myself.”

“You dare a lot,” Sael said as he came to the fire with Togo and Khirena had walked away. “Don’t anger her, Lord Kile. We need her help desperately. I can hardly credit that a stranger, and a princess at that, is even bothering with us, but let’s not spit on our good fortune!”

Minyah came from the darkness, nervous around the strangers after having endured the slavers. He began to edge between Togo and Sael, as they sat down, and then caught his brother’s eyes. He settled on Togo’s opposite side instead and leaned his weight against Togo’s thigh.

“Like Sael,” Minyah sighed happily.

Sael glared. “I don’t care whether you like me or not.”

Minyah yawned, showing his human looking teeth in a smile. “Togo like Sael. That’s good. At least one of us find mate.” Togo flushed, wide eyed. He gave Sael an alarmed look.

Sael’s jaw tightened. He reached out and closed a hand on Togo’s thigh, leaning close. “Is this true?”

Togo was unable to reply, strangling at the touch and Sael’s closeness. Sael leaned back and released him. He turned away, obviously agitated. After a long moment, Togo reached up a shaking hand to touch Sael’s shoulder. Nervously, he ran a finger along Sael’s stiff jaw, as if he were trying to relax it. Sael jerked away and stood.

“I don’t want your attentions,” Sael said firmly. “I thought, at one time, that we could... but that’s

past. I know my duty. I have to see it to the end. I don't need distractions." He strode away resolutely.

Kile was uncomfortably embarrassed, but silent. Togo ran his fingers through Minyah's fur, head bowed and face hurt and sullen. Ahlen was scowling in disgust. Obahn stared blankly at everything while Zerain tried to push some food between his lips. Ixien was curled up asleep, oblivious and uncaring of the strangers around them. Jhan had heard everything, but couldn't respond. Their angry words made everything even more confusing. She felt the shocking pain in her head and convulsed. Kile held her tighter, unaware that it was something more than another uncontrollable twitch. The pain went on, getting so bad, that Jhan fled deep into her mind, diving into the safe place she, and someone she couldn't remember, had made for her there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

(Idolass)

Jhan opened her eyes to her indigo world. The pain was gone and so were all of her body's numerous aches and pains. The sun there was cool and clouded as if it were strained through stained glass; the lake of indigo water, soothing and as flat as a mirror. She sat there, as still as the lake, enjoying the cessation of confusion and a clarity of thought that had become a stranger.

When Khirena appeared, sitting cross legged before her, Jhan was only surprised, not annoyed. She remembered the woman. Nothing stood between Jhan and the realization that Khirena had saved Jhan's life at one time and that she was owed at least a piece of Jhan's peaceful world.

"They said that you had met with an accident," Khirena said. "Is that true?"

"An accident?" Jhan found that memory long gone. "I don't know."

"You don't need to protect them," Khirena told her. "I won't let them hurt you if you tell me the truth."

"I don't know," Jhan repeated again, staring out at the Indigo plains.

"That one, Kile," Khirena persisted. "Is he your husband? If so, has he treated you well? He seems concerned for you."

"He says he is," Jhan mumbled. "I don't remember him. He has been caring for me."

Khirena shook her head sympathetically. "If you can't even be well in your dreams, then you are too far gone for me to help you much." She took hold of Jhan's hand and placed it palm to palm with hers. "I will try my best. You have only to relax and allow me to walk your mind."

Jhan continued to stare out at the plains. She felt warmth spread between their palms and an almost too intimate sensation. She also felt Khirena's alarm.

"Your Power is slipping its bonds!" Khirena exclaimed. "Your mind isn't enough to hold it any longer!"

Jhan could feel it, pulsing like lava at the level of her heart, flexing and straining to seep through the slowly opening door. There was nothing she could do about it. It only waited a trigger, an extreme upset that would allow Jhan to be distracted enough to let it escape.

In her dream state, Jhan understood the problem perfectly. The solution was a sacrifice, a sacrifice of all that was left of her. Her confusion was her enemy. It created the damaging seizures that distracted and weakened her. The confusion sprang from muddled memory and frightening flashbacks.

To stop them, Jhan had to stop the memories. She had to get rid of them. Khirena had to help her.

Khirena, linked to Jhan's mind, balked. "I am sworn to heal and to help, not to destroy!"

Jhan fed Khirena the memory of the Sahvossa and their clear knowledge that Jhan could destroy the word with her Power. Khirena paled under her almond colored skin, but she understood.

"You will be honored to Hunellan, the god of sacrifice and healing," Khirena told her, solemn and sad. "I myself will offer up prayers for you."

Jhan didn't care about that. She only cared, that, in a very real way, she was killing herself. It was only small comfort to know that she was doing it to save others.

Khirena didn't hesitate now. Her hand tightened on Jhan's and Jhan felt that warmth spread from that hand up to her head. Something like lightning exploded between Jhan's ears. She shrieked, startled at the violence and suddenness of it, but then she went calm as Khirena shut down memory.

Jhan raised her head as Khirena released her. They were standing in rolling white nothingness, a rippling dream of white silk or rolling white seas. Jhan looked around, not understanding any of it. She didn't even have a baby's memory to tell her who she was, who Khirena was, what they were, why they were, where they were, or what would happen next. Not knowing anything, she felt nothing, certainly not fear, and the Power within her banked and settled like a cheerful hearth fire.

Khirena touched Jhan's cheek. Her touch was soft and tingling, not like skin to skin at all, and then Khirena was gone and Jhan was standing in the white nothingness that had become her mind.

When Jhan awoke, she found herself in a bland, alien world. Everything was new, everything was strange. She never knew what to expect. The people around her were unfathomable. They spoke in lilting syllables she didn't comprehend and did strange things to her that were equally mysterious. Jhan was a baby, just born, but, unlike a baby, her mind took nothing in and remembered nothing from even one second to the next. All capacity for memory had been shut off by Khirena.

There was one other that was like her. Obahn sat motionless until he was made to move, a cleaner slate than Jhan was. She at least could move her body and follow what was around her, even though she never understood and couldn't ever understand any of it, so she clung to him like a constant anchor, even when the tall one with the curly, gold hair tried to pull her away.

They traveled with the caravan all the way to Idolass. It took several long, dust filled weeks, but the trail was easy and they didn't meet any trouble on the way. When they broke out of the plateaus, they were met with an incredible sight, a broad river that snaked through red rocks and blowing dunes

of sand. On its banks crouched the mud brick buildings of Idolass.

To Jhan, it was all two dimensional, her mind refusing to give it the perspective of knowledge and understanding that would have made it real for her. She saw the domed tops and inlaid tiles, the whitewashed walls, and the painted designs. Her eyes registered the men and women in flowing robes, gold hanging from every bare piece of flesh. She saw the market full of food and wares. It was all bright, colorful, and full of the bustle of city life, yet, to Jhan, it was like a painting of a still life without a story or a reference point.

Sitting lax in Kile's arms, Jhan stared blankly, though her head moved at the motions that caught her eyes. When they rode into the shelter of a courtyard, the noise of the city suddenly cut off and the echo of the imala's hooves and the wagon wheels echoing, it was all one to Jhan. She didn't have any sense of arrival, and Kile had to pull her down and lead her by the arm as they converged with the others; meeting soldiers and grooms in a whirling exchange of shouted orders, bows, and the grabbing of baggage.

They entered a grand palace with arched doorways and whitewashed walls painted with frescoes of cavorting animals in flowering Mediterranean style gardens. Richly worked carpets covered the stone floors of the long hallways and a constant breeze rushed by them as if sucked into the building by an unseen force. It cooled their hot, dust covered skins, and the shadowy light soothed their raw nerves as they wound deeper and deeper into the palace.

Khirena and her men led them to a spacious suite of rooms. The only furniture was pillows and thick carpets strewn on the floor, but there was a sunken pool of water at the room's center, tinkling with a small fountain, and a wide window that led out onto a balcony.

Kile spoke with Khirena, grateful and pleased that they were being treated so well. Jhan listened to the lilting patter of their voices and then broke away from Kile to sit by the pool of water. She plunged her face into it and drank as deeply as she could, unmindful that she had to breathe as well. It was Ahlen who pulled her back up.

Jhan watched Ahlen's lips move, heard his words and saw his scowl when he realized that she didn't understand. Wiping at the water on her face, he left a track of dirt there. Annoyed, he stood and began pulling off his clothes, intending to take a bath. Jhan watched him climb into the pool, sunburned skin stinging, and then she followed him in fully clothed, her wet robe dragging her down. Ahlen caught her, pulled the robe off over her head, and then simply held her while he splashed her with water and scrubbed at her to loosen the dirt. All the while, his eyes were on Khirena.

