

Summary:

Christine never imagined that her day, beginning with hope for a new life and an escape from her simple, country existence, would end with her death on a lonely, rain soaked road. It seemed a pitiful end to a life that had never seen its full potential. Tragedy soon transforms into shock, however, when Christine finds herself, not only not dead, but on another world and in the clutches of an evil man, possessing incredible powers over life and death. Her soul, snatched from the peace of the afterlife, and thrust into a corpse to bring it back to life, seems the ultimate in horror, until she discovers that the body that she has been given is that of a boy!

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

Dark King Rising

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Dedication: Thank you to all my fans for supporting my work and to Robin for editing.

Dark King Rising

by
Kracken

Chapter One (Metamorphosis)

“Come on! Just a little further! Keep going a little more!”

Feminine hands rubbed the cracked covering of the steering wheel as if encouraging a reluctant lover, red fingernails digging in now and again; threatening.

The threat didn't have any effect on the old machine. It continued to make a groaning noise like a tormented denizen of hell, underscored by a low agonizing chugging, begging for respite; foretelling disaster like a sibyl in its shrine of metal.

“No!” A cry against fate; as if that cry could rend the future and change it, bring hope and an end at an apartment doorstep.

Such hope was futile.

Blue smoke billowed from the tailpipe of the car; a spirit escaping shackles of rusted metal, the carcass, motor dead, rolling off of the side of the road and into a ditch; seeking a burial place like a fatally wounded monstrosity of faded blue metal.

“You son of a bitch!”

White hands, balled into fists, beat furiously on a sagging, stained dashboard, before being snatched away and clenched together.

A pattering sound of rain began on the worn rooftop, a sound that soon turned into a steady pounding as rain washed over the windshield and thunder boomed within dark clouds overhead; the other world sound of gods laughing at mortal misfortune.

Christine turned the ignition key off, a useless gesture since not even the lights were shining, but an automatic one that expressed inner feelings of finality. The *beast* had labored down its last road.

Another car flew past, cold metal glittering with rain; dark figures. Faces pressed against shimmering windows; curious, yet, uncaring. Cold shadows fading into obscurity as wheels flung water over the crippled hulk.

Christine watched angrily as the car turned a bend in the country road and was quickly gone, hidden behind trees soaked with water and the moss hanging from their limbs like rags. She glanced bleakly in the opposite direction, without much hope, at stubble fields stretching far into the distance to meet the lowering sky; ophidian road slithering through them, slick and gray. It was empty of traffic, looking like a painting done by a depressed artist.

What to do now? Well, she knew, didn't she? Christine's stomach was going cold. Only one course of action was open to her. She had to get out of the car and stand by the road. She knew that no

one was going to stop at the mere sight of a stalled vehicle. She had to show them a rain soaked woman, pulling at the strings of guilt and compassion that were buried too deep in each person's breast to respond to anything but dire need.

Lightning crackled overhead. Christine winced in trepidation, but it was a long while before the boom of the thunder followed. Danger wasn't close enough to give her an excuse to huddle in safety. Christine gathered up her purse, popping her car keys inside; only a memento now. She hesitated, scowled, and then urged herself crossly, "Do it!"

Christine slid to the passenger side door, the driver's side inoperative, and endured the squeak and crunch of the vinyl seat and the bad springs. With a cry of, "Shit!" she opened the door and stepped outside, her heels sinking into mud. The rain drenched her to the skin, like a cloak of water being wrapped about her, but she persevered and struggled to the side of the road.

Oil and water shimmered on the blacktop, reflecting the dark clouds racing overhead like a disjointed dream. Christine could just make out her own form, a featureless blob in high heels, hose, and business suit. She clutched her purse against her, as if that could warm the chill that was taking her in its grip. Her hair, so carefully styled that morning, was a wet mass on her shoulders. Her mascara was running down her face; black makeup scars echoing the scars in her heart. A spasm of the rain obliterated the reflection and Christine closed her eyes against it.

Deep down, Christine was almost glad that she was suffering. It had seemed stranger when the inner pain had overwhelmed her and the world had been sunny and carefree. The rain, the car, the mud; they gave the pain welcome form.

"I'm sorry, but we've hired a man for the position."

Why wouldn't it stop? That one sentence played over and over in Christine's mind like a stuck record, gouging deeper and deeper wounds. Why was it so clear? Why did she remember every movement the man's mouth had made while he had said it? She even recalled the way his nose had pinched in impatience and the way the fluorescent light had reflected on his balding head!

"I'm sorry, but we've hired a man for the position."

Tears burned Christine's face and she wiped at them, smearing her makeup even more. She began walking towards town, trying to escape her memories, but there wasn't any escape. They followed at her shoulder, pricking like demons with needles. *Remember this? Remember?* Her heels stabbed into the wet earth as if stabbing into a balding man's heart.

"I'll get the job and move to the city!"

God, not that memory! It was Christine's voice, pitched angrily because her friends had looked at her with doubt. Didn't she always make such plans, plans that never amounted to anything?

“I'll move to the city. I'll never come back to this one horse town! It'll be parties every night and corporate business during the day! I'll be important! You'll see!”

Such childish words filled with childish dreams! She was forty-one years old! She should have known... but she hadn't! She had planned for every eventuality that might come up during her corporate job interview, except the one where she hadn't been given the interview at all!

“You're too old to be dreaming of things that would only interest a nineteen year old!” That was Christine's mother's voice, nagging country accent filled with bewilderment. “Why can't you settle down like your three sisters, marry a nice man, and have children?”

Christine's mother couldn't understand! Her sisters couldn't understand! Only her father, who had run away from the country life when she was young, might have understood. She burned for greater things! She didn't want a husband! Husbands were synonymous with babies and the chains that bound her sisters. She wanted freedom! That job! That job had been the key to unlock the door to a new world, a world where she could have dared to be great!

“I wish I were a man!” Christine shouted it to the empty fields, her voice drowned out by the rain. Her lips drew into a thin line and she sniffled. “Men get everything in this world!”

Thunder boomed, rolling over Christine as in reproof or shock. When it had passed, she heard the car. Turning towards it, Christine saw welcoming headlights. She waved hopefully to the dimly seen driver, every ounce of her being willing him to take pity and stop. Couldn't he see her, poor, wet woman on the side of the road? For an agonizing moment, Christine doubted it, and then almost smiled when he hit the brakes and began to slow down.

There was a deep puddle of water, reflecting the black of the clouds overhead; the same black as the road. It rendered it invisible. Christine's rescuer drove into that patch of darkness and at once hydroplaned towards her, the ton of metal car flying like some grotesque angel of death out of control!

Christine realized, in an agonizing instant, that she was going to die! Her mind confronted this realization, and tried to come to grips with it, stretching seconds into frozen eternity, while she watched in horror as the car barreled down on her. Her last thoughts were outrageous. She recognized the car! She'd seen it on television; lovely red finish with the hubcaps done in gold. She'd wanted a car like that. Something new and fine...

It hit her, that beautiful car, and all Christine felt was a sudden, violent push and then... nothing, nothing at all.

There was a tingling... a feeling of electricity dancing over Christine's skin, only... she didn't have skin. She was seeing! How to describe it? Her thoughts were as coherent as ever, yet permeated with visions. She hadn't eyes, yet she saw. Her being 'saw' her surroundings, sensed them and formed a certain picture... Everything glowed yellow... white... a color never imagined before or, perhaps, all colors. It beat about her bodiless soul like a heartbeat in the breast of a god. This was not the world or the universe. This was a place in between; the space between one breath and the next.

Of course! Christine remembered! One could not conceive of such a place in life because it couldn't be experienced by anything but the soul. Energy could see energy. She had dwelt in this place before her life as Christine and she remembered the freedom... the endless spaces filled with tingling streams of energies and other souls. This place was 'home'.

"Come!"

It was a strident command, not spoken, but felt as pulsing love and greeting. It was time to join the others and forget the body of Christine. She sensed companions of long ages, waiting; minds open books. Some were ancient creatures, full of the wisdom gathered through many lives, while others were simple entities, hardly formed, who had not yet lived even a single life. Yes, join them!

Christine began to stretch towards them, her form a leviathan of energy nets, pulsing in time to the surrounding light. She almost touched, almost joined, when something grabbed her! A hand! It was a hand of power, pulling fiercely at the stuff of her soul, dragging her back; back away from her freedom.

No! It was shouted from Christine's very being, but she was helpless, too newly free, too weak. She watched her companions fade and had the frightening sensation of being sucked through warping space, distance and time meaningless in that place.

Her flesh felt as heavy as clay and cold... dead cold. Christine forced air into stiff lungs, gasping with horrible choking sounds as she saw with eyes again, light flickering and darkness sparking in the corners of her sight. She was alive! It was a long struggle to calm a racing heart and to stop the room from whirling in circles.

Pain arced through Christine's body in spasms as someone chafed her numb arms and legs and cursed. Her blood struggled to move through frozen veins as her brain, starved for that blood, tried to make sense of what had happened to her.

Where was she?

“Moon Flower?” the voice sounded as soft and as slick as oil.

Christine felt tears in her swollen eyes. Those tears cleared her vision.

There were tall, black candles in tall scones everywhere in that room, their fitful light hardly denting the darkness. That light was strangely red, not yellow or white, and the flames seemed to reach for her like fingers. Christine had the strange feeling that they wanted to pluck her soul from her body. Hadn't that been done already? Christine struggled to remember, but it was fading already, too potent to hold onto.

“Moon Flower!” that voice again and a man's face bending over Christine's. It was then that she realized that she was lying on a low slab of stone as cold as her body. The man easily leaned over her, a hand resting on each side of her head. “Jhanian Kevelt?”

Christine tried to speak her confusion and failed. Her mind couldn't form anything but a low moan of pain. The man whirled in her senses and then settled into solidity. He was darkly handsome. His black hair was long, a little past his shoulders, and straight. It was bound at the nape of his neck with silver clips adorned with something that sparkled... diamonds? Black eyes bored into Christine's, reflecting the candle light as if they were aflame with liquid obsidian. They oozed cruelty. The mouth was set with a torturer's smile; shadows of blades and blood.

“Did you really think that you could escape me in death, my precious Moon Flower?” The face bent closer. He wore a musky perfume, or was that his own scent? It was wild and wolfish... dangerous; a warning.

Christine continued to stare dully, her only thought, *I am alive!* Even that began to fade and her eyes lost focus. A sharp pain, overriding all others, brought her back from unconsciousness. A hand was twisted into her hair and the face was bent close, teeth very sharp.

“Don't think that you are going to go unpunished!” The words were forced through gritted, sharp teeth. “And this is a punishment I will enjoy meting out!”

The arms flexed and hooked about Christine's bare legs, pulling her roughly over the slab to the edge. Corded muscle and silken skin brushed her bare flesh as a body lay atop hers. It was as hot as a furnace and she sighed to feel warmth at last, but that sigh turned into a strangled cry as teeth buried themselves into her neck, chewing like a mad dog, while other things happened that she closed her mind to.

“Curse me, Moon Flower! Fight me. That's what I love best!” The man growled as Christine shrieked and tried to make her leaden body move. Hard hands caressed and gripped her face while the teeth mauled, velvet lips sucking on the blood that flowed.

Red light danced in blackness. There didn't seem to be an end to it, just a falling sensation until the pain ceased and only his laugh followed her into final oblivion.

An angel of light sat on a silver throne suspended over a lake as still as glass, reflecting a city of crystal spires that hadn't any solid reality. A black angel, wings like pitch and face smooth and serene, stood on the bank and held out his hands to the angel of light.

Chaos and Order; was evil always the color of the night?

Something was going to happen.

The angel of light drew a shining sword. His face set in dread as he awaited his brother of the dark. The dark angel began walking towards him over the water, beginning to smile, but now it was a woman; Mother Earth. Was it a trick? No, it was a plea. The earth was made of dark and light.

The angel of light understood and sheathed his sword. Hands joined, dark and light, and another throne appeared beside the other. Together they sat, hands clasped, and there was balance at last.

She felt so strange. Christine tossed out of the dream and sat up, rubbing at her eyes. She looked about her in bewilderment, shivering and naked, mind struggling to comprehend.

She was sitting on a stone floor and it was chill. Its cracked, uneven surface was slightly damp and smelling faintly of something awful. The walls were damp stone as well. There was a wooden door, banned in rusting iron, and a high window barred with spiked rods. It let in a murky light that illuminated unpleasant spider-webs and the large, dark shadows splayed in them.

"Please, God, no!" Christine choked out.

Slowly! Think slowly, she told herself. What had happened?

There had been a car... her car. Christine remembered it breaking down, the rain, walking in the rain. The other car... She shuddered and choked on a convulsive sob. The other car!

Christine tried to veer away from the memory. It burned. The images were flames that threatened sanity. Here! Look at it! You died! That car hit you and you died! She shouted it within herself, forcing herself to confront it. You died, you stupid bitch! You stood there and let that car hit

you! You wanted to die! You could have gotten out of the way in time, but you stood there letting death make you promises of peace! Sure, die and don't face friends and family with yet another failure! Stupid! Stupid!

A cold wind blew through the window smelling of wood smoke and carrying faint sounds. The inner ranting, hysterical voice ceased abruptly and Christine took in a great breath. The very act was as shocking as a douse of water in the face. She was breathing! She wasn't dead! She *felt*. She felt miserable, aching in every muscle. A particularly throbbing pain brought back a wash of other memories, dim and nightmarish; colored by horror.

Christine bit her lip and chewed on it viciously, remembering a man and... Her hand touched the marks on her throat, trembling fingers searching the ragged wounds. Tears burned her eyes. She wasn't dead. Had she been kidnapped by the driver of the car? What other explanation? Here she was, nude and in a room that looked like something out of a movie; a horror movie.

Christine sat in perfect terror for several long minutes, every beat of her heart growing faster and faster with panic. She could hear the blood rushing, and feel the shock taking its toll, as she struggled with the joy of being alive and the fear of being a prisoner!

The dim light changed, grew brighter. It must be early morning then, mist rising and letting in the light. She turned her head, her throat protesting as the wounded flesh there was stretched. The light illuminated her face, made her blink. She was still weeping. There had been another light, somewhere... when? No, it was fading. The memory was gone, too potent for flesh to grasp.

She felt so strange. If she could just get up and look out that window... but Christine's body was sluggish, as if her mind wasn't connected to it properly. The car had hit her. She had felt the car hit her. Was she damaged? How not? A ton of car couldn't hit you head on without... without what? Killing you? But, she wasn't dead...

Christine looked down at herself for the first time, the light picking out every detail, her mind braced for some sight of healing flesh.

“No!”

The room reeled and fogged. Christine's eyes shut tight and her mind closed up like a sensitive flower. No! She hadn't seen it! She was still sleeping! She tried to smile and failed. A dream! None of this was real! She was probably in a hospital bed somewhere, under the care of pristine nurses and competent doctors. Everything would be fine.

Wake up! Oh please wake up!

She heard voices, unidentifiable shouting, some animal honking like a goose, and the sound of metal hitting metal. It drifted through the window and pricked at Christine. Open your eyes! This isn't a dream!

Her hands felt unusually small and delicate. It took concentration, and every ounce of inner strength, for Christine to lift them and touch her chest. She felt small there as well. Her anxious fingers didn't meet any welcoming fullness of breast, only flat buds and a slim expanse of waist that led straight to narrow hips and small legs. Christine felt what lay between them. Christine recoiled, her body slamming up against a freezing wall and huddling there without conscious will.

It couldn't be! It was impossible! Now would be a good time to go mad, she thought. Anything was better than facing... Christine's mind blanked. She stared at nothing as hours crawled by, not even the spiders dancing in their webs causing her to blink. The light changed subtly, rising to zenith and then slanting towards late afternoon.

A shuddering breath, and the feeling of taught muscles beginning to tremble, brought Christine around again. Her eyes were crusty with tears and she had drooled. Her nose was running as well, making her feel disgusting. Christine wiped at her face, feeling the sharp chin and the heart shape of it, high cheekbones and narrow nose. She choked, her empty stomach knotting with hunger and nausea at the same time when she realized that it wasn't her face that she was feeling!

Slowly! Think! Memory churned and displayed itself painfully. The car! It had been going so fast! It had hit her... where? It had hit her straight in her torso. Slowly! What had she felt? The very last second... what had it felt like? She remembered the feel of splintering bones and a quick, sharp pain. What then? She had felt herself floating and there had been a light. There had been a hand as well. Yes! Christine had been grabbed and forced... forced into flesh!

"I was dead!" Christine choked out to the empty cell, her voice echoing against stone walls. "This isn't my body! I was dead!"

The truth of it was like the force of a blow, undeniable no matter that Christine couldn't comprehend the how or the why of it. She forced eyes to look downwards. She strangled a shriek, going white, mind threatening to blank again. What she saw, in all its perfect horror, was the body of a young man!

I've gone mad! Christine repeated it silently, over and over again, as if it were a chant. Was

madness so clear and sharp? Shouldn't everything be blurred and dreamlike? The body appeared to be on the cusp of manhood, seventeen or eighteen years old at the most. It had impossibly long black hair, braided like a coil of rope well past its feet. That proved she was mad. It would have taken longer than eighteen years to grow hair that long! Yet, touching the pale skin, like finest silk, and feeling that body tremble with cold and her reaction, it was hard deny the reality of it.

The sound of heavy footsteps and the rattle of a key in a lock startled Christine. Was it her jailer at last? The one who had hurt her... not her, but this young man's body? Her stomach knotted in revulsion. No. *She* had been hurt. Madness and nightmare aside, this was her body!

The door opened, creaking with old hinges, and a very large man stepped through. He was bald and had eyes that resembled a pig's. He had heavy jowls and he sported a thick scar that looked as if someone had tried to remove his chin. He wore a rough woolen homespun of dirty gray and ragged boots of doubled cloth strapped onto his feet with leather cords. In one hand, was a large set of keys, and in the other, was a long folded strap of leather.

Another man stepped out of his shadow. He was whip cord thin in somewhat finer clothes of forest green; a woolen cape and leather boots of black. His face was lined and stretched over prominent bones, the mouth drawn thin with care and too long holding back his words. The eyes were gray and the hair a nondescript brown. "Don't fight me, Jhanian," he said in a voice that sounded firm and professional. "I must see what your foolishness has done to you."

Who was Jhanian? The man was looking at her. Christine wanted to deny that the name was hers, but all that came out was a low, strangled noise. She wept tears of frustration and her hands closed in ineffectual fists.

"Watch 'em now, healer!" the big man warned. "Ye know how 'e is! 'Em and 'es clan fight to the death! I don't know 'ow his Highness handles 'em!"

"I do." The reply was short and sharp, shadows of witnessed horrors in his tone. "Wouldn't you rather die than let him do this to you?" He motioned at Christine. "That was once a warrior and the son of a king!"

The big man showed rotten teeth and laughed. "Nothing but a girl now, eh? A little prissy girl, my king has made of 'em! A little priss that still fights like a warrior! That's how 'e likes 'em! Fightin'!"

The other man glared sharply and said with disgust, "Keep speaking so boldly, Bakel! I

would enjoy seeing you torn apart by His Highness's dark Power!”

The big man scowled angrily, making the scar on his chin stand out like a white worm. “Do wha' ye came ta' do, healer!”

The healer's lips grew thin as he held his anger in check; respect for a larger man. Attention was given to Christine again, who still struggled to make frozen vocal chords respond. It was as if a hand rested on them, squeezing when she sought to speak. It denied her a hysterical outburst of questions and demands.

“Calm, Jhan. Accept what is.” The healer was speaking to Christine, now. He stepped towards her and one of his hands made a motion as if flicking something away.

Christine suddenly felt detached, as if she had been given a sedative. Her mind tingled. Something touched her thoughts, not reading them, but taking control in small places; a feeling as personal as a hand cupping the breasts she no longer owned. It could have been violating and frightening, but this touch was as clinical as a doctor's fingers; utterly professional.

The healer sighed, his face drawn and shadowed from too many witnessed horrors. “Slight damage to the brain,” he announced without ever touching Christine. “There’s more extensive damage to nerves and some muscles. By the gods! Why didn't the king let Jhan die? He grew tired of him a month ago!”