After Khirena and her men had left, they all bathed except for Ixien, something at the bottom of

the pool slowly sucking the filthy water away and replacing it with cleaner water. Afterwards, they all climbed out and lay on the pillows, naked and exhausted. They were silent, everyone contemplating their good luck in having found Khirena. Only Ixien was at the balcony, staring out at a walled garden a story below the balcony. His impatience was tangible.

Zerain rose and covered herself with the edge of a carpet as several men servants came in with fresh robes of white and food and drink. Laying everything out like a banquet, they bowed and left without ever once having looked directly at their nude masters.

None of them were eager to move. Zerain was the first to dress and begin eating. Sael, lying on his stomach with his eyes closed, was the last. Togo, thinking he was asleep, reached out tentatively and touched his shoulder. That touch turned into a caress down Sael's back that he couldn't seem to stop himself from making.

Sael flinched, his whole side shivering like an imala feeling a fly. He opened his eyes and rolled them at Togo. Jhan saw pain in that look and a hungry need. Togo saw it to. His hand caressed Sael lower.

Like an uncoiled spring, or a whirling tiger, Sael leapt up and slapped Togo a furious blow in the face. Togo reeled and clutched at his cheek, bowing his head in shock at the violent rebuff. Standing nude over him, Sael shouted something. Togo looked up, his eyes traveling up Sael's body as if he would devour it with his eyes. When Sael came forward to hit him again, Minyah was on him, throwing Sael onto his back and threatening his eyes with his claws.

All of that motion drew Jhan. She came forward. Leaving a bird leg behind, her white robe tangling in her legs, she approached Sael and Minyah on her knees. Pulling it up, and out of her way, she straddled Sael's face, ignoring his muffled shout of disgust as she threw her arms around Minyah's soft furry, neck. Surprised, he pulled back, taking her with him. Sael rolled, shouting, but Minyah couldn't react as Jhan smiled vacantly and nuzzled her face against his fur, thinking nothing, only wanting the silky sensation it gave her.

Togo and Sael confronted each other again. They shouted until they both looked pained, panting and frowning furiously. Finally, they turned from each other and paced to opposite sides of the room, shooting looks at each other when they thought the other wasn't looking.

Jhan stayed with Minyah. He soothed her, giving her world a better anchor than Obahn. He was warm and able to hold her; a patient, simple, undemanding presence. He wept for his brother's pain, but Jhan didn't understand that and neither, really, did Minyah. He was far too simple to understand complex relationships.

They spent days in comfort, fed well, and content not to travel any further just yet. They ignored Ixien's protests. They weren't in any shape to tackle the last leg of the journey. The desert was a barren, cruel place; a forge to test any pilgrims determination to see the Sun God.

Jhan was ministered to by Ahlen, at first, but he was dissatisfied with that arrangement. He soon left Jhan and was, more often than not, in the company of Khirena. Kile was equally reluctant to care for Jhan, his guilt and misery over her condition so great, that he could hardly bear to look at her. It was left to Sael to take care of her, then. He did so roughly, his preoccupation with his own troubles, leaving little room for playing the compassionate nursemaid.

Close proximity to a man he desired, yet couldn't have, and the tense emotions of so many troubled individuals, finally became too much for Sael. One evening, he sought the solitude of a lush garden enclosed inside the walls of the palace and open to the night sky. Jhan followed like a docile pet behind him.

After wandering the narrow paths lit by small lanterns, Sael discovered a low bench. He placed Jhan there and then stood silently in the moonlight, staring up at the night sky.

Jhan would have sat quietly all night, boredom unknown to her; lacking even imagination to think of doing anything, but what she was gestured and positioned to do. When Togo suddenly joined them, it was all the same to her. His movements and Sael's, as the man turned angrily, were only distracting in a primitive reflexive way.

They argued. Togo reached out and gripped Sael's strong arms, running his hands up and down them gently despite his angry words and his fierce expression. Sael stood like a statue, staring down at the ground and face reflecting his determination not to give in to Togo's demands.

When Togo held him close, Sael groaned and closed his eyes, finally, giving in like a string breaking. Jhan was as unimportant as the flowering plants around her, both of the men knowing she was blind to what transpired. When they sank to the grass, still locked together, but pulling off each others robes now, she continued to sit, empty witness.

They argued again. Sael was standing up and thrusting his head through his robe, jerking it down as he shoved Togo away from him. Togo was crying, urging reason, but Sael turned and fled into the

garden. Togo snatched up his robe and followed close behind him. Jhan was left alone, not even aware that she had been abandoned.

Jhan wasn't alone for long. Her awareness twitched as Ahlen and Khirena approached, stopping just within view, but as yet unaware of her sitting there. They were hand in hand only briefly and then they were embracing, kissing deeply and passionately without the tension and argument of Sael and Togo. This wasn't a first time for them and this was a familiar trysting place.

Ahlen's hands reached into Khirena's robe and pulled out her pendulous breasts. He cupped them, squeezed them roughly, and then let them hang enticingly while he bent over and lapped at the erect and swollen nipples. He delighted in this, suckling long and hard while Khirena moaned. When he bore her down, placing her on her back on the grass, he lay her body and breasts bare to the moonlight by pulling open her robe with a strong jerk. Khirena whispered protests as Ahlen grabbed a large breast in each of his hands, but her legs parted willingly enough so that he could drive himself into her. When he finally exploded into Khirena, he let out a shout of utter abandon.

Khirena reached up a hand in entreaty to cover his mouth. He kissed her hand with a smile, nipped at it, and then sucked on her fingers. They were on their feet then, Ahlen pulling Khirena up by a hand and saying something low that made her gasp and laugh. He led her away and Jhan stared after them, feeling nothing, not even the slightest titillation or outraged disgust.

In her right mind, Jhan might have been terrified, but she felt nothing. She continued to sit even when the lanterns dimmed and her only light was from the moon and stars. Sael didn't remember to come back for her, or if he did, something kept him from it. Jhan's body sagged in weariness and her chin nodded as she began to fall asleep. Needing to lie down didn't occur to her. When Jhan's body succumbed at last, she simply collapsed, head striking the edge of the marble bench.

Jhan blinked and the world came into focus. She was seated in a metal cage that wasn't more than four feet square, naked, dripping wet, and smelling of some sort of caustic soap. A young man in a red robe dumped another bucket of water over her through the bars and then picked up a broom to push whatever he had washed off of her towards a drain in the floor.

In another cage sat Obahn. He looked blank and haggard; his body appearing thin and frail. Next to him, in a slightly larger cage, lay Minyah. He was dozing; ears twitching at flies.

All of their cages were in the shade of a huge tree with a twisted trunk. Cages and tree were in a courtyard, open to the sky and very small. A wooden table with straps was positioned in the sunlight and a man was laying out instruments on a smaller table beside that one.

The man wore a blue, silk robe with a black apron of leather tied over the front. He looked much like Khirena, dark skinned and hair like wool. On his head, he wore a simple, gold circlet. There wasn't any mistaking that he was Khirena's father, the King of Idolass. He motioned to the young man, a servant perhaps, and the servant opened the latch of Jhan's cage and pulled her out.

Jhan walked docilely as the young man took her over to the table and then lifted her onto it. Making her lie down, he attached the straps over her neck, shoulders, wrists, and ankles. Backing away, he filled the bucket with water again and returned to the other cages to continue cleaning.

The King looked over Jhan's body with an analytical eye. He seemed familiar with it, but still curious. His hands parted and examined, felt and prodded. He paused only to write something down in a leather bound notebook of parchment leaves. That done, he took up a hose and a bottle of a greenish liquid. Without a word or a look of sympathy, he snaked the tube down Jhan's gagging throat and then poured the liquid into the tube. It was all done quickly and competently.

Removing the apparatus, the King waited patiently, humming a tune under his breath as he wrote something else down. Finally, he returned to Jhan and leaned close to her ear. "Can you hear me? Do you understand?"

Jhan did hear and she did understand. Her head began throbbing and one of her eyes went dark. She wanted to raise a hand to it, but the strap held her immobile. She turned her good eye to the King and looked at him questioningly.

"Still can't speak?" the King guessed in disappointment. He shook his head and wrote something else down.

"Where?" Jhan managed and the King whirled on her, gripping her arm hard.

"You spoke! Good, very good!" the King leaned close to her ear again. "I am the King of Idolass. I have been searching for drugs that will counteract the mind work of the priests of Hunellan and the Terenians. Unknown to my daughter, I allowed her to go to them, to learn all that they could teach, so that I could bring her back here and test my work. When she told me that she had worked on you, I knew that I had my test subject." His expression turned angry. "When she shamed herself with that foreign nobody, I had an excuse to imprison all of them in the mines and take you according to the law."

Jhan stared, not knowing who or what he was talking about. He saw her confusion. "My daughter

told me that you were damaged in the mind already, but this is an improvement. I can only credit the efficacy of my drugs to your partial recovery.” He smiled with pride. “Soon the lands of the Terenian and the priests of Hunellan will be mine! When my soldiers are given this drug, their minds will be safe!”

The King wiped his hands on a cloth and walked briskly away, taking his notebook and leaving Jhan in the searing sun. The servant came to her rescue, unstrapping her and then putting her back into her cage. He latched the door, but there wasn’t any lock. It was obvious the cages had been only for animals up until then.

Jhan sat quietly, head bowed under the throbbing pain there. The servant finished his duties and then left, unconcerned that Jhan, or any of the others, might escape. Obahn certainly wasn’t in any condition to and Minyah was still sleeping with his eyes half closed.

Jhan wanted to touch Minyah’s soft fur. She opened the cage and began to slide out onto the floor.

“What are you doing?”

The servant had come back, irritable to see Jhan being disobedient. He strode forward and took her hard by the elbow. Concentrating on putting her back in the cage, he didn’t see the small, pale figure behind him.

Ixien, dispassionate face almost translucent in full sunlight, reached out tiny, clawed hands and grasped the servant by the head. The young man didn’t even have time for a shriek as boiling blood spurted out of his ears and nose. Ixien had used his heat to fry his brain. The smell of burnt flesh hovered in the air as the man slid to the ground.

“Such fragile creatures,” Ixien commented coolly as he took hold of Jhan with a warm hand and pulled her back out of the cage. He looked her up and down, assessing her ability to travel. Reassured by what he saw, he began to walk away with her.

Something took hold of Jhan’s mind and made her plant her feet. It had the familiarity of Khirena “The others,” her voice said, though Jhan didn’t understand the words.

Ixien glanced at Obahn and Minyah. “They will be a distraction, allowing us to get away,” he agreed and went to open their cages. He pulled Obahn out, but Minyah was groggy, as if he had been drugged. Ixien shook at his shoulder until he moved, standing uncertainly and blinking in the light.

“I won’t leave without Ahlen,” The presence of Khirena said through Jhan’s mouth. Jhan touched her lips in confusion.

That was too much for Ixien. He shook his head and began pulling Jhan out of the courtyard. Minyah took hold of Obahn and made him walk after them, though Minyah looked as if he could

barely comprehend that he was being saved.

Jhan planted her feet again and Ixien looked ready to strike her. Khirena said through Jhan's mouth, "I know the way. I know how to get us safely out of Idolass without anyone knowing. If you don't help me save Ahlen, I'll scream for the guards."

Ixien raised a glowing hand towards Jhan's face. Jhan stared at it in fascination. Ixien closed that hand into a fist and then lowered it. "I have been in hiding since they took the others," he said. "I waited to see if I could free them. They are in the mines, deep under the palace. It's impossible to get past the guards. I saved you. I need you. We will go together to the Temple of the Sun God."

"No," Khirena replied through Jhan, an angry firm presence in Jhan's mind. "You'll do as I say. Without supplies, which I can provide, you won't get a day away from Idolass without dying."

Ixien considered. In the end, he knew that she was right. "If it is necessary, I will leave you to die while I escape. You saved my life once, at risk of your own, but I won't do that. I told you that I would not."

Khirena's mind trembled against Jhan's, but she wasn't swayed. She didn't have anything to lose. It was Jhan's body that was being spoken of, not hers. "You will follow me and keep these others quiet," Khirena ordered briskly.

Jhan felt control of her body taken away from her. Like a spectator, she sat in the back of her mind while Khirena lead Ixien and the others deep into the palace by little used hallways.

Jhan felt darkness covering her mind as Khirena took complete control. Sinking into blissful oblivion, she floated there, for how long, she didn't know, but when she could see again, they were loaded down with packs, dressed in robes, and going slowly down a very narrow tunnel with unfinished stone for walls.

"They will be resting now," Khirena was assured Ixien through Jhan. "This tunnel goes past their holding cells."

"What about the guards?" Ixien wondered.

"You will see," Khirena replied confidently.

Ixien did see. By the light of their two lanterns they could see door after door lining the walls of the tunnel. They were each bolted in iron and covered in cobwebs.

"This is the old mine," Khirena explained. "I used to explore here as a child. This tunnel stretched through a vein of gold a generation ago, but that vein turned left and it was abandoned. There are doors on the opposite sides of the cells now that allow them access to the new tunnel going to the vein."

Khirena made Jhan stand on her tiptoes to peer through a small hole in each door. In that manner,

they moved down the hallway until Khirena found what she had been looking for. Throwing the bolt aside, she opened the door and entered tentatively.

“Jhan!” Kile was wrapping Jhan in his big arms in an instant. He was wearing a ragged cloth around his loins and his bare body, from his face to his booted feet, was streaked with sweat and dust from digging. He looked as if he had been starved, his ribs standing out.

Ahlen was there as well. He stood unsteadily. There were bloody lash marks all over his body and his eyes had a hollow look of suffering. Jhan broke from Kile and went to him, nuzzling against his stinking skin and kissing his lips hungrily.

“My love!” Khirena said through Jhan. “I’m here to free you, but we must move quickly!”

Ahlen was dumbfounded. Kile looked sick and shocked. Sael was standing with teeth gritted as if he could barely keep himself from violence. Togo stood as well, a bruised shadow standing behind Sael with eyes downcast and his mouth set hard.

“I don’t care who you love, Jhan Dor!” Sael grated out. “If you can get us free, do it now. Our masters will be returning soon.”

“Silence!” Ixien warned. “They will hear.” He pulled Jhan away from Ahlen. “You have done as you wished,” he told her, “Now, lead us out of here.”

They went single file. Ixien and Jhan went first. Kile followed after. Ahlen, Sael, and Togo followed in that order. Minyah hugged his brother only briefly as he tugged Obahn along, the drug that had dulled his mind beginning to fade.

Jhan slowed as the tunnel bottomed out and swerved to the right. She motioned to the others to be silent.

They passed a great domed hall that had been carved out of the rock; its smooth, vaulting walls disappearing into darkness. An archway led into the old tunnel and, across the great room, there was an archway that led to the new tunnel. Two tables, with straps, dominated the room. Empty cages stood along a wall along with a worktable and shelves full of stack upon stack of notebooks. A great, glass globe of fiery light lit up everything. It was positioned in a metal, clawed stand just right of center of the tables.

Togo exclaimed and began to weep as he ran into the room, ignoring everyone’s hissed warnings. Uncaring of danger, he lifted up a heavy chair and flung it at the glass globe. It shattered all around him as fire flared out to encompass the entire room. The company ducked behind the walls of the hall and prepared to run.

Minyah’s cry halted them. “Tagara!”

Blinking against the light as it slowly gathered and died, everyone saw the form of Tagara, the daughter of Selaya, coalesce from the flames. Togo held his arms out as if to hug her, still weeping, but then he wrapped them about himself, as if he were clutching his heart, as Minyah came bounding up to Tagara happily.

“Free at last,” Tagara breathed, as if she had almost forgotten what it was like. “Forgive me, my brothers. I should never have left you! I was too naive. The King of Idolass captured me easily and entrapped me in that globe. All of this time he has been attempting to control my power for his wars. Now he shall know what my power can truly do!”

“If we live so long!” Ixien complained, but he seemed excited too, his crystal eyes gleaming in the dark at Tagara. “Come! We must leave this place.”

It was a confusing jumble of images for Jhan. Khirena controlled her, leading everyone down the tunnels while Tagara began to burn everything behind them. Because of that, there wasn’t any pursuit as they burst out of the tunnel at last and slid down a sharp incline of mined rock and sand. It ended on a hard baked expanse of barren earth. Sitting there, in a trance, was Khirena with Zerain standing beside her.

Tagara raised a hand to burn her, but Togo stopped her in time. He was suspicious, but he wasn’t going to allow murder when Khirena was obviously helpless.

Khirena opened her eyes and stood, rushing into Ahlen’s arms. As he held her loosely, Jhan felt Khirena’s mind leave her and with it, knowledge and understanding. She stood blankly, feeling Kile take hold of her, face still reflecting his hurt and longing for her. He spoke, but Jhan couldn’t decipher his words.

Khirena had imala waiting for them, loaded with more supplies. She intended to go with them, knowing what her life was worth if her father should discover her betrayal. When Ahlen, the man she had risked everything for, pushed past her indifferently to go to an imala, it was clear that her affection for him wasn’t returned. She faltered, her expression full of emotional pain, but then she was mounting an imala, her future now with them whether Ahlen cared for her or not.

Tagara burst into flames and rose into the sky. Togo followed only a second behind her. Their heat and wind ruffled over skin and hair as they passed and Ixien was shaken out of his bland manner, shouting at them that they would be seen. Tagara listened, leading Togo away from the company, angling down a ravine to hide from any pursuers.