“Do yer job as 'e commands!” the big man growled in reply. “The likes of us can't question 'em! Ye should know why anyhow! He breaks a glass and slits 'es wrists rather than let 'es Highness touch 'em again! 'E can't let 'em get away with that so 'e brought 'em back from the dead ta face 'es punishment!”

“Such is his conceit!” the healer grated under his breath. “And now he expects me to heal the body after he kept him frozen for three weeks!”

“Ta keep 'em from rottin’,” the big man replied and there was fear in his little eyes, fear and awe. “Es Highness kept the body frozen until 'e could gather 'es Power ta bring back the soul of Prince Jhanian.”

The healer's eyes were tinged reluctantly with the same awe. “Such black Power must sway the very balance of the world!”

“Keep yer old ways ta yerself!”

The healer shrugged. “The Powers exist whether I keep them to myself or not. I use them

and our king uses them; the dark and the light aspects; the balance.”

“Yer magic ain't so full of light!” The jailer guffawed. “Yer keepin prisoners alive ta be tortured again and again, and right here, yer keepin' this Prince alive ta be his Highness's toy.”

“I heal. That is Power of the light.” The healer's voice was stubborn, as if that belief was the only thing holding his life together.

“If ye like ta think so!” The jailer grinned and winked broadly.

“Enough! Let me do what I must and depart!”

The healer reached out and ran his hands from the crown of Jhan's head to the ends of his toes. He then took Jhan's hands in his. They were firm and confident. Warmth slowly spread through Jhan's chilled body. A blazing fire could not have warmed him more.

There was firelight, or were they flames? Perhaps he passed out? Images flickered. A woman's face appeared and faded away. He? Jhan? No! No! She! Christine! She was a woman! Her name was Christine and she was a woman! The idea was as solid as the sand on a beach and it flowed away. She wasn't a she anymore! She wasn't Christine anymore! Christine was dead! She was dead! This wasn't her! This was a he and this was called Jhan!

Visions fled and eyesight cleared on the reality of a cold cell and two men. One with eyes of gray flint and the other with pig eyes that made the blood chill with glimpses of hidden depravity. It was easier to look at the large spiders splayed in their webs.

“No look of hate this time?” the healer wondered. “You tried to kill me the last time that I healed you. You disparaged my mother and all my clan, commenting profusely on the creatures they must have mated with to produce me.” Another of those heavy sighs. “I suppose that even you would lose your spirit after being dead.”

He looked as if he had wanted curses and hatred, perhaps to distance himself from caring. It was hard to care about someone who hated you. When Jhan failed to reply, he turned away and went out of the room, his tense back and clenched hands revealing his tightly held emotions.

The big man grinned at Jhan as he slipped the leather strap around Jhan's throat, making a slip knot and a leash out of it. He jerked Jhan cruelly towards him and Jhan stumbled, uttering a lost cry.

“We can 'ave some fun again, now that ye are made as good as new! I missed our playtime!” His breath stunk like wine, onions, and rotten teeth as he planted a devouring kiss on Jhan's lips. Jhan struggled, weeping, and staggered as the man released him just as quickly. “His Highness wants ye first

though. Royalty before the help!”

Like a dog being led for a walk, Jhan was taken out of the cell and into a long stone corridor. Legs worked awkwardly and he stumbled, barking knees on rough floors more than once. He tried to pull back and away from the cruel hands. He was given a hard slap and a jerk that cut off his breath. Pig eyes glared warningly.

“See ya mind me, young sir! I can make ye pay without leavin' a mark on ye!”

I'm not a man! Jhan screamed it inwardly, but all he could manage verbally was a choked sound more like a gasp. I was Christine! I was a woman! I'm not this Jhan! I'd rather be dead again than be this!

Jhan was cowed under Bakel's threat and followed meekly, a chill settling over his heart. He had been brought back from the dead. Vulture wings flapped in Jhan's mind. Jhan had been dead and Christine had been dead. Someone... this king they spoke of, had tried to make dead Jhan live again. He had reached out and grabbed a soul, Christine's soul, putting it into Jhan's corpse, thinking the soul was Jhan's. Madness!

Small hands felt the trembling body. This was real. Christine was now Jhan. Christine would have denied it and laughed at anyone who would have said that anything other than what she could see existed. Magic was for fools and charlatans! Fingernails dug into flesh and drew blood. This was not a trick. The pain was sharp and real. This place was real!

The hallways were lit mostly by torches and the odd lantern. The roofs of the hallways were blackened and the smell of oil and burning wood was choking. Jhan longed for sight of sunlight and the smell of fresh air, but what few windows there were had been placed high up and made narrow.

Guards were stationed at the intersections, forbidding men, with scars to show, in uniforms of orange, crisscrossed by two black snakes. They wore swords at their sides with twin pommels. The sight of those swords only added to Jhan's confusion.

Double doors opened into a hallway paneled in wood. The grain of the wood made swirling patterns that led like flowing water to two more doors. These were guarded by four men with drawn swords. The fat man paused to speak to them.

Jhan stared at the doors in a daze. They had been carved into the startling likenesses of gargoyles, fanged mouths hanging open and serpent-like tongues slithering outwards. Eyes stared at Jhan as if seeing inside of him somehow. They weren't fierce faces, meant to frighten, but faces etched

with longing.

Jhan had a vision of wind, blowing like a cyclone, lifting him up into the clouds; mountains spread like a panorama below. Jhan took in a shuddering breath and would have fallen if the fat man hadn't grabbed him by the arm. The vision cleared and Jhan found himself staring at the wooden gargoyles again.

The guards opened the doors, one shooting a lewd glance at Jhan's nakedness. Jhan shrunk in on himself, beginning to sob, but the fat man shoved him through the doors before he could panic completely and shook him hard by his arm.

"Be silent and do not move!" the fat man warned. He called out to the darkness respectfully. "Prince Jhanian is here for my king's pleasure, Sire!"

"Get out!" a familiar voice snapped.

The fat man bowed and retreated as if something more horrible than him lurked within those rooms. He closed the doors behind him and Jhan was left in near darkness.

There was a candle on a table so polished and dark it looked as slick as oil. Its faint light picked out the black silk drapes blocking out the sunlight and flickered over towering bookcases full of thick tomes. A chair, sturdy shadow, stood empty, but turned as if someone had just risen.

Jhan backed up until he was flat against the doors. They were strangely warm and comforting, yet Jhan was not soothed. Some last memory of the real Jhan was screaming inside of him and every instinct was sounding a warning alarm.

"Are you afraid, my sweet Moon Flower?" The voice came from the opposite side of the table, but its owner was hidden. "I never thought that I should see the day! Was it death that taught you such fear? Was it so bad? You must tell me."

That voice! Smooth as a cat's purr yet silk over claws. A shadow detached itself from its fellows and stepped into the light. Jhan knew him and recoiled, banging painfully against the doors. It was the dark man with the chilling handsome face! He smiled at Jhan's reaction and Jhan wondered if the man could still taste his blood on his tongue.

"No curses?" The man gave a mock frown and shook his head. "Where is your pride Prince? Don't you have any manhood left? I've used my powers to change you here and there, until you seem more a daughter of a king than a son. Should I finish and make you a woman entire?"

"Yes!" Jhan exclaimed and it was almost a shriek. Could this man do it, or was it all

madness?

“I don't like women,” the king replied coldly. “Would you go so far to escape my attentions?” He pouted. “But you preferred death to my touch didn't you? I still must punish you for that insult!”

The king moved like a panther, spring and strike. Jhan was in his arms before he could think to move and those arms were terrible in their strength. Jhan was crushed against a hot body and he stared up into twin pools of fire; a bird transfigured by a snake.

“Fight me!” the king demanded roughly. “Are you a woman already? Fight me! That's what I like; blood and a fight!”

“I... am... not... a... man!” Jhan forced each word out through paralyzing fear.

The king laughed in reply, short and sharp. “Your father must be turning in his grave! You are frightened and shaking like a maiden!” Hands tightened on Jhan's wrists. “Come along then and play, my lady!”

Flash of black silk, rippling as the king forced hangings away from the bed they obscured. The bed was covered in black silk. Jhan was thrown down onto his back and the king climbed on top of him, not bothering to undress. His leather clothes were supple, but the buckle of his belt drove into flesh.

Move! Fight! Scream! Do something! Jhan's mind railed at him to act, but his body was leaden and he couldn't do more than lay like an immobile doll, staring up with a woman's fear.

“Fight me!” the king shouted into his ear. Teeth sunk into Jhan's flesh making Jhan whimper. “Fight me, damn you!”

Fingers wound themselves into Jhan's hair, preventing him from turning his face away. The king had blood running from his mouth to his chin. It dripped onto Jhan's upturned face, sending Jhan into complete terror. He began to shudder in shock, his eyes wide and his breath heaving in and out of his lungs with a horrible, tortured sound.

His terror was studied dispassionately by the eyes above him for some moments and then a decision was made. The body lifted off of him and left the bed. Jhan curled into a fetal ball and covered his face with his hands. There was the sound of glass clinking and liquid being poured. There was an audible swallow and the sound of a glass being put down onto a table.

“I've broken you, my sweet Moon Flower,” the king said at last with a gusting sigh of

disappointment. “Perhaps I should have taken your father, instead, and let you die on the bladed wheel? Your father would have *never* broken.” It was a last verbal barb. Jhan only curled tighter.

The weight on the bed returned and a hand caressed Jhan's hip. “You are so beautiful! I did well with you, but then you were beautiful even before I meddled with your body. Your family wouldn't even know you now, what's left of them. You're useless to ransom. I'm sure they wouldn't want you back after what I've done to you.” It was yet another attempt to rouse anger. “Ah, well. It would be a waste to simply kill you. I spent a great deal of energy bringing your soul back from the dead.”

The hand did things that made Jhan's face burn even through his fear. He began to cry again. The king was unmoved.

“I need a plan... Ah, I have it! I shall use your beauty to advantage. I'll train you to be a weapon against my enemies; a small weapon. A small moon flower with the sting of a viper! Who would guess?” His voice dripped with venom. “You'll do as I say, yes? Everything that I say, sweet Moon Flower, or my men will have you to play with! I promise you, they aren't as gentle as I!”

The king smiled and his face seemed to transform into a goblin face, hideous beauty concealing the demon within. “Pray to your gods, Jhanian of the Kevelt, maybe they will hear you.”

Chapter Two

(The Awakening)

Black dreams shot with red light and dancing demons that tormented... torment. The whole world was torment! The Dark King. Red coats. Red uniforms. Demons in red uniforms were tormenting him.

"Moon Flower! My sweet Moon Flower!"

Light; there was blinding light and cool winds. Disorientation; he was tumbling into the light. Out of control: was he dying again?

"Do you see it?" It sounded inhuman, a voice wrapping about his consciousness.

"I see it." It was another, richer voice. "Unknowing, he has sown the seed of Power within this one. He may yet be destroyed before the balance is wrecked completely."

Black and white wings; a bright angel stood on the shore of a lake beseeching an angel of darkness...

Someone was screaming. It was like the sound of the damned echoing up from Hell, rending eardrums and shaking sanity. There was protest against it, pleading. Hands grabbed to enforce silence. No! Don't touch! Not again! Not again? Fear mounted, choking off the screams. His screams. His screams!

Rocking; he was rocking. Light stung opening eyes and a forest bobbed crazily, ancient trees, cloaked in vines, holding out arms over a dirt path winding between them.

He felt disoriented. He panicked and struggled. His hands were tied to a saddle and the saddle was tied to a fat beast, a homely mottled creature with drooping ears that flicked against flies.

Christine. The name came reluctantly. I am Christine. No, Jhan. Remember. You were turned into a young man! Remember! Jhan; this body was called Jhan. No more Christine. His home was gone. His family was gone.

"Just a little further," a young, male voice reassured.

Fear filled him. His heart pounded wildly. Muscles tightened. Red throbbed behind eyes. No!

He didn't want to be awake! He didn't want to feel or see anymore! He didn't want to look into the face of the young man dressed in a leather vest and pants walking beside him. Tall, lanky, raw boned; a mop of sun streaked hair almost obscuring an open face and brown eyes. Those brown eyes stared back, kindly yet unsure.

“I'll take you to my rooms and get all that dirt cleaned off of you,” the young man continued. “You've a lot of it and probably some pests as well. You must have been running about the forest for a long while before the Sahvossa found you. Ah, you're looking at me with some sense, now! I thought you were a wild child the way that you ran from me screaming. What's your name? Mine's Rehn, Rehn Tarwallen.”

It was like the odd clarity of a dream that seemed normal, at first, yet almost always turned into nightmare later on. There was a bright forest and a smiling man. He must be dreaming. In his mind came the rattle of the cell door, like the rattle of bones, and somewhere in the distance thunder rolled.

The young man spoke soothing words, but they did nothing to cut through the horror. The beast rolled its eyes and bucked as the young man sought to steady it and Jhan. Jhan struggled against the ropes until he hadn't any strength left, then he hung weakly against his bonds, panting like a trapped animal as he slipped back into awful memory.

He was in a stone room that was damp and empty of everything except a table and a chair.

“Sit down, Moon Flower.” The voice was smooth and strong, overriding the shivering whimpers that seemed to echo everywhere. “Sit down.”

He sat and the Dark King stood opposite, hands reaching out to dig into flesh, mind boring into mind. “Hear me, Moon Flower!”

There as darkness. It was a horror without memory; rooms, people without any face or names. There were hands; hard, calloused hands; greedy and cruel. Red bled into everything like a flow from a cut vein. Red! Everything red!

Sunlight made a dazzling display of rainbows and sparkles on a window. Warmth seeped into what felt like a frozen corpse, thawing it painfully and suddenly.

'You have slept too long.'

Jhan blinked and mentally awoke, his dry, sore eyes telling him that he must have been staring at nothing for some time. He was naked, sitting cross legged and relaxed on the fluffy down comforters of a simple bed, his great mass of jet hair all about him like cascading black water. It was drying from some recent bath and smelling of flower scented soap. Even before his mind awoke fully, he was looking downwards. Numb mind noting that the nightmare had not yet ended.

The slim body of alabaster skin, molded with the perfection of a master sculptor, was still evident and that impossible horror still lay quiescent, sending a shiver through Jhan as if it were the snake its shape mirrored. Tears were cold on his warm face. He looked away. Any sight of demons was better than that.

The room was small and clean and the décor looked like a photo from a country magazine. It was as quiet as a chapel. Sunshine made amber pools of light on hardwood floors as it shone through a clean window of thick paned glass. Woven rugs, with patterns of leaves, softened the floors glossy hardness and a simple wooden chair, with a wicker seat, sat beside a half desk set against the wall; a writing table scratched and dented from long use. There were three, narrow shelves that held knickknacks; colored stones, a carving of an animal, and a packet of letters banded with a silver ribbon.

Jhan absorbed it slowly, thoughts trying to surface through the clouded water of his mind. He didn't think, *'Where is this place? How did I get here?'* It was impossible to conjecture about something the magnitude of this impossibility. It seemed real; a quaint, country room. There were even candles and oil lanterns!

It would all disappear, surely? The nightmare lurked in the corners, in the shadow under the bed, the darkness under the desk. It would jump out, like a panther springing for the kill. There would be the Dark King again with his teeth chewing his ear or his neck and making him bleed. The men would reappear in their red uniforms, like bloody banners, their hands grabbing him and bringing pain. This peace did not exist!

There were three doors. It *was* a dream. Where lay the tiger? Which door hid the nightmare? Choose a door!

Move! This peace was a lie! To endure it, impossible when one knew it was going to end abruptly. Open a door. Let the nightmare back in!

Jhan slowly swung his legs over the edge of the bed, touching bare feet to cool floorboards with the same dread one showed for stepping on razor blades. He paused, listening to his own breathing; anxious and rapid. There wasn't any other sound, or any sign that anything existed beside himself in this

world of four walls.

Stay in bed! Don't let the horror find you! Why break the peace? Jhan's mind recoiled, a coward with burned fingers that cried in the next breath, why wait? Fear tugged forward and pushed back. Finally, Jhan stood up, knees shaking as if he had been lying like a corpse for far too long.

He took one step after another. It was like moving dead wood, walking. Jhan stumbled, hands outstretched in case he fell, hair trailing everywhere like some shadow Rapunzel. Reality remained stable. Nothing changed as he finally touched the smooth wood of the door to his right.

It was a closet. Jhan resisted the urge to hide in its darkness among the hanging suits of brown leather and the drooping piles of scuffed boots. The leather smell was rich and pungent, almost soothing. There was an oval mirror. Jhan saw his face for the very first time and froze as if turned to stone by the Gorgon.

His face looked elfin, Jhan though hazily, and very beautiful. The chin was sharp and cheekbones were prominent in a heart shaped face. Those cheeks and his mouth were colored like the translucent petals of pink roses. His eyes were blue pools framed in black lashes, fathomless and overflowing with tears. He was more beautiful than Christine, even with layers of makeup, could ever have hoped to achieve. It was the face of an elfin princess on the body of a young man!

Glass shattered. Pain stung Jhan's hand and he looked at it dully. Pieces of glass protruded, blood flowing like spilled wine. The frame of the mirror was empty and its contents scattered everywhere. Jhan walked over them unseeing and unfeeling, even though they stuck into his feet.

There were two more doors. From this vantage, Jhan could see that the door opposite him led into a bathroom, a toilet and the rounded side of a wooden bathtub just visible. The last door was different from the others. It was thick and solid; meant to keep out intruders. Of course such a door would lead outside. Of course such a door would be locked. He *was* a prisoner.

Keys rattled suddenly. Jhan felt his heart jump into his throat as the lock of the solid door turned and the door opened. He stood, an uncontrollable fear gripping him, as a young man stepped inside.

All of the young man's attention was centered on a food laden tray that he was balancing with one hand, while he fumbled with the door with the other. He closed the door and re-locked it before turning and seeing Jhan standing there, blood pooling on the floor and staining the edge of a rug.

Time ceased. Sunlight glinted on floating dust between them. Jhan had an eternity to stare

and to realize that he recognized this young man. The man took a deep breath and carefully set the tray of food on the writing table, breaking the moment.

“What have you been doing?” he demanded angrily. The broken mirror glinted like ice, scattered in a wild pattern of violence. “Do you know how much that cost me? You haven't moved a muscle in nearly a month and now you get up at last and break the most expensive thing that I own?” He threw up his hands in defeat. “That's it! I won't do this anymore! I don't care what the Sahvossa told me to do. I can't care for you any longer!”

The young man strode into the bathroom and reappeared almost at once tearing a towel into strips. “As soon as I bandage you up, I'll take you to Sarvoy and let the charity house care for you. I should have done that as soon as I found you in the forest! I don't know what madness possessed the Sahvossa to think that I, an unlearned farmer, could care for a screaming, out of his head man!”

Jhan was pushed into the chair as if he were a doll, and he felt as numb as one, unable to react or make much sense out of what the man was saying. The pieces of glass were removed from his feet. No reaction. No alarm at the flowing blood. His stare was dead, accepting of one more torment, yet, flat, blue eyes were caught by brown, sun streaked hair as disordered as a pile of hay, and awakening senses noted the gentleness of the ministering hands. This man smelled of leather and faintly of sweat and woodlands. A name surfaced.

“Rehn.”

Startled brown eyes came up, peering from under Rehn's wild hair. “You said my name!” he exclaimed softly. “You spoke!”

Spoke? Yes, he had. It felt odd. It gave himself solidity in the world. “Are you going to -” a babbling rush that petered to a halt. It meant nothing. Rehn waited patiently while his hands deftly tied a knot in the bandage on Jhan's foot, staring into Jhan's face. “Don't... Don't touch me.”

Rehn heard the rising panic and straightened with a cracking of knee joints. He took several paces back, and then stood uncertainly. “I can't believe you're speaking after all of this time! I had lost hope. I was -.” he looked guilty. “I was going to get rid of you - take you to a charity house. I didn't think that I could help you. My neighbors... well, they couldn't stand your screaming any longer. They threatened to throw you out if I didn't do something!”

He had been screaming? Jhan blinked and cradled his hand against him. It throbbed in time to his cut feet. The sun began to dry the blood on the floor. The streaks and pools seemed to make a

pattern and Jhan's mind was caught in it, more able to understand it than what Rehn was saying now.

“Hey!” Rehn called anxiously. Jhan looked up, flinching, and Rehn sighed with relief. “I thought for a moment that you were...” he licked dry lips. “Can you keep talking? Can you tell me your name?”

What was his name? A twist of pain in Jhan's heart caught him by surprise and the name exploded from his lips full of bitterness. “Jhan.”

Rehn smiled with relief. “Jhan, that's not really any sort of name, is it? Is it a pet name? Is it short for Jhanis, Jhanan, Jhaner?”

No reply. Jhan's will had been spent in uttering that one reply. Rehn scowled with strained patience, eyes red and haggard and face pinched from some deep care. “All right, Jhan, then. What about your family name? Family name, like mine's Rehn Tarwallen. Tarwallen is the name of my family. Everyone has one, even a dirt poor farmer's son like me!”

There *was* another part to his name. Jhan struggled to remember through layers of fog and darkness. There it was, just an image. A flower, white and delicate, petals open to moonlight. He almost said it, opened his mouth to form the word, when hands reached for him from the fog carrying pain. Pain!

Jhan sat bolt upright, eyes wide and breath gasping in and out of his lungs in short, terrified bursts as the pain mounted and mounted. It didn't have any end, this pain, and it commanded without any words. *Do not remember!*

“Jhan!”

That was Rehn and his voice cut through the pain like cooling water over burns. It retreated and crouched at the back of Jhan's mind, waiting, threatening. He could see again and his first sight was Rehn's anxious face hovering before his own.

Don't touch me! Jhan thought. The voice had robbed him of the ability to speak it out loud. Limp. Rehn lifted him from the chair and put him into the bed, berating himself under his breath.

“I'm a fool!” he said more clearly as he settled a blanket over Jhan. “You've just come to your senses and I go and pelt you with questions!”

Jhan watched Rehn turn to clean up the glass from the floor. The blankets were soft. No pain. No torment. It was just a young man cleaning the floor. The glass clinked as Rehn dumped the shards into a bin and threw the blood soaked rag into the bathroom. Without a word, he took up the tray of food

and placed it on the coverlets of the bed, taking a seat on the edge and drawing up his knees to hug them, watching Jhan's expression.

“I've been feeding you up till now. Can you manage it yourself?”

Jhan wasn't hungry. His stomach was cold, knotted with fears, something waking and turning uneasily. He watched Rehn take up an apple like fruit and bite into it as if to prove that the food was safe to eat. When Jhan didn't react, he growled something and broke off small bites. Reaching over the tray, he shoved them into Jhan's mouth. Jhan automatically chewed and swallowed. An unconscious part of him was used to this.

Juice dribbled down Jhan's chin. When he ignored it, Rehn wiped it away with the edge of his thumb and then wiped his hands on his breeches. “Is there anything you want to ask me? You must want to know where you are.”

Awareness uncoiled in Jhan, but words struggled and were killed until he could only stammer and then fall silent. He began to have thoughts, mind churning like a long unused machine; gears grating together. Rehn's face was open and trusting, kindness oozing from every pore. Was it an illusion? Dark images danced before Jhan's eyes; half memories of horrors he couldn't put any names to.

“I'm afraid,” Jhan admitted quietly, able to speak at last.

“You're afraid of me?” Rehn was astonished and then understanding. “It seems you have a story to tell and that you won't be telling it right away.” He considered for a moment and then sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I'll let you stay for a few more days, until we figure out where you belong.”

Let you stay. That sounded chilling, as if there was a choice to be made. Wasn't he a prisoner? Let you stay. Jhan turned his head to see the window, warming sunlight like a beacon. What was there to be faced? Were there more horrors, more hands reaching for him out of the dark?

Jhan clutched the blankets to him. “I-I want some clothes.” The desire was like a bolt of lightning forming into words.

“Whatever you had before I found you is lost,” Rehn told him, shrugging. “I haven't anything that will fit you. It's best that you stay in bed until you fully recover, anyhow.”

How long had he been naked? Jhan wondered. Open to any touch. He felt defenseless. It was agony, his words a cry. “Please!” He choked on a sob.

“All right, don't get upset, now!” Rehn soothed.

Rehn rummaged through his closet and, after a time, came out with a rumpled black robe with a pattern of white leaves on the collar. He made a face at it and laughed a little. "My mother wove me this. I've never worn it. The leaves make it..." he crinkled his nose, "too womanly for a man to wear."

Jhan held out his hands for it. They shook as Rehn placed the robe in them. When Jhan attempted to put it on, his hair snagged and tangled. He refused Rehn's attempts to help him and it was several awkward moments before Jhan was able to accomplish the task.

"Better?" Rehn asked and Jhan nodded distractedly. "Good. I suppose that I wouldn't want to be without any clothes in a place I didn't know either." A thought came to him and he looked at Jhan sidelong. "You won't try to leave, will you? I mean... I said some unkind things to you, but it's been hard caring for you. Now that you're somewhat in your right mind again, I don't mind having you here until you're completely well."

Jhan couldn't form a reply. Whatever Rehn was saying, it meant nothing to the turmoil inside of him. Leave? Leave where? A cold cell was enclosing him. If he closed his eyes, he could see the spider webs and hear the cold wind coming through the narrow window.

Rehn went on doggedly. "You kept having nightmares, you see. Most of the time, you sat and stared, but once in a while, you would just start... screaming. I couldn't sleep and I was afraid to leave you alone for long." He hesitated, hands in pockets, staring at Jhan from under his mop of hair. "I asked everywhere... all the way to Sarvoy, if anyone had lost someone who looked like you. When I described you, your hair, especially, everyone laughed and told me to check the pleasure houses. I... I finally did. I've never gone into such places! Never! I went to the front door of the Golden Palace of Delights and asked them if they knew you. A wizened woman told me no, but they'd take you off of my hands anyway!"

Rehn turned away suddenly, shoulders tense. "I actually thought of doing that! Things here had become that bad!" He took up a fruit from the tray and stood up, juggling it from one hand to the other absently. "I thought better of it before my mouth opened. If you had run away from such a place... how could I send you back there?"

Jhan pulled the comforter around himself and curled his legs in close, watching Rehn's back and the fruit that suddenly appeared on one side of him and then the other, back and forth. "When will I wake up?" Jhan asked softly to the air between them.

Rehn turned abruptly, the fruit clasped in one fist, eyes wide. "Wake up? You think you're

dreaming?” Jhan nodded shakily and gave the room a wild look. “You think this is a dream?” Rehn repeated and gave Jhan a level look that attempted to pierce his distraction. “This isn't a dream, Jhan.”

The dream was lying again, torment changing its faces. Don't speak to it. That will make it go away. Rehn sighed and took a bite of the fruit, chewing thoughtfully. He seemed to make a decision and swallowed the bit of fruit decisively. “Where do you come from? Where is your home? If you tell me, I can contact your kin.”

Rolling fields, brown with winter, and tall trees reaching to a perfect sky; Jhan's vision was filled with it. He could almost smell his home; wildflower scent mixed with the smell of wood and loamy earth. The little, old house of whitewashed wood and the sturdy screen porch that overlooked a gravel road stretching towards other whitewashed houses in a curving line towards the more conventional buildings of town. That hated little town seemed heaven now, an oasis. That rocking chair Christine had spent hours in, one leg crooked over a worn arm, creaking on the porch and faced away from town, towards the city and Christine's dreams.

“You're crying,” that was Rehn's voice cutting through the vision, uncomfortable. “Do you remember your home?”

What could Jhan reply? I died and was forced into a man's body in this place, wherever this place is. He shook his head to clear the vision and saw Rehn's anxious face.

“You don't remember, Jhan? You must! I found you running wild in the forest. How did you get there? Where were you before that?”

Jhan went cold all at once and his bottom lip trembled. The words came out despite his resolve. “There were mountains. It was... cold... all of the time.” That chill seemed to seep out of hiding from deep within until he was shaking. “I don't know where it was. I don't know where this is. There were bars on the window. They... hurt me.”

That was as far as Jhan could go. He curled into a tight ball and hid his face in the blankets. Rehn was silent for some time. Just as Jhan felt himself tumbling into sleep, he heard a small whisper. “Bars on the window?”

Gentle hands touched skin. Jhan flinched and awoke. A strange man sat in a chair by his bedside, leaning forward and examining his lacerated hand, purple lipped slashes still oozing some

blood.

“Gods keep you well, little one,” the man growled under his breath, his attention not wavering from his task. “Do not move. I will take quickly care of your wounds.”

Tall, ascetic, face spare and narrow, eyes nested in wrinkles like two gray pebbles. The man’s graying brown hair was swept back in a short braid, the top cut close to the scalp. He wore a nondescript black uniform with a white collar, the neck open to show a white silk undershirt.

Jhan recoiled violently, every nerve screaming panic. The headboard of the bed hit his back with a loud noise. He yanked his hand from the man as if his touched were searing flame. Jhan was helpless to stop a deep throated scream that erupted without volition and he couldn't stop a mad scramble that threatened to send him through the headboard.

“Deane!” the man shouted. “Hold!”

Through a fog of panic, another, younger man, short and stocky with a mop of black hair, darted forward. He grabbed Jhan's hand and turned away so that it was trapped between his legs, the hand outstretched towards the older man. His grip was unbreakable though Jhan continued to panic.

“Stop fighting me, you whore!” the one called Deane swore.

“Silence, Deane,” the other admonished acidly.

Energy evaporated. Jhan went limp, panting harshly, beginning to sob as he felt his hand stabbed by something small and sharp again and again. The room faded. Figures loomed; red uniforms, ugly faces, grasping hands... pain... pain.

“Jhan, are you all right?” It was Rehn, someone familiar in all of that madness! “He was only stitching your hand. The wounds were bad. They wouldn't stop bleeding. Jhan can you hear me?”

The nightmare ended... or had it just begun? There sat the older man, behind him the younger, looking angry. Rehn stood by the bed, perhaps wondering if he had gone mad again. When Jhan said nothing, the older man made an impatient sound.

“Why did you wait so long to call on me, Rehn?” the man growled. “The child might have bled to death! Who is he and why are you caring for him?”

“He's a whore!” Deane spat in disgust. “That's plain!”

The older man took a long breath and then made a curt motion with one, long fingered hand. “I think he will behave himself as long as he isn't touched. You may return to the barracks, Deane. Be

sure to clean those instruments!”

Deane made as if to protest and then bit his lip, obviously realizing that it was useless to argue. He rolled up a towel filled with metal instruments and went out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Jhan let out a shuddering breath. Who were these people? What were they going to do to him? The hand that had been a mess of lacerations was now a crisscross of neat stitches, aching in time to the throb of his heart. He cradled it against his chest and huddled in on himself, miserably afraid.

Rehn licked dry lips nervously. “His name is Jhan,” he said at last. “He can't remember his family name, or where he comes from.”

“Convenient,” the man growled in a tone that said volumes.

“Lord Perazii, do you think he’s a whore?” Rehn was distressed by the idea, disgusted. “I asked at one house, but they knew nothing of him.”

Perazii scowled even more. He reached out despite Jhan's flinch and pulled at Jhan's long hair. He stretched it out to its full length and then let it drop. “If he is, then he was born to it. This hair has never been cut. What father or mother would allow it? It's shameful!”

“I can't understand it either, Lord Healer.”

Perazii made an impatient gesture. “Stop calling me lord, Rehn. I'm a soldier healer, no lord to anyone.”

“Sir,” Rehn replied sheepishly, embarrassed now.

Perazii was still studying Jhan intently. “Look at him. He has an odd shape to him, as if he were stuck between being a young woman and a young man. His face, the way his waist curves, is so strange. It’s disturbing.”

Jhan squirmed under their regard. The room seemed too small to contain them all. They were too close. They were frightening him.

“Is he afraid of you, Rehn?”

Rehn blinked, caught off guard, and then shrugged. “I've fed and cleaned him when he couldn't do for himself. After he woke up he acted afraid, but not as much as with you and Deane.”

“Is he afraid of being touched?”

“Yes. He has bad nightmares.”

“Jhan,” Perazii was speaking directly to him, ceasing to treat him as a mindless subject of conversation. “My name is Evian Perazii. I am Healer General of the army of Pekarín Fortress and to the king of this land. I command you to answer all of my questions truthfully or suffer the consequences.”

The sunlight played in Perazii's hair and made his gray eyes shimmer slightly. Jhan met his grand speech with silence, staring at him. The man seemed familiar, yet wasn't that impossible unless he was one of the others, one of his previous captors? Jhan felt a horrified, sickening lurch in his belly, and he struggled to remember.

“Where are you from?” Perazii demanded. “Are you a gypsy child or whore runaway?” He put on a very stern expression. “Rehn is a kind man, but I will not allow you to take advantage of him. As soon as you are able, you will be on your way, I'll see to that, so you have nothing to lose by speaking the truth. Now tell me. Who are you?”

“Jhan,” he replied in a trembling voice. “Don't... Don't... I don't know where I am. I don't know anyone. I'm frightened!”

Jhan's blue eyes teared and his face trembled. Evian softened, but remained stern. “No one's going to hurt you. We just want to know who you are.”

But Jhan didn't know who he was. He hid his face in his hands and began a slow rocking, trying to shut out everything.

“Are you a whore, Jhan, runaway from one of the houses in town or somewhere else?” Perazii coaxed.

Whore. A voice, rich with cruelty was speaking from some memory. Jhan repeated the words in a harsh whisper, “Enemy's whore.”

“What?” Rehn went pale stepping closer. Perazii motioned him to stand still.

“What enemy?” Perazii pressed.

“Dark man,” Jhan replied and turned his face away, tight and stiff as stone. His neck hurt from some long ago wound. Teeth, gnawing like a rat.

“Bars on the window,” Rehn said thoughtfully.

“What did you say?” Perazii demanded.

“I asked where he had been before I found him in the forest. He told me... a cold place. He said there were bars on the window.”

“Enemy's whore,” Perazii shook his head. “A dark man and bars on the windows. What can it mean? Something or someone has hurt him badly, Rehn. He isn't faking it.” He stood decisively. “I think you had best tell me everything from the beginning.”

Rehn became apprehensive. “You shouldn't bother, Healer Perazii,” he said quickly. “I thank you for coming here and stitching his wounds -”

“You are Lord Ambassador to the Sahvossa, Rehn,” Perazii cut in impatiently. “You are higher ranking than any lord in Pekarín save the king. Act like it instead of like a farmer. You know that I am at your call or you would not have come to the barracks to fetch me.”

“I *am* a farmer, whatever grand title was given me,” Rehn objected. “I am not a great lord simply because an accident of birth gave me the power to speak to the Sahvossa when no one else could! Besides, if he is just a... a whore, I can't ask you to waste time -”

“No human life is a waste of time, Rehn, not even a whore's.”

Rehn bit his lower lip, rebuked, and then said, “Would that more people were as charitable. The healer down hall would not help despite my grand title, Healer Perazii.”

“You're a brave man, but foolish, Rehn. Tell me what you know.”

Jhan listened to the story of how Rehn had found him in the forest after being called there by these 'Sahvossa'. Rehn's voice was soothing and familiar. Muscles began to unclench, but he still watched the healer carefully.

“What exactly did the Sahvossa say?” the healer asked thoughtfully.

Rehn paused to remember. “Whitefur, the one who speaks to me most often, said that I must care for her until she was well. I laughed and tried to correct Whitefur, but she repeated herself. 'This one is female inside and you must treat her so or she will never be well. It is important, important to everyone that she becomes well.' Then she left me to catch Jhan. He was screaming and running like a wild animal. When I caught him I had to tie him. He was mad... screaming or sitting as still as stone for weeks and then, suddenly... he just came to some sense.”

“It was sudden?” Perazii pressed. “Did you do anything differently to make such a difference?”

Rehn colored and looked down at his toes. His mouth twisted one way and then the other as if working on something sour and then he sighed. "I started... started calling Jhan *she* and *milady*, like Whitefur said. It worked. He responded right away."

Perazii gave Rehn a keen look. "Are you willing to keep caring for him until we can solve this mystery? I believe he will reveal his secrets when he recovers from whatever ill befell him."

Jhan gritted his teeth, waiting for the reply that was long in coming. "Can't you care for him, Healer Perazii?" Rehn begged plaintively. "He's drained me completely. I was on the verge of taking him to a charity house when he came to his senses."

"Regulations state that only soldiers can be treated in the infirmary, Rehn. You know that. I'm sorry, but I'm an old soldier as well as a healer." Perazii sighed and gave a small shrug. "If you truly feel that you can't handle him, do as you see fit. I am the last person to order you about."

They went towards the door, speaking in low tones. Jhan couldn't hear and didn't care to. He simply wanted everything to go away. He didn't want to think or feel or guess what was going to happen next. Whether there would be pain or kindness.

The door opened and closed and Rehn returned to the bedside alone, hands in pockets and face pensive. "I still can't get used to it," he said sheepishly. "I mean, people thinking that I'm important. You see, when Pekarín Fortress was first built, the people didn't know that they were putting it on the doorstep of the Sahvossa. The Sahvossa are... I'm not certain, but I guess you would call them protectors of the forest. When they appeared to demand to know why we strange creatures were clearing forest land and moving stones, they were looked on as beasts, demons. No one could hear their speech. We killed them. It wasn't until someone with Power, the magic of old, came forward and spoke with them that we understood they were beings like ourselves."

Rehn paced a little, staring at nothing. "Unfortunately, the Power became distrusted and many who had it were destroyed. Without the Power, we couldn't understand the Sahvossa. There were misunderstandings and the Sahvossa were killed again only this time they did not allow it. They showed that they had great Power and many of our people died. When I was just a lad, it was discovered that I could hear the Sahvossa. Everyone thought that I had Power and some demanded that I be slain. The king himself rescued me and brought me here, naming me Ambassador to the Sahvossa. I was the mouthpiece of the King for the Sahvossa and the killings stopped. I'm an important man, but many don't treat me as such and I don't feel important at all. I'm certainly not the equal of Healer Perazii!"

Jhan merely blinked at him. Rehn faced him, crossing his arms on his chest. "What should I

do with you? I could order someone to care for you, but they wouldn't really care for you. All that hair of yours, someone would think that you were only one thing. You could *be* that for all that I know. If I keep you, and it's found out, my reputation will be in ruins!”

“We can't have that!” Jhan muttered distantly, a sharp echo of some almost forgotten female voice. It was a harsh response, automatic for Christine, not an abused man in shock.

Rehn was silent, mouth working, and then he suddenly chuckled. “The gods forgive my selfishness, you mean? I've been far from selfish with you. My father wouldn't have given you a crust of bread if he'd have had one with my brood of brothers and sisters. Gypsy brats are like grains of sand in this land!”

Jhan turned his face away, feeling his stomach go cold. When would the fear end?

“I've given you my bed and my home and my food, Jhan,” Rehn continued. “Don't complain of my charity! I'll let you stay, as Healer Perazii suggests, until you are truly well and remember who you are. Does that satisfy you?”

That deserved a reply, but Jhan's throat was closed. Rehn made a grunt that spoke volumes and turned away.

Chapter Three

(Assimilation)

“Let me die!”

“I cannot! He holds us all in his power!”

There was darkness and a bone numbing cold. A white face, indistinct, speaking, explaining, making excuses to let the pain go on. Finally, there were arms holding him close and rocking, rocking while something touched inside him, healing, healing so the pain could go on.

“Let me die!”

It was always the same. A nightmare within a dream, or perhaps that was the reality and this little country room the dream? It caused Jhan to cry out, unable to stand the pressure of uncertainty. The nightmare always faded away with the cry and the room, clean and glowing with sunlight remained. After days of this, Jhan finally began to believe in it. To trust it and to begin trusting Rehn, ever steady Rehn who never failed to be gentle and kind despite his growing annoyance in having to take care of a madman.

“Thank you,” Jhan said suddenly, his words coming out almost like a reflex, a sneeze, an upwelling of a strange feeling; gratitude. He was sitting in the one chair with legs drawn up and his robe pulled over them, arms clutching knees close to his chest, while Rehn sat on the bed and laboriously wrote a short letter to his family. The paper was supported on an old book and he chewed a coal stick between strong teeth as he thought.