Sael stared after them as he mounted his own imala after putting Obahn and Zerain on one together. Sael didn’t look like a man just released from hard labor in a mine. Instead, he looked as if he

were still locked in his prison, face strained and set with suffering.

They rode at a hard gallop through the long afternoon and into the evening. Khirena was at a loss to guide them, having never gone into the desert, but Tagara and Togo were good guides from their vantage in the sky. If the King sent pursuers, they never saw them. Khirena spent most of the ride in a half trance, her mind, perhaps doing what the King had feared most from the Terenians and the priests of Hunellan, controlling and turning aside the minds of his soldiers.

When they dared to make camp, Tagara made certain to show her flames going far from them. They didn't chance a campfire, so they sat in the darkness and ate cold food.

When their strength had returned to them somewhat, arguments began immediately. Everyone was furious at Ahlen and shadowy fingers jabbed at Khirena, huddled against him, more than once. He, in turn, pointed to his whip marks, shouting back as he rose and paced away from Khirena, as if abandoning her.

Khirena began to look frightened as she suddenly saw the darker side of her love, realizing at last that Ahlen had been using her, hoping that her father would find out and have him killed. It had been a blatant attempt at suicide. That he had ensnared his companions as well troubled him, but he wasn't wholly contrite. His bitterness at himself and his failure to escape his guilt was too great.

Kile didn't have the strength for the argument. He soon broke from it and made Jhan lay down. Cradling her in his arms, his soft breath brushed gently against her cheek as they both slept.

The desert was an endless stretch of blowing sand under a merciless sun. The imala were born and bred for it, never wavering in their steps as they plodded out into it and began the long, dangerous trek. Their riders were less sure of themselves, checking and rechecking supplies nervously and conserving them whenever they could. Sael began to look thoughtfully at Obahn and it was clear what he was thinking. Surprisingly it was Zerain who angrily forestalled him. She began to care for Obahn when Togo stayed longer and longer with his fiery sister.

They traveled mostly at night, the clear skies, bright stars, and the moon their only light. During the day, they huddled under the bright silk canopies that Zerain had packed for them, sweltering through the worst heat of the day in that makeshift shade.

Kile had forgotten his hurt, Khirena perhaps having explained how she had controlled Jhan, but the

pain in his eyes never left and he always seemed ready to weep as he cared for Jhan. He stayed thin and weary, skin stretched tight on his prominent cheeks and square jaw. He looked as if his time in the mines had taken something vital away from him.

By the look of Zerain's swelling belly, Jhan had dreamed through more than a few weeks in the care of the King of Idolass. Zerain moved and rode as if she were in great discomfort, a hand always to the small of her back and her bare face contorted in misery. Still, she cared for Obahn as if he kept her sane with the simple repetition of his needs.

Ahlen remained sullen and hollow eyed. He often sat on the outskirts of the camp, hugging his knees and ignoring Khirena's attempts to engage him. His sexual interest in her was gone, snuffed out along with his need to be caught and killed, but it had been replaced by shame, shame that he had used her so, and shame that she hadn't minded. She had even enjoyed his attentions. It wasn't the man Ahlen, the once naive boy of the mountains, wanted to accept that he had become.

Sael and Togo were another point of contention. Only rarely did Togo enter camp, but, when he did, he approached Sael like a challenge, purposefully sitting next to him and putting hands on him as if they were familiar and accepted. They weren't. Sael shouted at him often, throwing those intimate hands away. When Togo once grabbed Sael's chin and kissed him long and deep, Sael reared back and punched him hard in the face. It added bruise on top of bruise and it was clear, now, that the origins of his other bruises hadn't come from the mines.

Minyah looked on in sad confusion, but when Togo leaned down as if whispering some explanation in his tufted ear, Minyah laughed and relaxed, not minding too much after that.

Ixien held himself aloof from all of them, eyes on the distances and body a bundle of tension. At the first light of dawn, he strode away from them as they were just settling down to make camp. When they traveled through the night, he was always at the end of their journey, curled up on the sand asleep.

In this manner, they crossed the desert. On the last leg of it, Ixien joined them in their night march, bobbing in his near stupor over the neck of an imala, so he was with them when dawn lit the sky and the low, white washed wall surrounding a building.

The Temple of the Sun God was unprepossessing; without mark or embellishment. Still it managed to declare itself for what it was by its simply being in a place as desolate as that desert. When they entered the quiet courtyard, imala hooves clapping on brick paving, they almost expected the place to be abandoned. They couldn't imagine how anyone could manage to get food and water in a place like that.

When a young man, dressed in a yellow robe, stepped forward, they were all startled and

defensive. His face was long and ascetic. Bright copper colored eyes looked out over a long aquiline nose and a shock of red hair rivaled the sun for brilliance. When he smiled, it was gentle and welcoming.

“I am Tiro,” he announced simply and Jhan understood him.

Everyone hung back, their own personal fears of their shortcomings making them reluctant to be noticed. Kile was the one who finally stepped forward, sketching a small bow to Tiro.

“I am Lord Kile Helarion Dor,” he announced. He introduced everyone, wincing a little in trepidation as Tagara and Togo landed in the courtyard and took their human forms. “We have come to seek an audience with Tsarianna, the Sun God.” Kile ended somewhat weakly.

Tiro was unruffled by their strangeness. He returned Kile’s bow and smiled again. “You are most welcome, but audiences are reliant on the whim of our God. You may stay as long as you like, refreshing yourselves and contemplating in worship, until he deigns to see you.”

It was a painful disappointment. Everyone was lost in it for several minutes, trying to come to grips that they weren’t going to see a god at once, as they had hoped. Kile, again, was the first to recover.

“There are some among us who need the God’s healing,” he managed to argue. “It may be that they won’t last much longer without it.”

Tiro was sympathetic. “As I have said, the God comes when it pleases him. I am only his priest. We do have a healer here who is very skilled. Perhaps he will be able to help your wounded so that there will not be any need to bother the God.”

“He would have to be miraculous in his skill,” Sael grated out, but then looked uncomfortably at his feet.

“He is, I assure you,” Tiro replied softly and then motioned towards a door. “If you will come, I will see that you are cared for. The beasts will be tended by others.”

They were too bone weary to be suspicious. They followed Tiro, but he only walked a short way. The building wasn’t very large, and much of it had been left open to the desert breezes. The room he entered with them was circular, the center of its roof left open to the sky, and large arched windows marching in rows down every wall. A pool of water bubbled in the center of a stone floor, the opening in the roof, directly over it.

“You may stay here as long as you wish,” Tiro told them. He motioned to the shadowed sides of the room. There were pallets covered in white linen along the walls. “The privy is through there,” he pointed through a low, narrow door, “and our kitchen and priest dormitory, is through there.” He

motioned to a wider door.

“Where does the god appear?” Kile asked, looking about at the spartan accommodations.

Tiro shrugged, still smiling. “He appears anywhere.”

“But,” Sael interrupted. “Where is the Temple?”

“Here,” Tiro replied. “There isn’t a special hall.”

Tiro could see the doubts creeping in on their faces, but he was patient. “Have faith,” he told them. “The God may show you favor and appear.”

He bowed to them casually and walked through the door he had said led to the kitchen. Everyone remained standing, still looking about in disappointment, but then they resigned themselves and began making themselves comfortable.

Jhan sat by the water. She felt strangely centered and aware, though she still couldn’t piece together any thoughts. She had a simple awareness and a simple understanding of her needs. One of those needs was water.

Tiro appeared with fresh fruit, meats, and cheeses. The wine and water he served along with it was oddly cool. He didn’t need to be asked for an explanation, he offered one as a matter of course. “The God provides,” he said proudly and left them again.

That awed them and reassured them at the same time that they were in the right place and that something akin to miracles might yet happen. There wasn’t any other explanation they could think of that could encompass fresh fruit at the heart of a blasted furnace of a desert.

There was a small child, perhaps three year old. His hair was as red as Tiro’s and he had a smaller version of his aquiline nose centered on a face still soft with baby fat. Dressed in a knee length red robe, the child took Jhan by the hand and led her away from the others. Preoccupied with their new surroundings, none of them noticed.

Through an archway, a smooth walled hallway led down into the coolness of underground caverns. The child took several stairways, helping Jhan down each one with an air of responsibility and seriousness beyond his years.

After only a little while, they caught up to Ixien, walking in the same direction. Ixien heard them and looked back just as they entered into a wide room with a low ceiling. It was empty, the floor a pristine white and the walls painted with a huge sunburst design.

Ixien paced out into the room before he faced them, his stance threatening.

The child smiled engagingly, his hand still on Jhan’s arm, and said, “You’ve livened up my existence, Caefu.”