Rehn looked up with raised eyebrows. “Thank you? What was that for, the food that I brought you two hours ago?”

Rehn was serious. It often took Jhan that long to make the effort to speak. Jhan looked away, nervous. His eyes were caught by the window. It was open a little and letting in a slight breeze along with a summer-like warmth. A bird darted by, blue feathers and curved beak shining with iridescence.

Rehn sighed. “I wish that you would trust me Jhan and speak to me. I can't keep you here forever! If you could talk about what you remember, I might be able to recognize where you come from!”

How many times had he said that? How many times had it been heard? For the first time, Jhan *heard* it and actually *thought* about it. The words had form and power to make him consider several things in a mind that had been a frozen lump for far too long. This man waited on him hand and foot. Jhan slept in *his* bed while he slept on the floor. Guilt and shame began to manifest themselves. For the first time, Jhan began to think of himself as a burden.

“You are kind,” Jhan managed thickly.

“Amazing, I know,” Rehn replied with a sour smile. “I must be a kind fool to care for you for so long, and you not even kin to me!” He saw Jhan's look of guilt. “I won't lie. If it wasn't for the Sahvossa's order to care for you, I would have given you over to someone else. I'm not a nurse maid or a healer.”

The room shrank. The floor shifted, almost fading. Feeling insecure, Jhan huddled in the chair, his hands gripping his knees so tightly that the veins stood out. He couldn't live with Rehn forever. Rehn was growing tired of him and who could blame him?

Jhan stood like a spring being released and walked to the window, looking out, really looking out for the first time, facing this world. He blinked against the light. There were small buildings among tall and ancient trees. People moved here and there, doing some kind of work, but they were too far to make out. If he had work he could afford his own home, Jhan thought. Merely considering it seemed madness. That was for the real world, Christine's world, wasn't it?

Jhan shivered. Something was kindling in him, lighting the fire of his mind. He was *thinking* about his future, a future in that place. That was Christine, always fighting and never conquered. She had always been too stubborn to give up.

Jhan's hands twisted in the fabric of his robe as if feeling his reality. Was Christine still alive in this body? He searched and touched on memories, on emotions, on Christine. Yes, inside he *was* still Christine! A woman! It didn't matter what flesh she was trapped in, she was still Christine!

“What's wrong, Jhan?” Rehn asked softly. “How can I concentrate on my letter? It takes thought to remember all the words that my father knows how to read!”

“Rehn, can we go outside?”

Rehn stared, considered, and then put his writing things aside. “I don't know. You've improved, but... my neighbors.” He seemed reluctant. “Will you let me cut your hair first and put you in a man's clothes? You aren't... whatever you were before. You should stop looking as if you were.”

What you were before. Not Christine? Not a woman? Jhan gathered up his cloak of hair; soft, flowing darkness. It was too long. Not meant for walking about at all. It always tangled and caught on everything. Give that up and his robe? If he put on pants and had to deal with... “No,” he replied. “I’m not -” Not what, a man? He *was* a man. Jhan’s chin firmed. Maybe the outside was, but the inside was still Christine, waking like Eve and becoming aware of what was happening around her. She was taking control again.

“No.”

Rehn stood and went to the writing desk. He rummaged in a drawer and then turned to hold out a pair of shears. “Cut your hair. I’ll go find some clothes, maybe get castoffs from some of the neighbor children.”

“No!” That was Christine, sharp tone overriding a young man’s light voice. He took the shears from Rehn. “I will cut my hair a little, but I will not wear pants!”

“What are you talking about?” Rehn demanded, perplexed, as he watched Jhan pick up his hair and then cut it with quick snips of the shears. When Jhan released his black tresses, they fell and swayed just shy of his ankles. The five foot sheared strands landed on the floor.

“I won’t take you anywhere like that!” Rehn was firm, but confused. What had happened to his near comatose patient? “Can’t you see? They’ll laugh at you and me!”

Jhan handed him the shears with a trembling hand and backed away. Rehn took them quickly, perhaps regretting that he had given a madman something sharp. He put them back into the drawer, gave Jhan a hard look, and then calmly sat on the bed once more to resume his writing. “It’s clear that you still aren’t in your right mind.”

Jhan bit his lip. “Rehn...” he sighed and hugged himself a moment before crouching to gather up the fallen hair and deposit it into a wastebasket. “You don’t understand what’s been done to me.”

“Because you won’t tell me,” Rehn replied acidly, scowling down at the letter.

“I can’t.”

“Afraid a farmer wouldn’t understand?”

“No, I don’t understand what happened either. I can’t put it into words.” Jhan was at a loss. He had spoken more words just then than he had since meeting Rehn. The sluggish blood was moving again and the mind was rebounding from its shock at last. Thoughts and feelings surfaced like green

plants after thaw, shouting, *'It's time to live again!'*

“Tell me what you can!” Rehn demanded, looking at him at last, eyes keen. “I want to help you!”

Jhan covered his face with his hands and tried to concentrate. Finally, he lowered them in defeat and slumped in the one chair. “There are only pictures in my head of red uniforms, a dark king, and a window with bars. It’s cold there, very cold. I know what these images mean, deep down, and it’s horrifying. It’s like not being able to look at the sun. I’m afraid of being burned!”

“At least tell me where you were born. Where are your people, Jhan?”

“I don’t know where Jhan comes from. I don’t know his people.” And where Christine came from there wasn’t any returning to it.

Rehn looked pointedly at Jhan’s hair. “If you did come from... a pleasure house... and someone mistreated you, I can understand why you wouldn’t want to admit it. I wouldn’t take you back there.”

“Then what will you do?” Jhan surprised them both by his anger. “Throw me out? I don’t know what’s out there! I don’t know your people! I’m scared shitless!”

Rehn’s face screwed up. “You don’t need to speak that way, young lad!” His face relaxed and he looked sheepish. “Actually, I’ve kind of grown used to having you. I’m used to close quarters with a lot of siblings. You aren’t bad company when you stay in your right mind. I’m not saying you can stay here forever, but I’ll see you set right. I’m sorry if I sounded callous. You haven’t been the easiest guest.”

“We’ll go out then?”

“No, not until you do as I say.”

That was final.

“I’ll go on my own then!”

Jhan actually took a few brave steps towards the door, not sure what he intended to do if Rehn let him reach it. How could he go out there alone? He was terrified!

“Jhan, stop!” Rehn exploded off of the bed, paper, book, and pencil flying. He stopped just short of touching Jhan, knowing Jhan would panic. He slipped between Jhan and the door instead. “What’s happened to you? How can you go from a quiet, madman to such a stubborn twit in less than a few minutes?”

“I found myself,” Jhan replied. “I am still me! All that was done to me didn't take that away! I want to go out, now. Unless you have been lying to me? Am I a prisoner here?”

Rehn glared, but Jhan stood his ground. Letting out a gusting breath, Rehn turned to slip on his boots. “All right, we'll go out! Maybe, when you see how they treat you, you'll understand why I should cut your hair!”

The door was a barrier. When Rehn opened it, Jhan felt a flashing moment when everything throbbed behind his eyes and his heart constricted. He clutched Rehn's shirt sleeve and half hid behind his lanky form, darting a look from under the curve of his armpit.

There was a hallway stretching in both directions lined with wooden doors. The walls were whitewashed stone and the floor was worn slate, cracked here and there from settling. Light came dimly from lanterns hung intermittently. Women stood and talked not far to the right, tight bodices and flowing skirts covered with dirty aprons. Their hair was mussed and tied in buns.

Small children hovered near, playing some game with long pieces of wood; tossing them and shrieking with laughter or groaning depending on how they fell. They looked almost poor, but they were well fed and their clothing was well made, if plain.

“Come, then,” Rehn commanded and strode out.

Jhan hesitated and then scurried to catch up to his long strides. The women didn't appear to notice, but the children looked up curiously. Rehn said some small greeting to them and passed on.

“Are you all right?” Rehn asked softly.

“Yes!” Jhan snapped back, but he wouldn't release his hold on Rehn's sleeve.

Jhan felt as if he had moved too suddenly. He had awakened from a long sleep and unwisely thrown himself into a crowded city, because that is exactly what the hallway emptied out into. A huge square was filled with men and women, either standing, talking, or rushing in every direction for some unknown destination. It had the feel of a city street, or a store mall, and everywhere there were rustic lanterns and rustic dress; full skirts, tight bodices, leather vests, boots or pointed toed slippers of velvet. Knives were on every belt, even on the belts of the women.

“Lower Pekarín,” Rehn announced, bending so that Jhan could hear him over the general clamor of the people.

It was overwhelming after having been closed in a room, with one man, for so long. It blurred into a kaleidoscope of colors and sounds. Jhan felt a scream of panic rising, but Rehn had him

by the elbow and was propelling him through it as if punishing him.

“Please stop, Rehn!” Jhan cried out, but it came out as the merest squeak. This had been a mistake!

The crowding eased. They entered another hallway, Jhan gasping and trembling; feeling ready to collapse. Rehn stopped. He seemed a towering figure, like a familiar dark shadow. There should have been a guttural threat, a voice from some nightmare uttering it; stinking breath and crude hands.

“Jhan... I'm sorry.”

Jhan blinked stupidly, coming out of the grasping darkness to see Rehn's anxious face. Jhan glanced back at the milling crowd and then away, trying to regain control. “It’s just that we've been alone for so long.”

“Who's your friend, Rehn?”

They both spun to see a heavy man that was dressed in plain homespun and a leather tunic embroidered with a snake. He had small eyes of clear blue and mobile lips that smiled ingratiatingly.

“Dhasra, you surprised me!” Rehn exclaimed.

“Ah, forgive me. We haven't seen you about, what with caring for that madman.” Dhasra scowled severely. “Gotten rid of him, have you?” Before Rehn could reply, he bowed low to Jhan. “You are as beautiful as a red sun at dawn, milady! Are you kind to Rehn? If you are, he has been remiss in honoring us with your presence before now.”

“Jhan isn't a -”

Dhasra spluttered. “Is that how you introduce a lady?” He glared at Rehn, and then took Jhan's hand and gave it a kiss and a pat before releasing it. “Jhania, it must be. Lady Jhania. A beautiful name for a beautiful lady! I am Dhasra Enveltorell, one of the handlers for Lord Frelen's hunting birds. I am also Rehn's neighbor, two doors down on your right, milady. You won't forget?”

“Dhasra, Jhan isn't a woman!” Rehn interjected in exasperation.

“Of course she isn't” Dhasra interrupted again smoothly. “She’s a young maid, as tender as a new bud.”

Jhan blushed and moved behind Rehn. Dhasra thought he was a woman! The soul of Christine shouted with joy. Yes, a woman! I am a woman! I look like a woman! This man can't tell!

Rehn again attempted to explain. “Dhasra, Jhan is a man! He's the person I've been caring for.”

Dhasra went bolt upright, all expression melting off of his face. Jhan watched his eyes, so kindly blue before, kindle like blue coals of fire. His fat face reddened like a cherry.

“What is this outrage?” Dhasra demanded in a strangled roar. “What have you taken into your home, a city slut? A man whore from the dives?” He pointed a shaking finger at Jhan. “You will be rid of him! You will be rid of him, now, or I will call a meeting and I will demand he be thrown out! Are you mad, Rehn? There are children in our hall! There are families!”

Rehn had expected that reaction. He remained calm, replying quietly, “The Sahvossa commanded me to care for him.”

Dhasra was even more shocked and clearly fearful now. He spluttered and his eyes widened. He was at a loss for words and then he found them. “How can the Sahvossa command Pekarín Fortress to keep this perverted creature here?”

“Will you challenge them?” Rehn wondered.

“We'll see!” Dhasra exploded and stormed away.

Rehn stared after him and then looked down at Jhan. “Now do you see? If you don't cut your hair and dress like a man, they will have you thrown out!”

“You didn't have to tell him,” Jhan replied angrily. “He thought that I was a woman.”

“Is that what you want?” Rehn demanded in disgust and disbelief. “You're still mad!”

“No, I've come to my senses,” Jhan retorted. “This is what I am, Rehn. No, not a whore and not a man either. I'm this. I'm something else. Inside I'm -”

“I don't want to hear any more of this!” Rehn shouted.

Rehn propelled Jhan down the hall and through a door. Sunlight and a dizzying view of rolling green hills made Jhan stagger. He put his hands to his eyes and rubbed them, blinking against the sunlight. He hardly saw the stone steps they descended and the borders of pink flowers that clung to iron railings. Something like a dog ran by. It was long and lean, with a pushed in snout full of sharp teeth.

“I'm taking you to the Sahvossa!” Rehn growled. “I need questions answered! I need to know why I should care for someone - someone so strange!”

Jhan was barefoot, but the path they took was soft loam cushioned by leaves. It led into a

great forest unlike anything Jhan had ever seen before. It was huge and ancient looking, the trees gnarled and hung with moss; towering high with branches that seemed to stretch out forever. It made the lower forest dim and mysterious; full of animal sounds and buzzing insects that kept up a constant drone. Large ferns and creeping vines, with orchid like appendages, were in profusion, giving it all a fairy tale look.

Jhan glanced back at the fortress and the rolling green hills. From this vantage, he could only see a sweeping wall of stone, covered in green ivy, half blocking the sunlight. The treetops obscured everything else.

“What are you going to do?” Jhan wondered quietly, looking up at Rehn's irritated face. His bare foot struck something sharp. He staggered, hopped, but Rehn didn't slow.

“I told you! I want answers!” Rehn replied.

“Stop walking so fast!” Jhan pulled away from Rehn's hard grip and stopped, angry. Rehn turned, hands on hips. “Look! First you say that you'll take care of me and then you say that you won't! You keep changing your mind! I don't want anyone taking care of me! I've always taken care of myself! All you have to do is show me how things work here... how I can get a job so that I can get a place of my own! Then you won't have to see me anymore!” Was that really his voice, Jhan wondered, demanding, assured, alive? Jhan was as amazed as Rehn.

“No one will give you work looking like that,” Rehn replied steadily. “I've told you, they'll throw you out! You're acting like a child and you're ill besides.”

Jhan felt his hands go into small fists and he felt honest anger. “I am not a child! Don't ever say that again!”

“Then what are you, then, because you're certainly not acting like a man?” Rehn demanded, just as angry.

'She is one trapped.'

The voice wasn't aloud. It was inside the head, a presence between the ears; soft, melodic, full of command and a tingling sense of power.

“What was that?” Jhan asked fearfully.

Rehn was shocked. “You heard her?”

'She hears like you, young brother.'

“Rehn, what is that?” Jhan asked again, beginning to panic.

“It's all right,” Rehn replied softly. “It's Whitefur. She's a Sahvossa.”

It stepped out of shadow and into dappled sunlight. Jhan thought it was a fox, but it was suddenly apparent that it had as little in common with a fox as a man did with a monkey. It was small and delicate. Pure white and fur as fluffy as clouds, with eyes as crystal blue as summer skies, it looked almost unreal. The narrow snout split into something like a smile as it sat back on haunches, balancing on splayed feet. Manlike hands began preening a white ruff as if there was nothing more important in the world, but the eyes were watchful and very wise.

'Gods give you light feet and slow prey, young ones,' the creature greeted.

“And you, soul-sister,” Rehn returned aloud.

'Not what you think in mind, young brother,' Whitefur admonished and she gave a barking laugh. *'We give you much trouble, yes?'*

“Yes, much trouble!” Rehn snapped back and then pursed his lips. He sat on the loamy earth abruptly. “I want answers!”

'Find yours and I shall find mine, young cub,' Whitefur replied easily. It sounded like ritual. Rehn's peasant brown eyes met inhuman blue ones as Jhan watched tensely.

“Jhan can hear you too,” Rehn said at last, choosing his words as if this were a test. “Is that why you asked me to take care of him? Is he to replace me?”

Rehn sounded at once hopeful and fearful.

'No,' was the answer. *'There is not any replacement for you, soul-brother. We do not speak to any man, but you.'*

“But you speak to Jhan!”

'She is not you. She has her own destiny. We speak to her, but she does not replace our soul-brother.'

Rehn snapped a look at Jhan and then glared at Whitefur. “Why do you call him a she? I asked you before but you refused to answer.”

'She knows,' Whitefur replied simply.

“I have bathed Jhan, seen to his needs. I know that he is not a woman!”

“I am,” Jhan cut in softly.

Rehn ignored him. “He is mad. Are you telling me that he thinks that he is a woman?”

'Is, young one. Inside, he is a woman. We told you that when first we called you to care for her. Treat her as she, not as she appears.'

Rehn closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then let it out angrily. “I don't understand! Why is Jhan a woman inside?”

'Power was used on her. Jhan is a victim of imbalance. The dark is eaten by the light and the light is eaten by the dark. There was balance. Now there is imbalance. The laws are broken. A woman is now a man and the world trembles.'

“Power,” Rehn echoed. “That's the only thing that I understand! What does the rest mean? How can Jhan be a woman inside because of Power?”

'It is being misused, soul-brother, by a terrible enemy. There is not any understanding I can give you. You must find your own answers.'

This creature knew! Jhan was open mouthed. It knew what had happened to him! It knew that inside this hated flesh was Christine! A woman!

Rehn was desperate, hands outstretched towards Whitefur. “You know so much about Jhan! Tell me who his people are! Tell me where he comes from so that I can return him!”

'There is not any return save death. 'People' I do not understand. Are you not of her people?'

“Her kin-his kin, I meant!” Rehn spluttered.

'There is not any matter to that. You are to care for her. You are her people.' Whitefur turned as if to go.

“Wait!” Jhan called out, afraid, yet daring.

'What is it, little sister?'

Jhan moved a few paces forward. “How did I get to this forest? Where did I come from? I-I remember mountains. It was cold.”

'Power brought you. You were not here and then you were here.'

“The man, the Dark King,” Jhan persisted. “I don't remember what happened, but I know... he hurt me. They hurt me.”

You will remember,' Whitefur assured him. 'Evian can help you. Trust in him.'

“Why should I care for him?” Rehn suddenly exploded, coming to his feet. “They will laugh at me and throw me out of Pekarín!”

'Child,' the silent voice was chiding, patient. 'She needs you. She cannot help what was done to her.'

“What was done?”

There was a flashing string of pictures, layers of gauze intertwining them.

“I don't understand!” Rehn protested when they ceased.

'There are not any words. Perhaps, you will come to understand,' Whitefur replied. 'Shadows hide you well and the wind in your face, young ones.'

It seemed as if she were suddenly rendered invisible; a breath of wind.

Jhan blinked stupidly and then let out a long breath as he sat heavily in the grass. “That was strange,” he whispered.

“She never said why I should care for you,” Rehn groaned as if in reply. He stood, pulling up a double handful of grass, and cast it towards the sky in disgust. He took a long time to watch every blade fall back to earth before he turned to glare down at Jhan.

“The gods cast life at you and never ask whether one likes it or not. I guess the gods have cast you to me and it is time, and past time, that I stopped railing against it.”

Rehn put hands in pockets and scowled in thought.

Rehn said finally, “I don't pretend to understand what Whitefur said to us, but I do know she said... said that you thought that you were a woman.”

Maybe it was easier for him to think it was all in Jhan's mind? Maybe it was safer to let him think so? Talking foxes aside, he might react negatively to the thought of a woman possessing a man's body, however that had come about.

“And it bothers you?” Jhan asked tightly. “You want me to change. Hide it. I can't. It's what I am... will always be. If you can't live with that... and I can understand if you can't, then I'll... I don't know... can I get work?”

“Not as you are, no,” Rehn replied. “I've told you. What does it matter, Jhan? If you do think

you're a woman, what does it matter if you don't act as one?"

"It matters because, I'm afraid!" Jhan hugged himself fiercely. "I'm afraid of losing myself. If I don't act like a woman, I might forget who I am!"

They stared at one another and Rehn fell silent. He rubbed a hand across his forehead and swore. He said, "I've seen babies die in this forest, unwanted births. Men and women have fallen under bandit knives or become lost, never to be found again. The Sahvossa have never bothered to help them. In their world, each looks after themselves. They are of nature, yet apart. That they should bother with you, whoever you are or were, is cause for thought."

"I don't remember, Rehn. I don't know why they should bother, why they should think that I'm important."

"Power brought you here," Rehn said. "You can hear the Sahvossa. Do you have Power, Jhan?" The prospect that she might clearly frightened him.

"No," Jhan assured him. "Is it like magic?" Rehn was uncomprehending. Jhan found that he couldn't pursue the topic. It stirred the blackness within Jhan. Sharp slashes of mental claws were painful and a warning to remain silent about it.

"Power is outlawed," Rehn continued. "If you don't have it, then someone else sent you here with it. Who? Was it the Dark King that you keep speaking of?"

"I-I don't know," Jhan replied with a shiver. But he did know, deep down. He just couldn't bring it to the fore so that memory could grasp it and make sense out of it.

Rehn grimaced. "Let's get back. Whitefur said that you would remember eventually. I guess that we can't press it."

Jhan stood and wiped the loam from his robe, picking at leaves tangled in his hair. "I don't like being a burden to you, Rehn."

"Try and stay in your right mind and you'll be less of one," Rehn growled back, "and don't mention to anyone about thinking that you're a woman!"

Jhan smoothed hands down his robe, dark lashes shading blue eyes. "You've done so much for me. I would be glad to repay you - Do anything that you ask, but I can't be a man, Rehn."

Rehn scowled and gave a mock bow, gesturing broadly for Jhan to precede him on the trail back towards the fortress. "Well, then, after you, milady!"

Jhan gave a gracious nod that was as false as Rehn's gallantry as he took the lead, ignoring Rehn's sarcasm.

The walk back seemed short. It was almost like giving up freedom to step out of the forest onto the flat, grassy hills before the fortress. Now Jhan could see what Pekarín looked like.

Jhan wasn't impressed. The fortress looked old and plain. Gray stones were piled into blocky buildings and watch towers. There were three levels. Lower Pekarín, where the servants lived, the Upper Gardens, that were full of greenery and flowers, and Pekarín Proper, where the lords and the king lived. The last was defended by high walls and drawbridges, a retreat in case of attack. Rehn had described it to Jhan on several occasions, but the actual sight of it put things into focus. Things were *very* primitive.

"We should go see Healer Perazii while we are down here," Rehn suggested and turned Jhan towards a long row of whitewashed barracks.

Before them were several sandy practice grounds where men, some hardly dressed in more than loincloths, struggled with partners. They practiced with swords, knives, and even bare hands, while others, seated on long benches near the rings, waited their turn on the sand.

Jhan felt a sudden, violent tightening of his muscles. He slowed, staring hard at the men. There was something frightening about them. It was as if he were entering some half remembered nightmare, not understanding yet that it *was* a nightmare.

"Nothing's wrong," Rehn assured him. "Those are the Pekarín guard. A few of them are friends of mine. They won't harm you."

They had to pass close to reach the barracks. Some of the men were even now turning heads and looking their way. Jhan stopped walking and Rehn bumped into him.

"What is it?" Rehn demanded impatiently. "If you'd rather not see Evian, then we'll go back to the fortress. I only thought that, since the Sahvossa said that he might be able to help you remember, that we should speak with him."

"I-" Jhan swallowed, blue eyes locked on the men, catching sun bronzed muscles, sweat streaked skin, and flashing weapons blunted for safety. "I don't know what's wrong." He measured out each word laboriously.

"I'll stay by you, Jhan, don't worry," Rehn soothed. He took Jhan by the arm, carefully, and found it shaking. "All right, we won't go this way. Let's circle around and come from the back."

It was too late. One of the men came striding towards them. He had on a uniform, a red jacket with gold emblems embroidered on chest and sleeves and red leather pants tucked into black boots. His face was like a hatchet, thin and narrow. His black eyes were as keen as a hawk's as he looked down from an impressive height at Jhan.

“Captain Narin,” Rehn greeted him with a smile. “Have you returned from your patrol so soon? How is Kile Helarion Dor faring out in the wilderness?”

“Your friend is as haughty as ever, but a few miles slogging through rainstorms and hunting bandits, improved his character somewhat.” His eyes never left Jhan. “I am Tevar Narin, young mistress.”

Rehn opened his mouth to speak, closed it. “This is Jhan, Tevar, a friend of the Sahvossa. They asked me to take care of hi-her.”

“She does not look well,” Tevar observed.

Jhan's entire world suddenly narrowed down to his red uniform. It was like blood, thick and slowly dripping from a wound. A voice screamed, begged for mercy. Was it him or the man in red? It echoed and repeated. Hands were reaching out, grasping. Pain tore and burned over and over. They were killing him! Stop! Stop! There was only one way to stop it. Kill! Kill the one in red and the pain will stop.

There was a knife. It gleamed at the Captain's hip, silver hilt with a slim grip. It was cold in Jhan's hand as he snatched it away and whirled with it, muscles responding to twist him up to sink the blade in the man's heart.

“Jhan, stop!” Rehn cried out.

Jhan was grabbed from behind by Rehn. His wrist felt as if it were being broken in half as Rehn wrestled the knife from his hand and cast him to the dirt.

Jhan had failed. The pain would come. He would be given to it, to them, the men in red. The torture was about to begin.

Jhan curled into a ball, weeping and whining as if he were being torn apart, face buried in his clasped knees. He was dimly aware of shouting and curses. Someone kicked. It landed solidly in his ribs. That was nothing. Worse would follow.

“No!” It was Rehn; familiar and safe.

There was a long argument. Hands snatched at limbs and Jhan felt himself dragged along the ground, stones scraping flesh. A door creaked and he was thrown. He rolled over a smooth, stone floor. The door crashed shut and metal rattled against metal.

Jhan crawled into a corner of the room even though he knew it didn't hold any safety for him. Punishment would come. He had failed.

"Jhan," the voice called over and over.

Jhan came out of his stupor enough to recognize Healer Evian Perazii kneeling before him and the fact that he was in a cell.

The cell was small and very clean. There weren't any spider webs and the high barred window didn't show any signs of rust. The floor was strewn with clean hay and a bucket in a corner served as a privy. It too was clean. Still, it was a cell, and Jhan was terrified.

"You tried to knife Captain Narin, Jhan," Evian told him, old eyes searching his eyes for some sign of comprehension. "Rehn's spoken with me. He's told me what happened with the Sahvossa and how you've recovered somewhat. He also told me that you seemed very frightened of the soldiers. Did you attack Tevar out of fear?"

Jhan huddled in on himself. "Let me die this time," he murmured. It was the words from his nightmare.

Evian scowled. "You *will* die if those soldiers out there have any say! I've come to get answers, answers that may save your life!"

This wasn't the way that it had always gone before, Jhan mused darkly. No one had ever demanded answers of him. There had only been the commands.

"What commands?" Evian demanded suddenly.

Had he said it aloud? They were commands to kill the men dressed in red. There was laughter, demonic laughter, and those sharp teeth at his throat, tearing.

"Men dressed in red," Evian said slowly and then asked sharply, "Do you mean men in red uniforms?"

How strange. Something was touching Jhan's mind. Touching like the other had to heal him. To heal what the men dressed in red had done to him over and over.

"Why did men in red uniforms hurt you?" Evian asked, "Remember, Jhan. You look frightened of this place. Does it remind you of somewhere else? Tell me."

Jhan saw the place of his nightmares interposed over that cell. "Cold," he said aloud. "Cold corpse and spiders ready to feast." He felt like laughing, on the edge of hysteria.

The door was opening. There was a livid picture of a fat man stuffed into homespun, bunch of iron keys at his hip. Jhan walked unsteadily. There were seemingly endless corridors, dim and cold. Empty room, dark figure swathed in black. Black eyes were boring into his. Fingers clawed and dug. A knife was placed in his palm, cold and hard. The man before him wore a red uniform. The picture jumped and flickered. The knife flashed, missed, the man was too swift. He had failure.

He was taken down more corridors and into a barracks. It was dank and dirty with men sitting on military like bunks in red uniforms. Jhan was placed on a filthy bed, his wrists tied to its hard metal frame. Men laughed and taunted him. The pain began. They hurt him until flesh rent and blood flowed, until they almost granted him the welcoming relief of death. He was prevented from that release. Gentle hands replaced the hurtful ones. Something touched his mind like the flicker of soft feathers over skin. A power cooled the fire of pain, healing him. Jhan felt himself rocked in someone's arms and heard someone whisper, 'Sorry', over and over.

There was a dark space at the back of Jhan's mind. He wanted to crawl into it and know oblivion, but he was tugged, pulled away, back to consciousness. He found himself staring into Evian's pale face. The man looked horrified.

"Who are you?" Evian asked softly, compelling him to answer.

"I'm dead," Jhan replied, "I should be dead. My name was Christine, but I died. Dark King put me in this corpse. Why can't I die? I'm not a man! I won't accept it. I'll never accept it!"

Evian glanced nervously over his shoulder, eyes wide, and then looked at Jhan intently again. "What are you saying?" he demanded. His eyes fell to Jhan's thin arm. He pulled it towards him and looked at a long scar there. Jhan followed his gaze and knew what he wanted to ask.

"Jhan tried to commit suicide," Jhan said and then corrected himself, "He did commit suicide."

Jhan felt as if he were trying to wake up completely from a nightmare. For once he didn't care who knew what and who he was. Maybe they would kill him for it? Maybe he would even stay dead this time.

Evian looked as if he were drowning. "Are you saying that you aren't Jhan, that you're someone who was put into Jhan's body? Are you saying that you're not a man?"

“Yes!” Jhan shouted into his face, fists clenched. “I’m a woman! I’m not this thing!” His fist thumped his flat chest hard.

“Be quiet!” Evian’s hand went over Jhan's mouth. “You mustn't say that ever again. If they knew such an abomination had been committed, they would destroy you! I've read about such evil in ancient texts. If this dark king has such power, our land may be in grave danger. I must speak with the king of Pekarín at once!”

“Listen to me, Jhan.” Evian leaned close, intent on an answer. “Can you remember the name of your dark king?”

There was a face in Jhan’s memory with lips that were red with blood and eyes that glowed red. Hands reached out of nothingness and grasped Jhan's head, digging nails into flesh. Jhan screamed and slammed himself into the hard, stone corner of the cell, but he couldn’t escape the mind that locked onto his. It delivered pain, throbbing, rending pain and commanded, *be silent!* He fell into a ravening maw filled with nightmares.

Chapter Four

(Chameleon)

“Eat.”

There was a shadow with a voice. Jhan’s mind was unwilling to focus, to chance that his nightmares had followed him into the waking world. He heard mutters, curses, and entreaties, sounds that danced out of range of his willingness to comprehend. It was better to stay in the nothingness, in the depths of his mind, than to face horrors.

“He isn't eating, sir,” a kindly, unknown voice that suddenly made sense.

Jhan blinked and drew away. He wasn't alone anymore. There were two men standing near. He refused to look at them, refused to wonder what they would do.

There was a grumble. A reply barely heard. Warmth drew near Jhan. One image became crystal clear. He shivered, strangely glad that the anticipation was over. There was a man standing near dressed in a red coat. They had come back to torment him.

Jhan wanted a knife, the one he was always given in his nightmares; cold sliver of ice that was razor sharp and deadly.

'Take it and kill.' That voice was from his nightmares as well. It was as soft as velvet, but velvet sheathed over deadly claws. *'Kill or I will give you to them to play with!'*

Jhan stretched out his hands on the floor, searching blindly, desperately for the knife in his dreams.

“Want to kill me, don't you?” said a real voice, not at all like the one inside Jhan's head, “We're going to train you out of it, if we can. If we can't, I'll give you the mercy stroke clean and fast.”

“He's just a boy, sir,” said a kinder voice. “Couldn't we just send him away?”

“He’s almost a man, a man we can’t free to possibly kill some poor man who just happened to wear a red coat on a cold day. Think, Captain Kelp! There’s also the matter of the information that he holds. If we can break his training, Evian thinks that he may be able to tell us about this ‘Dark King’ of his.”

“I don't understand why this king would want to kill a Pekarín soldier, General Vek. He must have realized that this young man wouldn't last a moment after taking down his first Pekarín soldier!”

"I believe that he was sent to announce his presence to us. A threat meant to reach the ears of our king. We've heard rumors of war across the mountains. If this king is the one waging it, then this young man must be our warning that we are next."

"Creating tension and fear instead of attempting surprise?" Kelp surmised.

"It seems so," Vek replied. "This king wants us to know he uses Power. His aim is to frighten us, to make us insecure while we wait for him to attack."

They were silent, studying Jhan for a long moment.

"If what Evian told us about him is true," Captain Kelp sighed, "I don't think he'll ever recover."

"He deserves the chance, Kelp," General Vek growled back. "We'll give him that. Have the men been given their orders?"

"Yes, they have, sir."

"Then we will begin. Stand ready."

"Sir, what if all of this is just his madness and there isn't any *Dark King*?"

"I've already considered it, Kelp, but my duty is to find out truth from madness and to examine all threats to our land. Now, don't distract me. If what Tevar says is correct, he knows how to fight dirty."

Glitter of a knife like a cold slice in the heart. It clattered near Jhan and the men retreated warily. Before they had taken three steps back, Jhan had snatched up the knife and risen to charge the man in his red uniform.

General Vek appeared out of the fog like a static photo, sharp and distinct. Black, shaggy hair over a prominent forehead set with bushy black brows. Little, black eyes squinted over a nose too often broken. A straight mouth was set under a black mustache. He was a short, compact man, burly with muscle, and he held a knife in one hand that came up to guard in time despite Jhan's quick attack.

Jhan spun like a ballet dancer, leaping out of the spin and using its momentum to take him high over Vek's guard. There wasn't any conscious plan to it. Jhan's body reacted all on its own.

The blow was certain. Jhan saw it in Vek's wide eyes. A sword blade flicked out and cast Jhan's knife aside like a striking snake. Jhan spun quickly to Vek's other side, the force of the counterattack giving his move momentum. He swung his blade low, his body bending with an almost

inhuman flexibility and strength as he sought to drive his blade between Vek's ribs.

"Ha!" Vek twisted and drove the blade aside with his own, his other fist driving into the side of Jhan's head before he could fall away. Jhan staggered and Vek's big hand caught his flying hair, pulling him forward to slam into the wall. The knife fell from Jhan's dazed fingers and the other man, still a blur, scooped it up.

"Enough!" Vek growled, but then exclaimed with appreciation, "Gods, he's good! He almost had me! If you hadn't deflected the first attack, he would have gutted me, Kelp!"

"It was a near thing, sir."

"His hair is too long and his muscles are as soft as a girl's! If he were in shape, Kelp, he would rival my best soldier."

He had failed! Red throbbed behind Jhan's eyes and he tried to crawl away, trying to save himself from what he knew was coming next.

Vek ordered, "Take him to the barracks."

Yes, that's the way it always went. Where was the dream of the neat country room and the kind man? Jhan longed to discover it again and escape, but a hand was pulling him up and a voice was demanding he follow.

Jhan obeyed, his feet dragging and his long robe tangling them. Light stabbed Jhan's eyes as he walked through the cell door into the sun and open air. His mind was jogged sharply. This wasn't right. Where were the filthy hallways and violent drafts of cold?

"I'm armed, so don't try anything," Kelp was saying.

His words didn't make any sense. Where would he run to? Jhan wondered. He was a prisoner.

"Follow!" Kelp said more sharply and Jhan understood that.

Grass tickled Jhan's feet with sensation, but he roughly cut that feeling off. He didn't want to feel anything. He tripped on a flight of stairs, three steps that led up into a very large room. Jhan closed his eyes, not wanting to recognize anything.

"Sit." Kelp's voice echoed slightly and his hands gently pushed Jhan down onto a firm mattress that creaked.

Jhan held out his wrists to be tied to the frame. Kelp was silent a long moment and then Jhan

heard him swallow. He said, “No, you won't be tied. No one's going to hurt you. We want you to learn that no one's going to hurt you.”

Jhan pulled up his knees and hugged them, hiding under his long hair. He felt Kelp leave his side. Now, it would begin.

Suddenly there were other people all around him. Jhan could hear low whispers and soft shuffling. He waited, clenched in every muscle, every nerve singing with tension.

Nothing happened.

Very slowly, Jhan peered out from his hair. He was in a large barracks, clean and neat with whitewashed walls, windows high up and opened to let in sunlight. Bed after bed was lined up from one end to the other, each with a chest at its foot for personal things and extra blankets rolled on top. Each cot held a red coated man, watching Jhan curiously or speaking to his neighbor.

Jhan turned his head slightly. One man sat almost at arm's length from him on a neighboring cot. Wide blue eyes met brown ones. The man was big and blonde, but his brown eyes were like Rehn's.

“Nice day,” the man said casually.

Jhan couldn't stifle a whimper. His eyes locked on this man and they faced off for long minutes that seemed an eternity. Kelp appeared between them and Jhan saw him clearly for the first time. He was thin and tall, balding on top with the hair he had left pulled back into a pigtail. He had an eagle's beak of a nose and keen gray eyes that peered over it like an alert bird. In his nose, was a small silver ring, and one ear was dangling with charms.

“That's enough. It's time to go.”

Jhan's legs were like water. Kelp put a hand under his elbow and hauled him up from the cot, supporting him as they walked between the long rows of beds for the door.

This couldn't be happening! Jhan looked back in amazement and saw the men still sitting, staring after him, faces mirroring many things, yet none of them cruel. He was allowed to reach the door and pass through it. No one had harmed him! He hadn't been punished!

Something exploded within Jhan and he began screaming, struggling out of Kelp's grasp and staggering backwards until he fell. He curled up on the ground, weeping. He felt his mind melting like an overburdened machine. It was too much! He couldn't believe that nothing had happened! It was a trick! Another trick!

Oblivion enveloped Jhan in soft wings for a time and when he opened his eyes again, he was in his cell again on the cool stone floor.

“He's bruised! What have you done to him,” asked a familiar voice.

“Un-training him,” Kelp's voice replied, sounding annoyed. “General Vek knows what he's doing. You saw what he tried to do to Tevar! He almost did the same to Vek! You cannot tell me that he should be let loose to do it to someone else!”

“If you don't intend to release him, then what do you want from me?” Rehn wondered angrily.

“He won't eat.” Kelp's voice lowered and lost some of its sting. “We thought a familiar person might be able to persuade him.”

“So you can keep tormenting him? He was almost sane when I had him, now he looks just like when I first found him!”

“Feed him!” Kelp ordered loudly. “We will do what we must and you know better than to question!”

“I can question! I am not a soldier, remember? Leave us alone, then! I'll do what I can!”

The heavy door opened and closed with a bang.

“Jhan, it's me, Rehn.” Gentle hands lifted Jhan until he was sitting up. He stared at Rehn's mop of sun streaked hair, and at his friendly eyes, and then looked away. “You blame me, don't you?” Rehn asked sadly. “You attacked an officer of the army with a knife, Jhan. I had nothing to do with it. Don't you remember? I spoke with Evian. He told me what you said to him. All those times that I asked... Why didn't you tell me?”

Jhan dug nails into his own arms. “I wanted to forget,” he grated out. “I can't forget, though.” His eyes swept the cell and he rocked a little.

“Jhan, this isn't the cell where you were tortured! Can't you see that? These soldiers aren't the ones who hurt you! You were lied to so that you would hate Pekarín soldiers and want to kill them! Can't you understand?”

“It's all a lie.” Jhan muttered, “It's a nightmare that won't end.”

“Jhan, we're friends, remember? I won't lie to you. Why won't you listen to me?” Frustration echoed in Rehn's last words.

Something, a tray, dragged across the floor.” You have to eat,” Rehn growled. “I can do that at least.”

Jhan felt his hair grabbed at the back of his neck and a spoon full of food was forced between his lips. Something in his mind responded, used to this from many weeks spent with Rehn. He swallowed automatically. Soon, an entire meal was resting uneasily in his shrunken stomach.

Days passed, broken only by the routine of battling Vek until he lost, and then being taken to sit in the barracks among the men. Rehn came at every meal and helped him relieve himself and clean up with a bucket of water and a rag. Rehn was always strangely reluctant to let any of the guards see Jhan undressed or being tended to. Jhan could sense Rehn's puzzlement at his own actions and Rehn put it into words haltingly only once. “You're like a little sister. I wouldn't let them look at mine! Gods! I must be losing my mind!”