Ixien blinked in confusion, but his stance didn't relax. "You will explain," he demanded simply.

"Isn't it obvious?" The child was amused, not the least bit afraid of Ixien. "I've had to use my powers to the limit to make certain that I had a sufficient response to your intended violence against me."

Ixien's eyes narrowed. "You are claiming to be Tsarianna?"

"I am Tsarianna," the child assured him.

"God of the Sun?"

The child made a face. "That's what they like to call me, only because I have my home in this desert. I actually don't have any powers regarding the sun."

Ixien's face twitched, almost as if the child's words had slapped him painfully. "What are you? Are you a god?"

The child sighed. "No, I am not a god, but I have power far beyond anything that your people posses. I can take on forms familiar to you, but my actual presence isn't one that your mind can comprehend."

"What are you?" Ixien persisted. He seemed at a loss and bordering on despair.

Tsarianna let go of Jhan and paced away from them as if to study the sunburst design on the wall. "This world is unstable. It has holes in its spatial integrity that suck all types of matter into it, spitting it out over its landscape with abandon. I was trapped and brought here, my essence forced into this place, this very bedrock, and sealed within the bones of ancient machinery. Through it I have led a life, of sorts, able to send my mind as far as I wish. My powers and my physical form are confined to this place, though. I am a prisoner."

Tsarianna turned to face Ixien, managing a stern expression on his child's face. "I know what you came to get from me, Ixien of the Caefu," he continued, "but I don't have it. I am not a God. The power your people crave, the ability to hold your energy and be in the darkness as well as the light, isn't mine to give."

"We have the ability to absorb *all* kinds of energy," Ixien told him angrily. "This weakness of my people confines them and keeps them small. We wish to be a greater race than this."

"So, you came all of this way to force me to change you, to change your seed so that you would sire a far different Caefu." Tsarianna was amazed at Ixien's audacity. "You were going to use Tagara and Jhan to help you, even knowing how wild and destructive their powers are. You didn't care how many people you killed, as long as you received my help."

Ixien's face went tight as he reached out a clawed hand and took hold of Jhan's arm. "They are not

my people,” Ixien replied. “They are little better than animals to me. Their people butcher animals for food so that they might live. I don’t see that there is any difference in killing these near animals for almost the same reason.”

“I can’t give you what you want,” Tsarianna repeated firmly.

“I think that you choose not to,” Ixien replied.

“You’re going to trigger Jhan’s Power with your heat, aren’t you?” Tsarianna asked anxiously.

“Do you fear that?”

“It can hurt me,” Tsarianna admitted, “but I’m not afraid for myself. I care about everyone else, even if you don’t.”

“Then help me. Change me as I wish,” Ixien demanded.

Tsarianna took a long moment, wanting his next words to carry the weight of the silence. “I can work on flesh. I can mold it. Heal it. I can’t genetically alter- I can’t remake your seed. If you will consider an alternative, there may be another way, if Tagara is willing.”

“Tagara?” Ixien echoed, not relaxing his grip.

Tsarianna smiled. “Tagara doesn’t generate her heat from the sun. She has an internal matrix of genetically altered-” Tsarianna paused, reworded with difficulty. “Let’s just say that Selaya should have been the one you should have sought. She could change seed. Suffice to say, Tagara can birth children such as herself, a self replicating part of Selaya and herself. If I change Tagara’s body so that you can breed with her, her children may be able to breed further with the Caefu. It is possible for your people to mingle and become something different.”

Ixien considered Tsarianna’s words. His people were intelligent and he worked it out quickly. “It would preclude the need for violence,” he agreed, “but that solution has many variables. Her children may be sterile.”

“Or she may refuse to cooperate,” Tsarianna added. “I won’t force her to go with you and birth your new nation. Still, it is a solution for her dilemma as well. The Caefu are the only people she will be able to breed with. Being part machine, I am unable to make her as everyone else.”

“There doesn’t seem much that you are able to do,” Ixien accused suspiciously. “Your vaunted powers are either exaggerated to the extreme, or you are denying them for your own reasons. I feel that I shouldn’t give up my advantage until I know you truly mean to help me.”

Tsarianna looked confident. “If I didn’t have some power and the urge to help others, then I would be a very lonely being in the middle of this desert. I doubt anyone would bother taking the journey otherwise. It is in my best interest to help you.”

“I will not release Jhan.” Ixien persisted.

Tsarianna’s smile dropped. “She’s dying in your hands, as we are speaking. You can’t use her for much longer. You must either believe me or try to destroy me.”

Ixien took a long moment to think and then he suddenly released Jhan. He gave her a shove away from him as if she repelled him. “I will believe you, for now,” Ixien told Tsarianna. “I still have Tagara, and she is not likely to die any time soon.”

Ixien spun on his heel and left the room, his glass like hair swinging behind him, reflecting his agitation. Jhan stared after him blankly and then felt Tsarianna take her arm. He looked like Tiro now, tall and adult.

“I told him the truth,” Tsarianna told Jhan. “You are dying. I have to heal you now.”

Jhan didn’t feel as if she were dying. Her body was as light and as detached from her mind as ever, but seeming determined to go on living. Still her heart was aching, feeling as if it had far too much blood to pump through narrow veins, and she was weary enough to want to lie down. She would have, right on the floor without a thought, but Tiro had a firm hold on her and he was leading her to a small pool of water hidden by a curve in the wall.

Tsarianna took off Jhan’s robe and then touched a hand to her nose. When he pulled it back, it was covered in blood. “Hemorrhage,” he muttered worriedly.

The pool was only two feet wide and banded in metal. Out of the strange, ambient light in the other room, it was a dark shadowy hole without a bottom. Into this, Tiro lowered Jhan’s body, pushing her down relentlessly until her head was submerged.

Jhan instinctively began to struggle, but clamps closed on her ankles and on the wrists she held above her head. Those clamps pulled her further down and then held her suspended as she struggled. She screamed soundlessly and then gulped in the liquid despite herself.

It wasn’t water. Instead, it was a warm liquid that penetrated into every pore of Jhan’s body through her lungs. It oxygenated her system without the need to breathe. Still, Jhan continued to panic, a basic, primal reaction making her fight for real air. When the cold, metal instruments began painlessly boring into her flesh under her arm, through her groin, and into her tear duct she went into multiple seizures and continued to hemorrhage, her blood turning the liquid red.

Jhan’s Power flexed to strike as her mind collapsed, but, almost instantly, the damage began repairing itself, her wildly firing neurons forced into their correct pathways by rapidly healing brain tissue. Throughout her body, the same miraculous healing was continuing. Flesh repaired and knitted itself back together while probes made inroads to direct the progress. The Power flexed against new

barriers and found that it couldn't escape.

The clamps released. Jhan was pulled out of the hole, coughing fluid out of her lungs, as gentle hands wiped her down with towels. A robe was then pulled over her head and she was allowed to sit while her eyes blinked against a haze and her head spun. She felt as if she was being examined and then she was stretched flat, with her head on a cushion, before she could faint.

"I've been gathering your memories," Tsarianna said in her ear, "ever since I found you a part of the Caefu's plot. Now I'm going to give them back to you. I know there are some you would rather not have, but they had made you what you are. It is my intent to restore that person fully."

Soft fingers soothed Jhan's forehead and then memory exploded into her repaired mind like searing fire. Shredding her numb ignorance, Jhan screamed at the revelation of the horror her life had been. She wept and struggled to get away, but Tsarianna held her as tightly as those metal clamps, and he was merciless.

She was going to go mad, or die, Jhan thought, but she did neither. Dagara had honed her to bear it like tempered steel. She swallowed knowledge whole and became again, Jhan of Pekarín, accepting of her fate, but furious with it as she blinked away the haze and stared hatefully at Tsarianna's face.

"Will you kill me?" Tsarianna asked sadly. He had seen her hands tense for violence. "I repaired the damage Selaya created. I have made you just as you were before, your body appearing a woman, but, in truth, neither; balanced in a neuter state that allows you to live. Your lower hair will fall out. Your breasts will grow again. Your skin will soften and round--"

"Why," Jhan swallowed, her voice too long disused. "Why give me all the memories?"

"Because you can't be what you want to be without them," Tsarianna told her sympathetically.

Jhan swallowed, coughed, and then grated. "And what is that? A neuter creature with enough nightmares to fill the world a hundred times over?"

"No, a person strong enough to accept this body for what it is," Tsarianna replied firmly. "You are a person who can survive in a world that despises you; a person who can ignore that and still make a life."

Jhan's memories were unmerciful. "What life?" she demanded. "Kile knows that he doesn't want me now. His family doesn't want me. His land certainly doesn't want me. All the strength in the world won't change that."