Evian came twice more to check on Jhan's health. Each time, he came alone and he urged Jhan to remember not to reveal that the body he had wasn't his own. “I've told them everything but that. If you breathe a word of it, they'll take you out and kill you.”

“I want out!” Jhan had shouted back each time. “I want out of this!” but Evian hadn't understood.

“The king himself ordered you imprisoned until we get the information that we need from you. I'm sorry, but there isn't anything that I can do.”

Out of this body, Jhan had meant, but they all turned deaf ears when he spoke. How could he put into words the impossibility of what he wanted?

He didn't reach for the knife. Jhan huddled away from it and turned his face from General Vek, ignoring his taunts. He couldn't beat Vek and even in his clouded mind, he realized it. Vek was like the Dark King, his master.

Tevar, dressed in his red coat, came in Vek's place the next day.

Grab for the knife, the darkness inside of Jhan ordered, but this time it was separated from

Jhan by a mental river it could not cross. Jhan could stare at the darkness and feel the threat, but it had little power to make him act. He had a choice. He chose to do nothing.

“At last,” Vek's said in relief. “Now, if we can just get him to trust the men.”

Of course that was next. Jhan followed quietly, as he always did, behind Captain Kelp, but something else had changed. Jhan's eyes were clear and he was seeing his surroundings for the first time in many weeks. He blinked at the sun and stumbled. Kelp reached out a hand to steady him and Jhan flinched away, staring with wide eyes.

“You're looking at me!” Kelp exclaimed and then grinned. “Good man! The General has finally broken through!”

That meant something and Jhan struggled to comprehend it. He stared about them, recognizing the same path Rehn had taken around the practice sand.

“Come on! What's wrong?” Kelp wondered impatiently.

Kelp tried to pull Jhan along but Jhan planted his feet and resisted. He felt confused, off balanced, as if he had just awakened in the middle of sleepwalking. Emotions churned. What was going on?

“No! Where's Rehn?” Jhan asked anxiously and pulled abruptly away from Kelp. When Kelp tried to regain his hold, Jhan shouted at him, “Keep your hands off of me!”

Jhan staggered away a few steps. The red coat of Kelp was frightening. It reminded Jhan - but this wasn't that other place, he told himself firmly. The waking nightmare, the weeks of feeling lost and alone, seemed to lift from his mind like a veil,

“Need help with prissy boy?” said a voice with a sour tone.

Jhan started when he caught sight of a group of soldiers standing outside a barracks. They had been waiting for Jhan's daily visit. At the sight of so many red coats, Jhan shuddered and felt the killing trance almost take over his mind again. With an effort of supreme will, he resisted the compulsion. Somehow, Vek had given him a weapon against it, a solid mental wall that refused to crumble under its onslaught.

The man with the sour growl was shoved by another, a slim aristocratic soldier with dark eyes and a scar on one lip. “I've told you for the last time, Geva, leave him be! He's a madman and can't help what they've done to him!”

“Fancy him, do you, Avalor?” Geva shot back.

Fists were raised and catcalls came from the other men.

“Leave it or go on report!” Kelp shouted and order was instantly restored. “Who told you to leave your bunks?”

“You were late. Thought you might need help with him,” Avalor responded quickly.

Kelp's nostrils flared and the small ring in his nose quivered. “Do you think that I can't handle the likes of him?”

“I didn't mean that, sir.”

“Then return to your bunks!”

“How long are we to keep this up?” Geva demanded. “Every day we use up our rest period playing nurse maid to this perverted pleasure house creature, and I don't like it one bit, sir!

How dare he? Jhan felt anger sweep his fear away. He was suddenly seeing things clearly. These men weren't the cruel demons from that hell on earth. How could he have thought they were? Jhan grabbed the edges of his sanity and reclaimed it in the only way he knew how.

Someone had braided Jhan's long hair. As he turned on his heel it whipped around in a wide arc. Primly hiking up his robe, he started to walk back to the fortress. He was certain that he could find Rehn's rooms, once his mind calmed and he was away from the red coats.

“Where are you going?” Kelp demanded and he put himself in front of Jhan.

Jhan stopped and put hands on hips. “I don't know who you are, but I'm getting away from you! I'm going to find Rehn!”

Kelp searched his face earnestly. “You really have snapped out of it, haven't you? Vek said that it might happen like that, but I never... Well, sane or not, you can't go where you please, lad -”

“Don't call me that again!”

“Maybe he'd rather be called milady?” Geva suggested with a sneer.

Jhan looked back at him disdainfully and then at Kelp. “As a matter of fact, I would. Now, you, get out of my way!”

There was laughter and Kelp turned red. He was firm, but almost apologetic. “I can't let you go. I have to take you back to your cell and report to the general. He'll want to know about this.”

“You don't have any right to keep me locked up!” Jhan's voice shook. His new found confidence and sanity threatened to evaporate. He remembered the cell with chilling clarity. The cell brought back the memory of that other place. If Kelp took him back to it, he feared he would lose sanity again. The nightmare would come back and he might never escape it again!

“He's a thekling!” Geva laughed. “He wants to be a little lady!”

“Shut-up, Geva!” a smaller man spat. “He's just a madman mixed up in the head! The Captain doesn't need your taunts making him worse!”

“Silence!” Kelp shouted and they obeyed, leaving only the distant sound of animals and the buzz of insects.

“You can't take me back!” Jhan protested and tears flowed down his cheeks. He stepped towards the sunlight and the rolling green hills with its half blanket of forest.

Arms locked about Jhan and he struggled in the grip of Avalor.

“Take him back to his cell,” Kelp ordered crisply. “I'll get General Vek.”

“No!” Jhan screamed and kept screaming even though Avalor was gentle and tried to calm him with soothing words. “I'll kill myself! I will!”

“I'm sorry,” Avalor whispered and carried him back to his cell. It took the two guards at the door to help pull Jhan off of him as he clung with desperate strength. When the door banged closed, and locked with a hollow rattle, Jhan sank to the floor, weeping. The four walls closed in.

“It's all right!” Jhan said aloud and closed his eyes. “I'm awake! I know I'm not in that other place! No one will hurt me! No One! I mustn't be afraid! Rehn will come soon. He'll help me get out of here and I'll be free. No more darkness!”

'Moon Flower.' That hated name came from nowhere, from everywhere. 'It's time to end it.'
White teeth flashed behind Jhan's closed eyes. They snapped on flesh and bit until blood flowed.

The voice sounded loving, coaxing and caressing Jhan with words. 'You know what you must do. They mustn't know me yet. They must feel fear and panic.'

Black wings enfolded Jhan. They were vulture wings smelling of carrion and rot. Glowing, red eyes looked out from the darkness and they became Jhan's universe.

Jhan stood abruptly, mind caught in trance. Yes, he knew what to do. He wouldn't let the nightmare take him again. He wouldn't be imprisoned in fear.

Eyes traveled up to the high window. Jhan pulled off his robe and ripped it several times before tying a loop and a knot. He scrambled up to the sill of the window. He balanced there on one rump while he tied an end of the robe to the bars as tightly as he could. The loop went over his head. Without hesitation, Jhan fell off the sill.

It was so quiet. Jhan leaned on the fence of the stallion's corral and stared out at the swaying tops of the forest. A wind blew his loose hair about like a black curtain and his rose red robe pressed against his spare figure. He briefly touched his throat. It was still sore from his aborted attempt at suicide. Rehn had entered the cell just as Jhan had fallen and saved his life. Even now, Jhan couldn't remember what had possessed him to try suicide. He remembered being very afraid of losing his sanity, so soon after regaining it. Had that been enough? It was terrible to think so.

The stallion was black, with a spray of white spots against face and right flank, as if he had been splashed by paint. He wasn't a horse. He looked more like a camel without a hump, with a horse's legs and hooves. He stood taller than a horse, all sinewy muscle and grace, with a flail like tail and minus a mane. Rehn called it an imala. There was a smaller, pony-like creature, with a much heavier head, called a Baku. These snorted and moved uneasily in a larger corral.

"Come here, sweetie!" Jhan called to the stallion and it snorted and made a strange growling noise that was most unhorse like.

Jhan held a hand over the fence, wheedling. The imala pranced and moved near enough to allow Jhan to stroke its shoulder and neck. It gave her a look with eyes that were as clear as crystals and set wide on each side of its head.

"His name is Dancer," said a soft voice behind Jhan.

Jhan whirled and the imala jumped away, startled into emitting a weird honk like a goose.

"Get away!" Jhan exclaimed before he even saw who it was; only knowing it was a man.

The man was dressed in silver dyed leather pants and boots and a sky blue shirt that looked like silk. A blue jewel sparkled in one ear and a silver torque shimmered on his neck. His face was oval, eyes mild and gray, and his hair was shoulder length and blonde. He looked apologetic and even bowed.

"Forgive me, milady! I didn't mean to startle you. Yonder beast is mine and he has a vile habit of biting. I didn't want you harmed."

The man stared. Beside him, Jhan was elfin small. The robe was long, sweeping, and high collared, the sleeves tied at the wrists; a gift from Rehn, who had silently given it to him, while Vek had hotly demanded that he wear the old boy's castoffs that he had brought for Jhan. It gave Jhan a delicate look and the dark red highlighted his milk-pale skin. His large blue eyes were wary, liquid jewels framed in black.

Jhan took a step away, trying to regain composure. This was his second walk without Rehn outside of the fortress and no one had harmed him or even guessed that he was a man. Still, strange men, any men, were enough to make Jhan nervous, despite his determination to make himself confident and independent.

"You frightened me," Jhan admitted softly and gathered his hair in one hand, keeping it from blowing into the man, as he half turned to the imala and made small talk to cover his discomfort. "You say he's yours? He's beautiful."

"And he knows it too well," the man chuckled, eyes still studying Jhan. "You're new to court? If not, my eyes must be failing me not to have noticed you before. My lady wife will be envious to find such a flower in Pekarín. I think that you rival even her for beauty, and that is not a simple thing! May I ask your name?"

"Jhan," he replied, blushing, forgetting what he was for a moment; only a moment as the man's eyes registered astonishment and recognition.

"Jhan," the man repeated carefully. "You are Jhan, the prisoner?" When Jhan nodded cautiously, the man's eyes swept him up and down in disbelief. "You are a man?"

Jhan scowled. "I don't like to be called that." He smoothed hands down his robe, looking away.

The man turned an unpleasant color, spluttering. "Why are you allowed to walk about freely? I was told that you were dangerous!"

Jhan sighed and slid eyes at the man. "Do I look dangerous? Besides, I have a guard." He motioned several yards away where a red coated soldier was standing, watching nervously, not sure whether to intervene or not. "Who are you, anyway?"

"King Tekhal!" It was said with angry, haughty pride that expected an instant response; a fearful response. Jhan disappointed him.

"You're the king?" It was anger Jhan felt, pure, rushing anger that threw common sense to

the wind and demanded action. This was the king, the man who had kept him locked in Vek's cell! "You ordered me locked up! Do you know what you did to me?"

The king looked astonished, outraged. He revealed a perfect pride when he repeated himself, thinking Jhan hadn't heard or perhaps understood. "I said that I am King Tekhal of Kelay, lord of Sarvoy, Bahrain, Rhenwall, Chardon, Soeteuse, Kalesne, and Darqvale!"

"I don't care what you're king of!" Jhan shouted back. His anger was singing through him, filling him with outrage. "I tried to kill myself in that cell and you were the one keeping me there!"

"You attempted murder!" Tekhal exploded. "I will order you locked up again and whip the man who released you!"

The soldier ran up to them and stood at stiff attention, not sure what to do, but certain he was in trouble. Jhan backed away, eyes wide with fear.

"No! I won't be put back in that cell! How can you be so cruel? What gives you the right?" Small and impotent, Jhan was dwarfed by king and soldier. He couldn't stop this. He was totally helpless. Realization of this was plain on Tekhal's face. Anger drained away to be replaced by something cooler and more level headed.

"Look at you! What sort of threat are you to anyone?" He motioned curtly to the soldier. "You, stand away; out of earshot."

The soldier was eager to obey. The king waited until he was some distance before he turned to Jhan. "Now, we will be calm and you will explain everything, understand?"

Jhan forced down his panic, sniffing and wiping at tears, chin going hard and hands clenched. "Explain what?" he choked out.

"Explain why my general thinks that you are so dangerous. Explain why you are in a dress. Explain why I should let you live! Being a thekling, and an attempted murderer, warrants the death penalty!"

Jhan was shaken, not frightened. What was death after all that he had suffered? No, death wasn't as frightening as being imprisoned again, prey to memory. "I was tortured by someone who wanted to make me think that it was your soldiers doing it. Vek helped me over that. He cured me of wanting to kill."

"He reported that to me, but after his florid descriptions of your fighting prowess... I opted not to release you. If he had told me that you were so small and looked to be a... a -" The king gestured

at Jhan's form in disgust.

"A woman," Jhan finished. "That's what I am, inside, not a threat to anyone. I just want to get past this, start what life I can here." He gave the king a look full of pleading. "I'm a victim. I shouldn't be treated like a criminal. Please, let me stay free!"

Tekhal had latched on to only one sentence. "You think that you're a woman?" Jhan saw bewilderment and then pity in his expression.

Tekhal said more calmly, "Vek informed me of the horrors that you must have gone through, but I was more concerned about the danger that you posed." He hooked his thumbs into his belt and sighed as if he had been presented with a dilemma. "In my kingdom, we do not blame the mad for their deeds. They are tolerated. I will forgive your unwise words of before. I value Vek's judgment. You are released. Dress as a proper man and cut your hair. That will be the first step on the road to your recovery."

Jhan confronted this haughty man, who condescended to be magnanimous, and said one word in reply, though he knew the ultimate consequence. "No."

Tekhal echoed him in utter disbelief. "No?" It was if no one had ever said that word to the king before. Perhaps, they hadn't.

"I mean, no, I will not cut my hair or change my dress. I'm a woman, no matter what kind of body I have."

Jhan expected a fit of temper, but the king seemed suddenly amused. He took a step closer and Jhan stiffened nervously. "You said, no, to me."

"Are you listening to anything that I say? Yes, I said, no, among other things!" Jhan shouted, frustrated into utter recklessness. He felt darkness closing in and fought it with defiance. "Am I supposed to let you tell me what to do?"

"Yes, you see, I am *the king*!" Tekhal gestured to his breast with both hands expressively, eyes glittering angrily. "Even a madman is supposed to do my bidding."

Jhan was going to be locked up again. The cell door loomed in his mind. "What can you do that's worse than what's already been done to me? I'll say what I want and you can do what you like about it! I said, no, and I meant no! I will not let you tell me what to do!"

The king was silent, unreadable thoughts drifting across his face, and then he threatened coolly, "I could call the guard and have you executed on the spot!"

Jhan swallowed hard and then shook his head. Ultimately, threats meant nothing! He couldn't lose Christine even if it meant dying. "It isn't any wonder that no one ever says, no, to you. You kill anyone who disagrees with you!"

Laughter burst from the king. "Oh, this is grand! Do you realize that no one has ever spoken to me like this before? You are either the bravest madman that I have ever known, or the most foolish!"

"How many have you known?" Jhan wondered softly, acidly. His stomach knotted while the king laughed, and after, when he quieted, he endured the king's scrutiny for a full three minutes, before shouting out, "Well, are you going to execute me?"

The king shook his head, becoming serious. "You are ill and don't know what you're saying, I'm certain. I can forgive it. It made me laugh, and I have not laughed in some time. You are free. I will command it to Vek, but I warn you, make one move to harm anyone and I will see you hanged, mad or not!"

Jhan nodded shakily, muttering, "Good." Thoughts of the future suddenly spun into focus, dizzying and urgent. What should he do now? "I'll need a job and a home."

Jhan had been speaking to himself, but the king replied. "You'll not get it dressed as you are," the king pointed out "You will have to concede this madness or wander the lands starving."

"Then I will starve," Jhan replied and half turned away, thinking on the prospect.

"You are truly serious, aren't you?" Tekhal was amazed. "You would starve rather than abandon this madness!" Jhan gave a stiff nod in reply. There was a silence, a weighing, and then Tekhal sighed. "Your identity is a mystery," Tekhal said. "You were held captive by my enemies and tortured. Perhaps, there is something owing to you for being turned into a weapon against me. I think that I will choose to do the repaying and the mending, as much as is possible. Speak with my chancellor and I will command him to see to your employment and living quarters. From there, you must make your own way, I warn you."

Tekhal gave Jhan a hard look. "There is also the matter of the identity of your torturer, my enemy. The questioning is far from done, and it is more convenient to question a healthy man under the roof of my fortress, than a corpse under the open sky!"

"Thank you." Jhan was stunned, first threats and now gifts! He felt suddenly wary. Why should this man care anything about him? He was able to frame only one word. "Why?" He was blunt, clearly suspicious.

"I am not a monster, only a king. You are barely a man, a man who thinks he's a woman! You need help, not more mishandling." Tekhal started to turn away, but paused. "I like the way that you speak to me. It is most refreshing, but do not mistake my tolerance for familiarity. I will be respected and, in the future, you will not be so free with me. Understood?"

"Will there be other times?" Jhan wondered, almost a barb at the king's condescending manner, yet too grateful for his help to lose his temper again.

"No, I suppose not," Tekhal replied and, with that, walked swiftly away.

The guard joined Jhan almost at once.

"Was he really the king?" Jhan asked, staring after him.

"King of this place and a good many others!" the soldier replied stiffly.

"Then I don't have to let you follow me anymore, do I?"

The soldier scowled and put a hand to his weapon. "What do you mean by that?"

"He, the king, said that I was free to do as I please. You are dismissed, soldier."

Jhan turned on his heel and picked up the skirt of his robe, making swiftly for Pekarín fortress. He could feel the soldier mulling his words over, trying to decide what to do. When he glanced back, he smiled. The soldier, unable to make a decision, was going to Vek for orders. Jhan hurried his steps.

He was alone. Free. Jhan felt exhilarated. He almost considered running away, leaving Rehn, Evian, Vek, and guards. But that *was* madness and he had a tight hold on sanity. He wasn't going to it loose. Jhan had conquered his desire to kill red coated soldiers, and he had vanquished a good deal of the fear that had all but overwhelmed his life. There wasn't any Dark King, not any cold cell. No pain. Forget! Forget all of it and start over.

Small hands clutched at the red robe. Forget Christine? Forget and become what he was, a man?

"No!" Jhan exclaimed. The outside meant nothing! He might as well forget every memory in his head, because that is what it would take for Christine to die, for the woman and everything that made Christine a woman to die. Christine had been feminine, delicate and sensual, every gesture and thought encompassing female. Jhan couldn't turn around forty one years of that by wishing it, even if he had wanted to, which he didn't. He *wanted* to be a woman!"

“I hope that you're ready for this, Rehn,” Jhan sighed, “because, I'm not!”

Chapter Five

(The Dove)

“I'm going.”

Jhan settled the black robe about him and hooked the high collar with nervous fingers. A look in the mirror showed a tense face over the dark silk. No embroidery. No flowing hair. His hair was tied back in a severe braid down his back. *‘Stop looking frightened!’* he commanded himself and firmed his chin. The stranger's face in the mirror looked approving. When would he ever call that face his own and stop being startled by it? Maybe when he learned to relieve himself without trying to flex the wrong muscles!

Rehn's face appeared over Jhan's shoulder in the reflection. “I wish that you wouldn't.”

Jhan turned and brushed past him, annoyed. He balanced on the chair back with one hand and slipped on sandals with the other. “Wouldn't what? Not go like this or not go at all?”

“Both.” Rehn sat on the edge of the bed and drew up his knees to clasp them. “It is... unnatural that you look so much like a woman. You are old enough to begin sprouting and growing a beard!”

Jhan touched his face, horrified. “God forbid!” and then softened with an effort to be understanding. “Don't think of me as a man, Rehn, maybe that will make it easier for you? Forget that you ever saw different.”

“They won't forget, Jhan. The people of Pekarín know what you are. Why antagonize them further?”

Jhan faced Rehn squarely. “You're one of them. I'm sure that you feel just as they do, don't you?”

Rehn became angry and uncomfortable and then shook his head as if it hurt him. “I don't feel like they do, the Gods know why! Maybe, it's because I've taken care of you all of this time? If anyone had suggested, before I met you, that I would ever like a creature such as yourself, I would have -”

“Busted them in the jaw?”

“Yes.”

Jhan smiled and leaned close, dark eyelashes shading pools of blue. “I like you too, Rehn,

but I can't hide here forever and I can't be something that I'm not. If your people can't accept -"

"At least pretend to be normal!" Rehn begged.

Jhan straightened, scowling. "I can't." He turned away, hands smoothing out his robe to hide his tension. "It's all for the best, Rehn. I'll get a job, and a place of my own, and then you can go back to your old life."

"I don't think that I'll ever live this episode down." It was hard to tell if Rehn was angry about that. Jhan turned, watching his face under its thatch of hair for a long moment, waiting. Finally, Rehn's eyes met his and the man smiled slightly. "People are probably thinking all sorts of outrageous things about us. I suppose it won't do much more harm if I keep being friendly with you? I mean, we've been together for months. I've fed you, cleaned you, dressed you- I won't say that I can accept what you are, but, we've gone through too much not to be friends."

Jhan felt a lump in his throat. He owed this simple farmer's son so very much, his life and his sanity. Impulsively, Jhan kissed Rehn lightly on one cheek. "Thank you, Rehn, for everything."

Rehn recoiled, wiping at his cheek. "Jhan, you mustn't do things like that! It isn't proper!"

It was such an abrupt rebuff, that Jhan colored first in embarrassment and then in anger. "Proper? To hell with what you think is proper! I was just thanking you! If you can't accept that from me without your macho ideals being assaulted, then you can just - just, ohhh!"

Rehn sputtered apologies, but found he was speaking to empty air. Jhan was already striding out of the room and down the hallway, ignoring the looks of the women and children trading gossip and playing.

Jhan slowed when he came to the intersection. To the left was Pekarín Proper, home of the nobles and the king. Jhan paused there, gathering courage and cooling his temper. Why had Rehn chosen to be irritating on this day of all days? It was the day after Jhan had spoken to the king, a day in which he had impatiently waited for enough time to pass for orders to have been given by the king on his behalf. That was trusting that the king had been sincere, hadn't changed his mind, or hadn't forgotten. All fears Jhan had envisioned, over and over, during the night and the morning. It was why his temper had been so short.

So much depended on this! Jhan needed independence, not to be hanging on the charity and fickle moods of others. He meant Rehn, but Jhan refused to think it.

A ramp of stone led to a ramp of solid wood. People were passing single file on each side,

heads down and concentrating on their business. Two guards stood at the top, holding sharp pikes that glinted in the sun. They looked uncomfortable in their dress uniforms of red velvet and they scowled at everyone that passed. Behind them, was a dark arch of stone that led to Upper Pekarín. It was guarded by a spiked gate of thick iron, and Jhan could just make out the glinting of other gates set intermittently down the short tunnel.

Be calm, Jhan told himself, and took a deep breath before trying to walk between the men. A pike stopped him, sharp point leveled at his belly. “Your name and your business,” a hulking blonde demanded, blue eyes keen and suspicious and face red with sun.

Jhan swallowed. “You know my name,” he replied softly, moving a little aside so that other people could pass.

“Yes, the thekling!” the grizzled, older soldier spat. His gray beard jutted out with his chin. “General Vek released you. Why haven't you returned to Sarvoy and the pleasure dens where you belong?”

“If anyone says that again, I swear I'll -” Jhan exploded and then bit down on the rest. He leveled his blue eyes at the two guards and told himself to stay calm. “My business is my own and doesn't concern you!” He thrust the pike out of his way and felt a momentary darkness where he actually felt a violent urge to grab it. Red coats and sharp steel. Jhan forced it down with an effort, breathing hard. “The king told me to meet with his chancellor. That's all that you need to know.”

Traffic had stopped and people chuckled, looked amazed, or appeared angry. Jhan strode between the two guards, soles slapping on stone floor. A chill crept down his spine and he refused to glance behind him. No one prevented him from going on. Perhaps they believed what he had said about the king.

The air was cool in the tunnel, a breeze whistling through. When it opened out into a courtyard full of sun, the light and the heat were soothing.

The courtyard was of a yellow stone. High balconies were decorated with wrought iron in fanciful designs, yet the bottom of each balcony was protected by spikes, pointing downward to stop anyone from climbing onto them from below. Flower planters, full of multicolored blooms, were everywhere, and two entire trees were potted and set towards the center of the courtyard.

There were three arched doorways. From the smell and sound of one, it was a courier stable. The other two were identical. Jhan stood in indecision, letting several people pass, before he gathered

the courage to step in the way of a blue clad young man with a lightning bolt embroidered on one shoulder. The youth bowed at once, eyes lowered.

“Milady?”

That was a good start. Jhan shyly asked directions. “I have an appointment with the Chancellor, but I don't know the way.” He tried to control his voice so that it lacked its male pitch. The result was low and sultry.

The boy was more than helpful, leading Jhan personally down a hallway with high ceilings and marble floors. Tapestries hung from whitewashed walls and the light was intermittent oil lamps of expensive looking glass. Everything shouted wealth and position.

The people who passed them were well dressed servants and lords and ladies in silks, furs, and sparkling jewels. The men wore simple tunics, hose or pants, and boots. In sharp contrast, the women were outrageous peacocks in layered petticoats and flowing dresses. Adorned with glittering hair ornaments, their hair was teased into fantastic styles. They looked down their noses at Jhan's simple robe, affecting shock behind delicate fans and tittering as they passed.

Jhan touched his hair and his robe self-consciously. He thought that the way that they were dressed was ridiculous and confining, but that was fashion here and that made them female.

Jhan tried to picture himself in shimmering blue silk and curls pinned up on his head until it formed a peak. Jhan studied the straight back of the youth walking before him. How many people here would realize that he was a man under it all? Probably only the servants who lived in Lower Pekarín, Jhan guessed. Jhan was certain that the gossip had introduced him to everyone there. If he managed to avoid them, perhaps he could pass himself off as female?

The servant stopped at an ornate oak door. A bird had been carved into the dark wood, like a ruffled rooster, and a ring of flowers and wheat had been carved around that. It was an emblem of office, Jhan surmised. The servant knocked politely and then bowed to Jhan.

“Thank you so much,” Jhan said with a nervous smile.

“At your lady's service.” The servant was green eyed, his mousy hair cut severely short. He blushed, awkward, and bowed again before taking his leave, as if he wasn't used to courtesy from anyone.

The door opened on a page boy. He had a heavy build and his eyes were mean under straight black hair. That hair was cut as if he had placed a bowl on his head and trimmed around the rim. He

wore purple velvet with the same emblem embroidered on the breast that adorned the door. His eyes swept Jhan rudely up and down.

Jhan's humor died. "I'm here to see the Chancellor. The king said that I should -"

"His Majesty, the King!"

Jhan blinked at the loud voice that came from within the room. "Yes," he replied uncertainly.

"He is addressed by His Majesty, or other such terms of respect!"

"Oh, I didn't know." Jhan chewed on his lower lip and tried to peer past the boy.

"Let him in, Krael!"

"Him?" The boy narrowed eyes at Jhan and then looked disgusted as he stepped aside. Jhan cautiously moved past him into the room.

A large window, that was almost the length of the farther wall, let in light that gleamed on the surface of a huge desk, and illuminated the papers and books strewn all over it. Chairs were placed haphazardly everywhere and thick carpets were worn from many feet. Behind the desk, sitting in a high backed chair, was a dark skinned old man in a purple robe. He had thick white eyebrows and white hair that hung in wisps on an almost bald head. He chewed on the feather end of a quill and glared.

"I'm Jhan," Jhan found himself mumbling. "I -"

"I've been informed," the man snarled, cutting him off. "I am Chancellor Thaos Sateon, not an employment and housing clerk. To say that I am offended..." He shuffled papers and brought out a sealed envelope. "Positions in Pekarín Fortress are almost hereditary. Finding you any type of work was nearly impossible, so I won't ask you what your talents are. You will take what you are given. I also won't state the obvious, that you should make yourself look less of a thekling. Your position will offered pending Master Cook Leren's approval. I am most certain that he will not accept you like that!"

Chancellor Thaos pushed the sealed packet, and a slip of paper, towards Jhan. Jhan picked them up, finding himself glaring back at the arrogant man. "The slip of paper has the number of your apartment," Thaos explained. "It costs two copper a five day. You will be making four copper a five day if you are accepted at your position. I don't think that I need to tell you that if you haven't work you haven't a place to live?"

Jhan scowled now. "You don't need to speak to me that way. His Majesty, the king -"

"Has a weakness for oddities. He is a man who requires variety in his life and the life of a

king, unfortunately, has very little variety. You were a diversion and he rewarded you for the service. That reward is limited because I choose to make it so. If I treated every beggar as he ordered, Pekarín would be full of them! Now, take your good fortune and do as you wish. Good day!”

Jhan clutched the paper in his hand and choked back a reply. He held in his hand independence, however sourly given. “Where is my new job?”

“Krael will take you there. It's in the kitchen.”

Jhan nodded and turned to go. Krael followed and closed the door behind them. He pointed up the hallway and Jhan took the lead, walking thoughtfully and looking down at the sealed packet.

“You are a thekling, aren't you?”

Jhan felt a shiver go along his spine. “No, I'm not.”

“Like a little girl,” the servant snorted. “Bet you don't have *anything* under that robe.”

“What do you care, unless you're a thekling?”

The words were hardly out of Jhan's mouth before he was slammed against a wall with the servant's face pushed close to his own, hands at his neck. Jhan should have been terrified, but he felt a flame of anger and pain instead. His knee came up violently and the servant doubled over, hands on his crotch as he huffed and whined in pain.

“Stay away from me!” Jhan shouted and began inching along the wall to get out of the servant's reach.

Papers still clutched tightly in one hand, Jhan was shocked by what he'd done. Instead of collapsing like a maiden, he'd... Of course, the boy wasn't wearing red. Jhan was terrified of men in red, not obnoxious servant boys. He almost laughed in relief, suddenly feeling in control, when the servant looked up with fury in his eyes and began to straighten.

“You there!”

Both Jhan and the boy turned as a lady, dressed in yards of scarlet silk, came striding up to them. She was not young, nearly sixty, but her features were strong and her bosom firm, upheld by a tight corset that barely concealed the nipples. Her white hair was coiffed high like a tower and small bells tinkled among the curls. The servant bowed low.

“Princess Margeritte!”

The lady ignored him as if he did not exist. “Are you new to court, Lady -?”

“Jhan,” Jhan replied uncertainly. “Yes, I am new here.”

“And given to a clumsy servant who keeps his feet like a newborn imala? This is outrageous!” She spoke in a deep voice that boomed as if she could not hear how loud she was speaking. She made a flicking motion to the servant with her fingers and took Jhan's elbow, leading him away.

“But, Princess Margeritte, you don't under-” The servant began and then ceased when he was given a cold look. He bowed even lower than the first time and stalked back down the hallway. “Such rudeness in servants these days! I shall have to speak to my cousin, the king,” Margeritte promised.

She was the king's cousin? Jhan's eyes widened. “I'm grateful that you sent the boy away.”

Margeritte bent close, smiling and trying to see Jhan with nearsighted eyes. “We women must stick together! Now, which apartments will your beauty adorn? Hah? Or am I being an old fool and don't know how high ranking your family is? Come now, lady in waiting, or lady to be waited on? Which?”

Jhan pressed out the crumpled paper in his hand and looked down. “Neither, I'm afraid. I'm supposed to work in the kitchen.”

“That is injustice!” Margeritte scowled. “I will speak to my cousin and see about getting you something more befitting -”

“Please, no!” Jhan squeezed the old lady's arm anxiously. “This job will be fine for now, thank you. You see, the king himself gave it to me.”

“What an Insensitive buffoon!” Margeritte patted Jhan's hand. “Never fear. I can change that man's mind. Be patient a time.”

“Thank you, but you don't have to on my account. If you could tell me where the kitchen is, I'll be on my way.”

Margeritte smiled almost sadly. “You're a brave child. Follow your nose, if you're bent on this course, but remember what I said. Someone with your beauty shouldn't be a drudge working in the kitchens.”

Jhan shrugged, feeling a little piqued. “Someone has to cook the food, and since I may soon be performing that job, I don't think that I appreciate being called a drudge. It's honest work. All work is honest.”

Jhan had expected lords and lady's to be rich snobs, and the cousin of the king should have been the snobbiest. That she had stopped to help a plain girl in distress was odd enough, that she didn't get angry at Jhan's words was another miracle. Margeritte laughed. "Marvelous! I haven't seen the like of such temper since I was a girl! Good luck to you, Lady Jhan."

Margeritte turned quickly on her heel and almost swatted Jhan in the face with a flying red sleeve. Jhan staggered, recovered, and watched the grand lady float down the hall like a red wave, before turning into another corridor.

Follow your nose. Jhan took a deep breath. At once, he smelled cooking meat. Jhan walked to the end of the hallway and turned right. No, that was the wrong way, he discovered. He turned back and then went left. The smell became much stronger that way.

A door ahead of him flew open and a servant, dressed in blue and balancing a steaming tray of platters, rushed past Jhan. That was definitely the kitchen. Jhan stuffed the slip with his apartment number into a pocket in his robe, and held the sealed packet tightly as he approached the door with slow steps.

The door simply pushed open and Jhan refused to let his feet stop walking. He entered a room so full of heat and smoke that he choked. A fireplace ran almost the length of one wall where meat on spits was being turned by sweating men. Tables, overflowing with as yet unprepared meat, including haunches of animals with the hide still on them, chickens, and tins of flour, eggs, and vegetables, were being overseen by a horde of women with cutting tools and scrap bowls. No one paid Jhan any attention, and he stood stupidly for a long moment before a man turned abruptly and glared at him.

Jhan was given a swift impression of a slim man in a dirty apron. He had an expression of being both disgusted and astonished. He had only a few strands of greasy hair on an otherwise freckled bald head and his eyes were wide and twitchy. They twitched even more as he barreled down on Jhan.

"Get out!" the man shouted. "What does a *creature* like you want in my kitchen?"

"Are you Master Cook Leren?" Jhan kept his voice timid and respectful, refusing to shout back.

The man's astonished, disgusted look grew more pronounced. "You know my name and so must know that I have the authority to have you thrown into an oven! Now, get out before I do just that!"

Jhan lowered his eyes, took a calming breath, and then persisted, saying apologetically, "I'm

sorry that I'm upsetting you, Master Cook, but I have a purpose here. If you would please read this letter, it's from the Chancellor.”

The man snatched it away from Jhan as if Jhan could burn him. He opened the packet with thick fingers and scanned the message hurriedly. He grunted and reread it, scowling. “Master Cook Leren,” Leren read aloud in a snide tone. “So certain am I that you will refuse to give this thekling a position, I ask only that you see he is informed of it and dismiss him.”

Jhan went white and then scarlet, mouth open. All this for nothing! He started to turn and flee the kitchen, embarrassed, angry, and near tears.

“Wait!” Master Cook Leren thundered and Jhan froze, hardly daring to glance back. The man was still scowling. He crumbled the paper up and tossed it aside. “Knows me well, does he? Orders me, does he? Thekling?”

“Jhan.”

“What?”

“My name is Jhan.”

“Your name is what I say it is thekling!” Leren pointed to a sink overflowing obscenely with pots, pans, and kitchenware of all descriptions. “You settle in your place first, but first light you're here! Got that? You wash up! I don't care what perverted thing you are if you can do that well! Show up late, or not finish your work by sundown, and you are out, thekling! Got that?”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir!”

“Get out!”

“Yes, sir!”

Jhan turned and rushed out of the kitchen, grinning from ear to ear. He had a job! He took a few more steps before it hit him. He had almost groveled at that man's feet to be able to wash dishes! Yes, sir! Had he really said that with such gratitude? He was washing dishes for God's sake!

“This is the real world now,” Jhan muttered as he headed back for Rehn's apartment. “I don't have any choice.”

“Working in the kitchens?” Rehn was strangely impressed. “That's a good position.”

Jhan scowled and bundled up the few robes that he owned, all of them charity from Rehn. When he had returned to the apartment, it had been as if they had never fought. Rehn had weathered worse outbursts from him. “Are you just saying that because a king gave it to me?”

Rehn was incensed. He rose from his seat on the bed and drew on his boots as he said in consternation, “You are given a job, and a new home, and you complain? A good many people would give up their positions in the stables, or in the fields, for one inside where food was there for the taking!”

Jhan took a deep breath and held his clothes tightly. “I'm sorry, Rehn. I keep forgetting. Things are different here. I'm lucky to get what I have. I will do better in time.”

“Better? Unless you're a lord's son, you can't do any better.”

Jhan whirled on him. “What do you mean?”

Rehn sounded as if he were delivering a lecture when he replied, “Are you a lord's son that you don't realize that you're breeding determines what positions you are given in life? You may become Master Cook, if you choose, Horse Master, Hawk Master, but not anything more than that. Even then, it takes years of proving your worth.”

“I will do better, Rehn, whatever you say.”

Rehn only smiled, as if at a joke. “All right, *Lord Jhan*! Let's see your royal apartments before I go to my own duties with the Sahvossa.

“Jhan's expression tightened on pain. “Are you eager to be rid of me?”

“I only want to stop hearing my neighbor's complaints!”

Jhan growled, “You shouldn't mind what they say!”

“If I did, you would have been back roaming the forest,” Rehn replied quietly and Jhan nodded, mollified.

Jhan dragged out the much crumpled piece of paper and realized that he couldn't read it. A little embarrassed, he handed it to Rehn. “What does it say?”

“It's not a good area. It's for bachelors and they are not as good as these rooms.”

Rehn tossed the paper aside, and led the way out of the room and down the hall, long legs

taking easy strides. Jhan struggled to keep up and look dignified at the same time. He refused to scramble like a child after an adult!

The opposite end of the hall rounded several turns before it became noticeably darker. Heavy doors looked more like portals to storage rooms and the place wasn't the cleanest. The floor needed sweeping and pieces of unidentifiable matter were strewn every few feet. It was quiet too. The single men hadn't left their jobs, yet, and there weren't children to run down the halls.

The very last door to the left was where Rehn halted. Jhan felt a chill. It reminded him of a cell door and it was dark enough to be that other place. No! Forget it! Jhan turned the doorknob hurriedly and opened the door, so that he could see that it wasn't a cell.

A musty smell rolled out. Rehn coughed and squinted into the darkness. He went in first as Jhan hung back in apprehension, hands clutched in his robe. Glass clinked. There was a sharp, scraping noise once, twice, and then three times and then a small glow quickly turned into a flame on the wick of an oil lantern. Rehn stood poised over it, two stones in his hands, as he looked with mouth open at the room.

It looked like the room of a lunatic. The floor was filthy and bare of rugs. The fireplace had almost been gutted by a fire that had gotten out of hand. Words Jhan couldn't read were scrawled across the walls, dirty whitewash with black markings; coal perhaps. The bed was rope, tied across a wooden frame, no blankets, no pillow, and the mattress thrown aside and burned as if the last tenant had tried to snuff out the fireplace fire with it. There should have been a window, it was situated along the outer wall of the fortress, yet one was absent.

"You're not staying here," Rehn was firm. He took Jhan by the elbow and started pulling him from the room.

Jhan pulled away. "I am - I am staying. This is my home."

Chapter Six

(Gardens)

The brush slammed into the bucket, the filthy water sloshing alarmingly. Jhan rose, untying his robe from the knotted bundle above his knees, and leaned backwards until his back cracked, his knees feeling raw and burned from the soap that he had used to scrub the floor.

“Here we are,” Rehn announced wearily and laboriously dragged a small mattress through the open door.

Jhan hissed between his teeth in annoyance and pulled the sagging end up to keep it off of the wet floor. Rehn slid a little, regained his balance, and then pushed the mattress onto the rope frame of the bed.