"You can't give up," Tsarianna told her. "Look in your memories and know the ultimate reason why I gave them back to you. You were taught to endure. You were never given a choice not to. It will continue to keep you alive, even though you wish that you weren't. It will make you win Kile, and your

life, back.”

“Why do you care?” Jhan lashed back as she sat up and gripped her aching head.

“I don’t wish Ixien to use you as a weapon,” Tsarianna admitted, but his determined expression softened, “but I do care. I’ve always cared about everyone. Being imprisoned inside of a machine didn’t change that.”

Jhan remembered his revelation with Ixien. “Machines. In this world, it doesn’t make any sense. Where did they come from?”

“Some were here from ancient times,” Tsarianna explained. “I can communicate with them minimally, but as to their history, I’m afraid I can’t say. Maybe the holes in the fabric of this world destroyed a more advanced civilization? It’s anyone’s guess. The other machines weren’t able to tell me.”

Jhan licked her dry and cracked lips. “I thought that Dagara had brought me here and that his Power had been that strong, but you seem to prove differently. Instead of being put into a machine, I was forced into a dead man’s body.”

“We are all just bundles of energies,” Tsarianna agreed. “The holes are like magnets, opening and closing as they crisscross this world. I don’t know where energies go after the body dies, but these holes seemed to have been powerful enough to keep us both from going there.”

Jhan closed her eyes briefly and then glared as she shoved it from her mind. Somehow, it had been much easier to believe that she had been trapped by magic rather than an actual, measurable, scientific phenomenon. It didn’t change anything for her though. She was still trapped and she still faced the task of living her tragic life again.

“I-I need to join the others.” Jhan stood, smoothing down her robe, surprised that the pain was leaving her and that her body tingled with health. It even seemed well rested and fed. “How long-”

“Days,” Tsarianna told her. “Your companions, and your love, have been worried, even though I reassured them that I was healing you.”

Tsarianna led Jhan back through the hallway to the open room where everyone else was either sitting at their ease on the pallets or pacing about in sheer boredom. When Kile and Ahlen saw Jhan, they came forward, demanding answers from the man they thought was Tiro.

Kile pulled Jhan behind him, gripping her like the distracted doll she had been. When she gently pulled away, he turned to look at her, stunned. His eyes traveled up and down her body in amazement, but she only had a pained frown for him.

“I’ve been healed,” Jhan said unnecessarily. “I think we need to talk, Kile.”

Tsarianna said, as he faced them all, "There will be time for talk later. Now, we are entering into some difficulty."

Tsarianna approached Obahn and touched his forehead. Obahn blinked, took a deep breath, and then fluttered his eyelids. All at once, expression and memory came to the man. He crouched, hands flexing and eyes seeming to glow yellow.

Obahn had recovered somewhat during the past few days of inaction. His red robe was filled out, rather than gaunt, and his arms were possessed of some strength as they groped for weapons. When he whirled on Sael, he hit the man a ringing blow to the face. Sael went down on his backside, hand clutched to the spot as he moaned. Blood ran between his fingers.

Togo rushed forward, outraged, but Obahn stopped him with a pointed, rigid finger, shaking with fury. "He is mine! He has sworn to me! Move towards him and I will kill you!"

Whirling on Zerain, standing shaking in a white robe, he spat on her. The spittle caught her on her shoulder, running copiously down the material of her robe. "I know your dishonor!" he told her. "Though I couldn't move, I could hear you and Ahlen Kantori speak of it. When I have finished with the Sun God, I will cut the child from your belly and strangle you with its birth cord! Ahlen Kantori, I will not be so merciful with! My honor demands that I think of a more appropriate punishment, one that will take days of pain before he dies."

Ahlen was shaking as well and he stepped back into the shadows as if prepared to run. Zerain kept him rooted. She was clearly trying to think of a way to save herself, but Ahlen's concern for his unborn child didn't hold much hope. He knew that he might have to die to save them and he was wondering if he had the courage.

"Sael has taken me as his wife, declaring you dead, my Lord Obahn," Zerain said at last in a last gambit. "It is him you must challenge."

Perhaps Zerain thought that Sael had a better chance of winning against Obahn, but Obahn wasn't prepared to play her game. "You will be minus a husband then, in only a short while." He turned to Tiro. "Where is the Sun God? I demand an audience!"

"He is the Sun God," Ixien said quietly from his stance in the sun by the pool of water.

All eyes went to Tiro/Tsarianna and he smiled sheepishly. "It's true. I am Tsarianna."

"He healed me," Jhan affirmed again, still staring into Kile's intense eyes. "He isn't a god, but he does have certain powers."

"Not a god?" Obahn's face suffused with blood. "There isn't a god in this temple?"

"No," Tsarianna replied, "but I don't think even a god would have given you what you wanted,

Obahn Om Sukhelan. Your son, Hagen, has long fled his body. There isn't anything to call back, even if it were possible. Certainly sacrificing your only other son, wouldn't accomplish much except to get blood on my floor."

Obahn didn't seem to hear that right away, but then he blinked and his jaw jumped. "I don't have another son! That is why my grief is so great! You are surely not a god if you don't know that!"

Tsarianna faced Obahn's fury with gentleness. He didn't fear Obahn's violence. "Sael Ruon is your true son, Obahn," he told the man patiently. "It wasn't only your warrior brother that raped Sael's mother on that night. You were there as well. Your crime is inexcusable to me, of course, but there isn't any denying the outcome of that crime; a son."

Sael was looking up, his mouth bloody and his face as white as the floor under him. "You are my father?" He looked horrified.

Obahn spat aside again. "So he is my by blow? I suspected, but that doesn't make him my son. Do you think I would acknowledge an Ekhal bastard, even now? What good is a son who can't pass on my blood to his own sons? He's better off dead!"

Tsarianna looked pained. "Your customs and attitudes are cruel, but have I heard you right? You wish your son dead?"

Obahn's jaw continued to work as if he fought back grief and loss. "Yes, why wouldn't I? If there isn't a power here to give me back Hagen, then let them both die. I will get me another on one of my wives sooner or later."

"No, you won't," Tsarianna replied with a weary sigh, "but I don't think you are deserving of one anyway."

Obahn suddenly leapt forward in fury as if he would strangle Tsarianna with his bare hands. He disappeared with a snap of air rushing into the place where he had stood.

"My Lord?" Zerain gasped, clutching at her belly. "What have you done with him?" she demanded of Tsarianna.

"Sent him home," Tsarianna replied. "He had what he wanted, well, at least half of it. I couldn't allow him to stay and do you harm."

Sael was still kneeling, tears on his cheeks now, mingling with the blood of his busted lip. Tsarianna confronted him, bending a little to look into his face. "And you, Sael Ruon, son of Obahn," Tsarianna continued. "What of you? Do you still wish to die? I assure you, I don't know what lies in store for us after death. You may, in fact, join Hagen, or, you may simply remember nothing of him once you shed the body that longs for him. It might even be that Hagen has done the same."

Sael took a shuddering breath. “I,” he glanced at Togo and Togo stepped forward and put a tentative hand on Sael’s shoulder. “I would have died for honor’s sake, because of my oath, but, I’ve found, that I don’t want to die any longer. What I felt for Hagen, I know now, was childish passion. What I’ve discovered since then is... is something stronger. I can’t return to my people, but I think exile would be sweet spent with one I,” He bowed his head in acute embarrassment as he struggled to say the word. “love.”

Togo’s hand tightened on Sael’s shoulder and then the man crouched to take him into an embrace. Sael fended him off as he stood, not willing to go that far yet in front of everyone. Bowing to Tsarianna, he strode away with Togo close behind.

“Someone is happy, at least,” Tsarianna said wistfully, but then turned to Zerain with a harder expression. “What of you? Sael doesn’t need you as a wife and it will be death if your return to your people.”

“Death if I return with this child,” Zerain agreed. “You are not a god, but do you have the power to take this child from me without killing me?”

“The child isn’t ready to live without you,” Tsarianna told her firmly and then intensely, “and you will not tell me that you care nothing for its life. I think that you do.”

“Zerain,” Ahlen stepped forward nervously. “I-I will accept the child, if you will allow it. I can take it back to my people, after it is born.”

“Back to your people?” Tsarianna gave Ahlen a keen look. “What will you do there, Ahlen Kantori? Farm? Live your days counting bhie and looking forward to market day once a year? I think you’ve gone far beyond that. Your family wouldn’t know you now. Their brother, their son, was a simpleton; a burden to them.”

“My sister,” Ahlen began.

“Has long ago died,” Tsarianna told him gently. He went on at Ahlen’s stricken look. “She gave all of herself to make you whole and then she found peace with it praying to her goddess.”

Ahlen groaned and covered his face. “All of this was for nothing! I-I can’t bear it! I can’t bear what I am, what I’ve done! Please, take my life.”

Ahlen fell to his knees, his hands still over his face, but Tsarianna was shaking his head. “Jhan has to live with what was done to her. You, Ahlen, have to learn to live with what you did to others. It takes the same strength; the same determination. I won’t take your life.”

“Then I will!” Ahlen groaned and staggered away.

“I don’t think so,” Tsarianna replied to Ahlen even though he didn’t hear it.

Minyah crept forward. Tsarianna stared down at him affectionately. "Yes, now is your time."

"I-," Minyah began, but Tsarianna forestalled his struggle to put his longing into words.

"You don't want me to change you," Tsarianna said and Minyah nodded, "but you were never meant to know so much. You simply don't have enough human, or machine, to balance your intelligence and make sense of it. You need an animal's ignorance to go along with your animal body."

"Yes," Minyah sighed happily.

"You can work stone as well?"

"Yes," Minyah replied simply.

"If you will stay, I can use your abilities to make this place a little more accommodating to travelers." Tsarianna laughed. "They always look so disappointed! Would you like that Minyah?"

"I would like that," Minyah agreed. "Brother has love and life all own now. I need own life too."

"Put well, indeed," Tsarianna laughed and then touched Minyah on the forehead. Minyah bowed his head and then his tongue lolled out, panting like a dog and smiling vacantly. "There. Enough mind to help me, but little enough to be content."

"What of your promise?" Ixien stepped forward. Tagara was beside him, staring down at Minyah in disapproval. "She has agreed to be my mate. She knows where her future lies."

"Is this true?" Tsarianna asked Tagara.

Tagara nodded, but she was nervous, not certain what was about to happen. "Like Minyah and Togo, I must find my own life with the Caefu, or live alone and untouched for all of my life."

"Well, then," Tsarianna motioned them towards the archway that led to his pool of healing. "You must come with me so that we can effect the changes."

"All resolved," Kile said in the silence, "but not to everyone's satisfaction." he moved close to Jhan's shoulder. "I wish you would speak to me now."

"And say what?" Jhan gave him her back and slowly began walking away. Kile followed. When they reached the shadowed edges of the room they stopped, seeing Ahlen being approached by Khirena.

Ahlen stood with his head bowed and his hands lax against his sides. He was at a loss as to what to do now, perhaps contemplating simply walking into the desert and ending his life that way. When Khirena approached, he didn't look at her.

"I wish to stay with you," Khirena told him.

"You are the daughter of a king," Ahlen reminded her, "I am only a farmer's son. I used you, treated you worse than a street whore, and then ignored you when you saved all of our lives. You are

just the last of my many crimes.”

Khirena said with a smile, “I welcomed your touch. I know that you care for me as well-”

“Do you?” Ahlen broke in.

“Yes,” Khirena insisted. “It doesn’t matter what I am, or what you were. We can make a new start and forget our old lives. I am willing.”

Khirena touched him lightly and Ahlen slowly raised a hand to touch her as well. His expression was amazed and hopeful, but then it turned sad. “I do care for you, but I don’t know how I can have you after all that I’ve done.”

Khirena looked resolute as she replied, “You can have me, because I allow it and I trust you not to hurt me. Let me take you to the priests of Hunellan. We will be safe there, free to do anything we wish; far from my father’s anger. Zerain may go with us as well and have your child there in safety.”

Ahlen pulled her into a sudden, emotional embrace. Khirena returned it with a fierceness of her own and then she was leading him away from the others.

Kile had watched Ahlen and Khirena make their peace, but then he was following Jhan out of the room and out onto the sun warmed sands of the desert. They walked far enough for Kile to feel uneasy.

“Jhan,” Kile asked in concern, “What are we doing out here?”

Jhan stopped again. There were two figures on the sand. Jhan had spotted them when she had turned her eyes away from Khirena and Ahlen’s display. Privacy was out on the sands, where there was nobody for days in any direction. Thinking they had found a secluded spot, Sael and Togo were making the most of it.

They were on their sides, Sael in front of Togo. Their robes were askew, but still covering them modestly. They looked as if they had been in a wild fist fight, the sun marking their bruised faces, and it seemed that Togo had won. His rapid, thrusting movements under their robes, made it clear that he was taking advantage of their positions to the fullest extent.

Jhan trembled and wanted to run, but she stood there rooted, watching silently. It was Kile who turned away at last, a hand on his mouth as if he were about to vomit. He whispered to her urgently to come away and Jhan finally allowed him to lead her into the shade of the temple.

Kile demanded, “Why did we watch that?”

“So you would understand what I’m about to say to you,” Jhan told him firmly. “Whom do you think we most resemble; Khirena and Ahlen or Togo and Sael?”

“I don’t understand-” Kile began, but Jhan cut him off impatiently.

“Yes, you do.”

Kile was stubborn. "I don't think we resemble either of them," he replied.

"I don't *want* you Kile, I never have been able to," Jhan explained, "That passion they all have for one another, that makes them bear with pain and humiliation, that makes them do anything to be with one another, isn't in me. Though the act itself brings pleasure, I don't need it like you do. I let you make love to me out of sympathy and a fondness for your warmth, and yes, because I care for you, but it will never be the same as what you feel. If you don't realize it now, you will if we stay together."

"If?" Kile was alarmed, looking at her intensely now. "Jhan, I've told you many times that it doesn't matter to me."

"And every time you've said it, it's been a lie." Jhan half turned from Kile, crossing her arms tightly. "Whenever someone told you that you were taking a man to bed, you've invariably replied that I am a woman, and you should know. Well, I'm not. I'm a man that's had his genitals cut off and some breasts thrown on."

"I don't listen to what they say," Kile argued.

"You do," Jhan insisted, "and it's been killing you by inches since we were married, because you know what they're saying is absolutely true. In a dream, or maybe it wasn't, you told me that I had to learn to accept myself. You said that you had. That was a lie too. It's time we stopped lying. We have to both accept what I am and, maybe, go our separate ways."

Kile closed his eyes, jaw clenching. It was a long moment before he opened them again. He slowly reached out and took Jhan by her arms. He pulled her closer, looking down at her with soft, blue eyes.

"Jhan, you can be such a fool!"

Jhan started and then frowned. "If you're aren't going to take this seriously-"

"But I am!" Kile exclaimed and then softened his voice. "Little Love, I had every reason to believe that you were dead. Instead of crawling into the welcoming arms of the mother of my children, I grabbed Jaross and two imala, and rode into the teeth of winter to find you."

"Then you are the fool," Jhan growled.

Kile hissed and his hands gave her a small shake. "I pursued the slimmest of leads, even when Jaross left me, and braved death a dozen times. When I finally found you... You weren't Jhan anymore. You were a mindless piece of flesh thrown between a pack of men little better than criminals. I could have left then, you wouldn't have known, but I didn't. I stayed and cared for you, I traveled these cruel roads and braved death another number of times to bring you here. Do you know why?"

It was Jhan who was stubborn now. She looked down at the sand between them. "You were always a man of honor and I was your wife."

Kile grabbed her chin and made her look at him. "I did it because I love you. I've told you this before, but you persist in not listening. You'd rather wallow in your own self pity than believe that anyone can love what you are."

"Then say it," Jhan challenged him tightly. "Say what I am and say that you love it."

Kile's hand left her chin and caressed her face, fingers going into her thick curly hair at the back of her neck and bringing her face very close to his own. "I love you, Jhan of Pekarín, Jhanian Kevelt of Karana. If that makes me a thekling, then I will proclaim it on the rooftops."

Jhan was very soft, but very serious. "It does, Kile. You know it does. Look at me, truly look at me and know what it is you hold in your hands. The Charia took my illusion away. I have to take yours as well."

"Then take it and be done with it," Kile kissed her lips deeply, but Jhan felt nothing in response. He broke the kiss and looked at her again impatiently. "What more do you want?"

"To be a thekling too," Jhan whispered sadly.

Kile became angrily confused. "What are you saying now?"

"I've told you. I don't *want* you."

Kile caressed her face again, thinking, and then he shook his head and stared over Jhan's shoulder at where Sael and Togo were still wrapped in each other's arms. "You want to be like them, rutting in the sand?"

"I want to feel something more than sympathy when we come together," Jhan admitted, "but no, I don't want, completely, what they have. It frightens me."

"I know that," Kile sighed. His hand trailed from her face to her breast and cupped it. Jhan tensed. "See, always you pull away. Always you fear to let me- to let me show you the joy I'm capable of giving you. I know you feel the physical... you've told me you feel a great climax that almost takes your senses from you."

"But it's not what a man or a woman feels," Jhan corrected him. She groped for an explanation. "It's nerves inside of me, raw and on the surface, feeling a pain so incredible my mind registers it as pleasure. The *climax* is my mind finally having the strength to shut it off. I don't have genitals, Kile. I don't have anything to have a real orgasm with."

"You never told me," Kile said in anguish.

"Because I didn't want you to know," Jhan told him firmly. "I wanted you to think that I was a woman on the outside as well as on the inside."

They were silent, Kile still holding her, but Jhan as distant as the moon. Finally, Kile bridged the

gap. "You watched Ahlen and Khirena together." Jhan blinked at him. "Did you hear what she said to him?"

"No," Jhan admitted.

"Khirena trusted Ahlen to love her," Kile told her, his eyes beseeching Jhan. "You've always told me that you feel safe with me. I drove the nightmares away at night. Why-Why can't you trust me in our love making as well? You may not be able to feel what the others feel, you may never *want* me, but I can give you a pleasure that will make you glad, even eager, for me to take you in my arms."

"What about you?" Jhan demanded. "Are we trading places now? Are you going to do such things out of sympathy for me?"

Kile smiled and it rivaled the sun. "Little Lady, I love every inch of your body. To touch it makes me shiver. To feel the softness of your breasts and the tender skin between your thighs makes me want to weep in ecstasy. I have always loved women to distraction, but your body makes them all pale in comparison. For you, and you only, I am a thekling. I am a lover of your man's body."

Those words were costing him, Jhan could see. Kile, always so forthright and honest, had never been eloquent, yet Jhan could see that he meant every thing that he had said. When he took a tighter hold on her, she allowed him to lead her to a low wall. Leaning her against it, he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Trust me," Kile whispered. "If you do, you will feel joy."

Kile pulled up Jhan's robe and moved her legs slightly apart. His clothes rustled as he kneeled. Jhan shivered as he leaned forward and teased her opening with his tongue. Before, when he had played with her there, it had seemed to Jhan that he was pretending that part of her was a woman. Now, he was accepting of it for what it was, even caressing the small scars there with the tip of his tongue.

Kile's tongue traced a sensuous trail away from Jhan's opening, and found several, tantalizing spots where he nibbled and mouthed her. The skin in those places was shockingly sensitive. Jhan writhed and gasped, embarrassed when she pushed to bring tingling flesh harder against Kile's mouth. He chuckled and played until Jhan's knees grew weak.

Kile's big hands caressed her legs. As he returned to tease her opening with his mouth, he brought those hands up to her hips, kneading her there. That too was wonderful. Looking down into his flushed face, Jhan at last understood what he had meant. She had held herself back, out of fear and disgust for what she was. It had been safer to hide from that self knowledge and just let Kile enter her, ride briefly, and be done with it. This love making, didn't leave any room for escape. She wasn't blinded by the overwhelming sensations lurking inside of her. Kile purposely left that alone, never letting his tongue

go too far into her opening.

Kile found it all at once, his face reflecting only a second of his consternation, before he firmed his resolve, closed his eyes, and took something into his mouth. Jhan's hips bucked in reply and she was startled again by a far different sensation. This thing that Kile was mouthing was a remnant of manhood, cut to the root, split, and widened to make an opening, it was still thick, retaining enough of itself to have lengthened the merest two inches in response to Kile's insistent tongue.

Jhan touched Kile's head as she moaned, cradled it against her, and then pressed him close as his lips and tongue stroked rhythmically. It was only a brief minute of pure pleasure, and then Jhan felt a sharp, short orgasm that was dry, but strangely satisfying.

Jhan released Kile's head. He sat back on his heels, but leaned close again to kiss her there to show her that he wasn't regretting. Knowing him, she was finding it impossible to believe. "Why? Kile..."

"We've been together a year," Kile explained, "and I didn't know about that. I can see by your face that you didn't know either. That's wrong. What we've been together was a lie. This, what we just did, is the truth. I've been hurting you, treating you as a woman. I've seen you suffer again and again, and yet I persisted in putting myself into a place a madman made to torture you."

Kile stood, raised Jhan's fingers to his lips as he let her robe fall back around her. "I have to learn a new way. I won't treat your body like a woman's again."

Jhan was dazed, looking Kile's strong body up and down and shaking her head. "I know you, Kile. You need that."

"There are other ways, if you are willing to learn as well?" Kile asked wistfully.

"I," Jhan began and then swallowed hard.

"Do you love me, Little Lady?" Kile asked.

Jhan looked into his eyes and then wound her arms about his strong body. "With all my heart!" she replied amidst a sob. "You have the other half of my soul!"

"Stay with me?" Kile begged. "Trust that my love is strong enough, as strong as my big oaf of a body."

Jhan nodded shakily. "The world is a nightmare of darkness for me," she replied. "You are my beacon of light, my safe haven, my true love. You're the reason I stayed alive after all they did to me. I had to be with you again."

"Then let's not ever speak of parting because of differences," Kile told her firmly. "Two people, as besotted as we are with each other, should be able to surmount any difficulty, Little Lady."

Jhan went quiet and still. "Perhaps you shouldn't call me that anymore?"

“It’s not true?” Kile wondered with an arched brow. “I’ve touched you in here,” Kile told her and touched her forehead with a broad fingertip. “I know that there’s a woman trapped in this body I hold in my arms. It’s her I address when my heart speaks, not a long dead Prince of Karana.”

Jhan relaxed and smiled. “Yes, I’m still that, even after everything that’s happened. I am still the essence of woman. It’s a strange tightrope to walk, Kile. I will always be two people; the inner and the outer.”

“I love them both,” Kile assured her. He slipped a hand on her waist and turned her back towards the building. “Now, let’s get out of this cursed sun and have Tsarianna send us back home.”

Jhan paused and looked back at the others. “What about-”

Kile frowned and it was full of leashed violence. “Do you want to say goodbye to them? They are not your friends, Jhan. They were your captors. They tormented you as surely as Dagara Ku Ni. I think it’s enough that I don’t kill them.”

Jhan agreed, feeling sick that she had even considered something so submissive and accepting of what they had put her through. She allowed Kile to lead her through an archway into cool shadows and they found Tsarianna standing there watching them.

Jhan felt a flush, darting a look back at the wall and knowing that they had been in full view. Tsarianna chuckled. “Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves, even Ixien and Tagara. He wanted to mate her as soon as I changed her, and she was willing enough.” he chuckled again. “The impatience of youth! Must be something in the air.” He winked. “Or something I might have done. Sexual intimacy heals many things, after all, and I am a healer.”

“A perverted voyeur, maybe,” Jhan replied acidly, but then she looked at Kile and amended, “but I think you’re right that it can be very healing.”

Tsarianna laughed outright and then calmed himself with an effort. “So, is it time for you to leave? Is it time to face life again with new lessons and new confidence?”

“Yes,” Kile replied and managed a warm smile. “Thank you, for all that you did for Jhan.”

“If there is a balance of things, Jhan is owed a great deal of such healing and love to make it level again,” Tsarianna said. “I hope that you will go far in putting her life in balance again, Kile.”

Kile nodded gravely. “I will, be assured of that.”

Tsarianna smiled at Jhan. “Where shall I send you? Where will your heart flourish?”

Jhan turned to Kile and he looked pained. “If we go back to Sarvoy, or Pekarín,” he told her, “it won’t have changed.”

“We’ve changed,” Jhan told him. She pulled his face down to hers and kissed his lips. She could

taste her body on his tongue and she curled hers around it. His eyes widened in surprise and his excitement under his robe was obvious. "Pekarin is where our friends are," Jhan continued. "Sarvoy is where your children are. We won't be driven away and they won't shame us any longer."

"No," Kile agreed. "I won't be ashamed. I'm going to tell them just what I am."

Jhan smiled. "Why not show them?"

Kile smiled too. He pulled Jhan into a passionate embrace and she returned it eagerly.

"To Sarvoy," Kile told Tsarianna breathlessly. "It should be dinner time. I want to be there in the hall, before the head table where my father and mother will be seated."

Tsarianna laughed again. "I'll tag along in your minds so that I can see their faces."

Kile laughed too, ignoring Jhan's sudden squirm of modesty as she began to reconsider. He didn't give her time, saying only, "Now," to Tsarianna.

Kile leaned down and gave Jhan a deep kiss as she felt a moment of disorientation. She was aware that the light of chandeliers had replaced a blazing sun and that the smell of wood fire and roasting meat had replaced clean desert air. There were shocked screams and shouts, but Jhan continued to kiss Kile.

There was the sound of Kile's father exclaiming in relief and then he chuckle warmly. Kile's mother screeched in horror.

Kile ignored them all as he finally broke the kiss, cupped her chin in his strong hand, and said, "There's no turning back now." and then he kissed her with passion, and Jhan found, not the *need* or the *want*, but a passion of her own that was different, yet just as strong.

"Only for you, my love," Jhan echoed, "Always for you."

THE END