Rehn did a long stretch that echoed Jhan's and smiled in delight as he looked around, squinting to see the clean floor and the new scrubbed walls. “Oil for the floor and a new coat of wash for the walls -”

“Save that for tomorrow!” Jhan protested and began making the bed with the rough sheets and blankets that Rehn had brought earlier. He fluffed the feather down pillow and then sat and tested the softness of the mattress. It was as hard as a rock.

“Free issue for newcomers,” Rehn said almost proudly. “Everyone is allowed the basics in the fortress.”

“Basics,” Jhan sighed and then shook his head, smiling. “Not as bad as it looked, eh, Rehn?”

Rehn was critical. “Fireplace is blocked and the floor buckles in places.” Jhan scowled and Rehn relented. “No, you didn't do so terribly.”

Jhan was ready to be proud of his accomplishments. His life had been turned upside down and made into a shambles, yet he'd managed this room and a job.

“You'll have to share the privy and the bathing room. They're down the hall,” Rehn reflected and watched for Jhan's reaction.

“I won't bathe with -”

“Didn't think you would,” Rehn chuckled and put hands in pockets, rocking a little on his heels. “You can use my room when you want to bathe, but I doubt that you would want to run all the

way down there to go to the privy. I can get you a chamber pot that might do for your modesty.”

“You're wonderful, Rehn!”

Rehn shrugged and turned for the door. “I'll see you next evening and we'll paint and unblock the fireplace. You won't need the heat in here for some time, but it will be good for extra light.”

“Thank you, Rehn,” Jhan replied, but Rehn was shy of gratitude. He picked up the bucket of dirty water and took it with him when he left, closing the door behind with a solid thud.

Jhan left the bed to throw the bolt. It was thick and strong. It should have made Jhan feel safe and confident, but the room was strange and close. His self-assurance began to evaporate now that he was alone. Jhan shivered at the shadows the oil lamp created with its flickering light; ghouls crouching, waiting for that small challenger to darkness to go out. It puffed fitfully, the wick old and uncertain.

He had his independence. Why didn't it make him feel stronger? Jhan felt a child suddenly, as young as his body pretended. He wanted the comfort of Rehn's familiarity, breathing as he slept on the floor amid tumbled blankets, as constant as a watchdog.

“Stop it!” Jhan snapped to himself and purposefully slipped off his sandals and pulled off his robe. The simple white wrap he wore about his hips came off last and, as always, he didn't look at what it had been covering.

Crawling under the blankets of the bed, Jhan winced at the scratchy sheets. They needed washing, but at least they were new and fresh.

Relax. Jhan considered being bold and blowing out the light. He stared at it, until flames danced on his eyes, and then rolled away from it in defeat and tried to sleep.

He was walking. She was walking. Looking down, Jhan saw Christine; heavy set body and large breasts. A forty-one year old body as nude as a newborn's, feet moving surely through the mist covering a forest floor. Forest floor faded and turned to storm clouds with a queasy ripple of reality. She was walking in the sky and thunder was rolling with a sound like a boulder rolling down a hillside; building and building and then fading away.

'She comes here at last, as you said,' a voice like rain, not heard with the ears, but heard with the body like a vibration. 'I cannot prevent her. The balance tips and even the gods are helpless. How can those of flesh have so much power?'

'Passion.' Another voice, light, like air, but tinged with danger as a darkened sky promises a

storm. 'They are filled with passion and we are cold beings.'

Like the thunder, the voices grew louder and louder and then passed away out of hearing. Christine's feet took her deeper into the clouds and then... She fell... Of course, you couldn't walk on clouds, could you?

Jhan sat up, choking, clutching blankets close. The oil lamp still flickered bravely and the room was sterile and still smelling lightly of cleaners. What time was it? Without a window, or anything approaching an alarm clock, Jhan was forced to get up, slip his robe over his head, and pad to the door. Throwing the bolt, he opened it slowly and peeked out. People were leaving their homes, rubbing sleep filled eyes and grumbling greetings to neighbors as they trudged down the hall. It was time for work.

Jhan finished dressing, running a hand through hair that needed washing and a comb, and sighed at the lack of both. His stomach asked about breakfast and he told it to be quiet. He didn't have money to buy food from the kitchens or vendors, and hoped that Rehn was right about being able to get food for free from his job.

Nerves on edge, Jhan went through the door and hurried through the crowd, trying not to be noticed. He kept low and never stood in the open, managing to reach the roadway to Upper Pekarín without anyone recognizing Rehn's madman.

Sunlight and open air. Jhan was able to stand in it for a full minute, as he waited to cross the span to Upper Pekarín, with the horde of servants going to their duties there. That brief glimpse of sun, and the feel of wind on his face, heartened him and helped him shed fears and uncertainties of the long night.

At last, he was able to slip between the two guards and hurry through the maze of corridors to the kitchens, following his nose mainly instead of relying on an uncertain memory.

Once through the kitchen doors, Jhan was assaulted by a wave of heat from the huge fireplace, and was almost choked by the flying flour the women stirred up as they kneaded dough for bread. Men prodded the coals to even higher temperatures, while others butchered meat and spit them to be cooked, blood up to their elbows. The mingled smells turned Jhan's stomach and thankfully banked his hunger.

There was a monolith of dirty kitchenware and dishes. Jhan approached it slowly in irritated horror. It had doubled in size from the previous day, as if not even the sharp tongued Master Cook could drive anyone to do it.

The sink was deep and shining steel, a drain leading somewhere out of the wall. A spigot tapped water from some source above. Hot? Jhan opened the spigot and boiling water poured out! He snatched his hands away, just in time, and had to grab a dishtowel to turn the flow off, the spigot having heated with the water.

Where was the soap? Jhan poked about a mound of dishes and worked out a bowl filled with something like pumice, a scrub brush stuck into it. Jhan touched it with a finger. It felt caustic and unpleasant, but, when he added some to the water, it smelled like pine needles. The smell was overbearing.

Jhan worked open the window over the sink and had a breath of fresh air. The window overlooked the forest. If his job was depressing, at least he had scenery to look at.

Jhan started washing slowly, working on plates crusted with food that must have been drying on them for days. Each cleaned dish he placed on the drying rack, opposite the dirty dishes, was immediately snatched away to be used. More dirty dishes were placed in the spaces he cleared. Jhan began washing faster, trying to keep ahead, unmindful of the caustic soap burning his hands along with the hot water. After a few hours, his eyes narrowed down to the sink as he went even faster, mindful of the Master Cook's words that, if he didn't finish before evening, he would lose his job.

Talk flew everywhere around Jhan, laughter, joking, gossip, but no one spoke to him and, when he did pause to look around, he saw only curious looks thrown his way that were full of disgust or blatant dislike. The men especially seemed hostile and he caught several crude gestures thrown at him. Nothing more was offered, luckily, but it kept Jhan from leaving his post or taking a break. By the end of the day, he was shaking with weariness. Constant restriction to a cell, or Rehn's rooms, had left Jhan soft.

Quiet drew about him like a cloak, the folds falling a little at a time until there was just the sound of the dishes and the water.

“Not done yet?”

Jhan started and spun, water flying. The Master Cook made a face as some of the water splattered him. The kitchen was empty, the coals banked and still glowing; everything cleaned up and tidy. Jhan turned his head to look at the remaining dishes. There were two pots, a stack of utensils, and a frying pan with a long handle tumbled together like conspirators.

“I-I,” Jhan stammered, “I tried...” and then louder, with anger, “I tried, damn it!” His blue

eyes were full of fury. “These dishes have been here for days! You can't possibly expect -”

“Oh, there's a spine in our little priss?” Master Cook grunted sourly, cutting him off. He glanced down and swore, suddenly grabbing hold of Jhan's hands. He turned them palm up. They were raw and bleeding. Dropping them just as quickly, he wiped his hands on his apron and began searching the room, muttering under his breath. He stooped at last and pulled a pair of oiled leather gloves from a bin of discarded greens. Disgustedly, he tossed them to Jhan who caught them awkwardly.

“Put those where they won't be stolen and use them, stupid thekling!” Leren admonished acidly. “Any child knows not to scrub dishes without them! Do you think this place a prison that we abuse our help?”

“No, I -”

“You did well. I had not expected you to finish, but you did more than I had hoped. You apply yourself better than the other fools in my employ. As long as you continue in that vein, it doesn't matter to me if you bed sheep!”

“I don't -!” Jhan started angrily, but Master Cook was striding away, as always not interested in what anyone had to say, especially Jhan.

The great, empty space of the kitchen echoed as Jhan moved to put the gloves under the sink. He discovered more dirty dishes hidden there along with a supply of the pumice soap. Jhan swore as he pulled them out and slammed them down on top of the others with a deafening clang of metal against metal.

Jhan's stomach gave a gut wrenching growl and his bladder reminded him it needed relief. There was a privy behind a door in one corner of the kitchen. Jhan had been afraid all day to pass the men and use it. He used it now, glad he wouldn't have to use the public one near his own rooms. That done, he washed his hands in the sink, groaning as it stung his open sores, and then ducked in his entire head and washed his hair, not bothering to take out the braid. It was late and Jhan didn't dare go knocking on Rehn's door to use his tub.

After drying his hair briskly on a towel, Jhan finished by washing his face and as much body as he could manage without undressing. By that time there was only the light of the coals, darkness having fallen outside like impenetrable velvet.

There was hardly enough light to see by as Jhan rummaged through a few bins for food scraps. Embarrassed to have sunk so low, Jhan gobbled down bread crusts and vegetable tops. It was all

that was left since most of the garbage had already been taken out. It sat uneasily in his stomach, unsatisfying to a man's body.

The walk back to his room was eerie. The usually bustling corridors were empty, lit dully by lanterns. It was like walking through a strange dream, all those open, deserted spaces, and it was a relief to reach his door, until he noticed that someone had left it propped open. Jhan shivered in trepidation, eyes wide as he cautiously peered in.

He exclaimed in surprise and laughed in delight. His room had been transformed! The walls smelled of new white paint and the floors reeked of lemon oil. The fireplace gleamed with brass scroll work, newly cleaned, and the grate was spotless, a fire burning cheerfully with wood in a bin close at hand. A woven carpet, stitched with some blue flower as a border, was a soft seat before the fire, and a comforter of sky blue adorned the bed. On a table by the bed, glowing with dark wood, lay a hairbrush, hair combs, and several dark ribbons that wouldn't be noticed if he bound his hair up in them. Beside these lay a meal of thick meat in gravy, a hunk of bread and butter on a large plate and a mug of something that smelled like spiced apples.

Rehn was absent, but the deed spoke his name in every caring detail. Jhan felt like crying for joy, thanking the same god he had cursed before for giving him such a friend.

Having a clean room raised Jhan's spirits. It was a haven now, a fortress within a fortress that belonged to him; proof against shadows and beasts, real or imagined, because some of them were real. It made it easier to bear with the future, even when that future turned out to be worse than he thought it could be.

Jhan's job was endless; grueling labor. He discovered that there weren't any days off. Food was cooked every day and dishes, therefore, were always dirty and in need of washing.

The new beasts in Jhan's life were the men that he worked with. They were able to take breaks and to use their free time to harass Jhan. At first, they had kept to insults, as if wary, but, little by little, they had seen that Jhan was afraid and they had grown bolder, only stopping short of actually laying hands on him. Perhaps, they feared the Master Cook, Jhan had thought, not discovering the real reason until he'd completed his second week.

He'd been staring off into the forest, following the shadows of the trees outside of the

window, cool breeze blowing in with scents of wood, smoke, and rotting leaves. Jhan's hands had been scrubbing absently at a stubborn grease spot fried onto a pan.

He felt a shove from behind. It caught Jhan by surprise and the force of the shove almost sent him into the tub of hot water. Jhan whirled with a pan in his hand to defend himself. He smelled reeking male body and found himself face to chest with one of the burlier meat preparers. The man was covered in fresh and drying blood. Jhan was rooted by terror, pan dropping from his shaking fingers as dark memories threatened to overwhelm him.

"Pretty ribbons in your hair," the man spat out, his breath stinking of onions.

Jhan had taken to tying up his hair with black ribbons, to keep it out of his way. The compliment had been dripping sarcasm and disgust. He barely heard it, in the grip of something that he could hardly have described, a feeling as chilling as skeletal fingers tracing his spine.

"Heard tell yer good with a knife, that you nearly killed a guard. True?"

The man's question had broken the spell, at odds with the nightmare that had been in Jhan's head. He became aware, all at once, that all activity had ceased. Every eye was on them.

"I... I was... ill. I'm not now. I don't do things like that anymore," Jhan replied uncertainly. A stray thought wondered if this had been why they'd been so hostile and distant.

"Good," The man grunted and his fist lashed out hit Jhan in the face. Jhan was slammed back against the sink. He fell to his knees, clutching his face and beginning to cry out, when the man's boot caught him in the ribs. Air rushed out of Jhan's lungs and he choked, overwhelmed by pain and fear.

Jhan heard laughter and crude jokes. Of course they didn't hate him because of what he had tried to do to a guard! They hated him because they thought he was a thekling! They had only kept from touching him because they had feared his retaliation. Jhan had foolishly destroyed his only defense!

"La!" a woman's voice said, dirty apron smell and female scent. Rough hands touched the swelling knot on Jhan's face. "Bullies! Hurt a man who's addled in the head would ya? Can't help he thinks he's a woman! Won't help ta beat on em either! Had a cousin like that once. Hit on the head and bam! Thinks he should be spinning an cookin' and women's work. Nothin' fer it at all!"

More laughter came from the men. "Get away, Bell!" a rough voice shouted. "He's a thekling! A pervert! We don't want the likes of him here!"

"Master Cook will have it in fer sure if he knows. No fightin'!"

“If he knows what's good, he won't say nothin' to Master Cook!”

“You be gettin' up, lad,” Bell said softly and Jhan felt her hand under his arm, pulling him up. He shook his head to clear it and was immediately sorry. It felt as if his face was separating into chunks of pain.

“Let go!” he hissed in pain and pulled away to lean against the sink, turning his back on everyone. “I'm not addled in the head and I'm not a thekling!” he shouted and hissed again as his shouting increased the pain. “If you think that I won't tell Master Cook -”

“Ye won't be!” Bell was short and gray haired, wrinkled face puckered like a raisin with two black coals for eyes. She poked that face around into Jhan's sight. “Master Cook'll get rid of the bully and the victim, so there won't be no more trouble! I don't care what ye be as long as ye do dishes and not me!” She showed him swollen, splayed hands that were all over callouses. “I been doin' it too long!”

Bell went away then and the others returned to their work.

Jhan was livid with anger. He wanted to walk out of there and never return. And do what? The more practical part of his mind wondered. He didn't want to go back to being a burden to Rehn. Jhan wanted his independence.

Jhan refused to look at the men, or hear what they were saying. Keep washing the dishes, he told himself as he picked up another pot to clean and ignored his pain. These men were amateurs compared to the evil men who had abused Jhan in the past. To keep his independence, Jhan was willing to withstand their crude efforts to force him to leave. He could only hope that the men had finished with their *fun* for now.

The next day passed without incident and Jhan began to believe that the men had just been asserting their masculinity, showing him how much he wasn't wanted there. When evening came on the day after that, without more than a crude exchange of words, Jhan's mood brightened, hoping that the worst was over. Still, despite not suffering any more attacks from the men, Jhan was still left wondering how much longer he could keep up the grueling pace of the kitchen. At the end of the day, he could barely muster the strength to walk the long distance back to his apartment.

There was a breeze, moonlight, and starlight. Jhan stood on the threshold of his room in amazement. There was now a window on the opposite wall that hadn't been there before! Jhan rushed to

it and touched it hesitantly, as if it might fade away like fairy magic. It remained solid, a sliding sash window of clouded glass smelling of freshly broken stone.

Jhan excitedly rushed to Rehn's apartment. Flinging the door open, he intended showering Rehn with his gratitude. His grateful words tumbled from his lips and then halted, replaced by a quick in draw of breath and a warm smile.

Rehn was asleep, sprawled over his bed fully clothed, powdered from head to foot in stone dust. Quietly, Jhan closed the door behind him and crept to Rehn's side. He bent slowly and kissed Rehn lightly on the cheek. "Thank you," he whispered and then started to leave.

A light was on in the bathing room. A sybaritic vision of a steaming tub of water greeted Jhan's eyes. Rehn must have fallen asleep before he could use it. Jhan felt his own dirty skin, glanced at Rehn, and then rushed to the tub, tossing off his clothes as he went. He stepped in gingerly, and then sighed, as he sank into watery luxury. Unbinding his hair, he washed it thoroughly.

Jhan could have stayed forever, letting muscles and nerves unwind. The world was perfect at that moment and all troubles evaporated in soothing water and steam. But, the water eventually cooled and Jhan was forced to drag his weary body from the tub and dry off, donning his clothes once more.

He paused at the mirror on the closet door, replaced without word of reproach or mention about how much it had cost. Jhan now knew how much that had been. He had tried to purchase a small one and the price had staggered him. He touched this large one appreciatively and then grimaced as he touched the swollen lump on the side of his face. It still looked ugly and would grow uglier as it colored and faded. It was a good thing that Rehn was asleep. Jhan wouldn't want him to see such a stark proof of violence against him.

Hair ribbons in one hand, and wet hair over one shoulder dripping on his robe, he left Rehn's apartment and returned to his own. Jhan met no one on the way, but heard laughter and talk behind closed doors. It made him feel lonely. How long had it been since he'd talked to anyone? There was only the dull repetition of each work day without any respite in sight.

Jhan entered his room, closed the door, and shot the bolt. He threw himself onto his bed. It was positioned under the window, allowing him to sit in comfort with his arms on the sill, staring out; longing.

Jhan had a good view of the forest. His room was facing in the same direction as his kitchen window. There was a small expanse of lawn before gnarled roots of trees, a veil of moss turning the

insides of the forest to an inky darkness that hid secrets from the illumination of the moon. In daylight, the forest had looked inviting; a haven. Now it looked eerie; forbidden; the home of the Sahvossa.

“You know who I am,” Jhan whispered to the dark. “You know what was done to me. Do you know who the Dark King is? Do you know how he took me from my world and forced me into this body? I'm a dishwasher! I wanted more from my old life! I never got it! Here I have a new life and I'm still the old Christine! Christine trapped in a man's body and still a failure!”

'You put limits on yourself.'

It was soft as velvet, yet full of bewilderment; an alien trying to understand a human. Jhan started back from the window, surprised, but there wasn't any Sahvossa on the forest edge and the voice did not speak again.

Jhan pulled off his robe and crawled under the blankets, thinking his weariness was making him imagine things, yet, deep down, he didn't believe that. He thought about the words. Were they true? Was he limiting himself because he was afraid of losing everything if he attempted to reach for more? Christine had wanted safety and security. Maybe, that's why she had always lost, afraid to try and lose what she had. Maybe, it was time to stop being afraid?

Morning light slanted into the window. Jhan lay and watched it, not making any attempt to rise until the birds started to sing and his blankets warmed with sunshine. It was almost sinful, the feeling of purposefully being lazy, as long as he ignored the growing alarm of his more practical self.

Jhan sat up at last, and stretched like a cat, before taking up a brush and patiently untangling the knots from his long hair. When it was flowing silk, he stood and took up a scarlet robe, the one that Rehn had given him after his release from the cell. It caught him tightly in the waist and almost gave him a shape before falling in soft folds to his feet.

Jhan ran white hands over his flat chest. He looked like a prepubescent girl and he clenched his hands into fists to keep from striking at his body in anger. Confidence! He needed confidence. He was a woman! The body that he had *was* a woman's!

Jhan slipped a hip slightly and his graceful body easily bent into a more feminine pose. It shouldn't have been able to. A young man's body was all planes and angles, ready to spurt with growth. This body was soft and rounded; as at odds with its gender as the mind was.

“Now we will see,” Jhan murmured.

Jhan moved gracefully through the halls to Upper Pekarín and few, even some who had often thrown insults, could keep from staring. Jhan wished at that moment for a mirror. Was he beautiful or ugly? You are a woman, he reminded himself. The body doesn't matter!

Jhan carried himself with chin lifted, challenging. It was a challenge, a challenge to these people and their notions of *'place'*. A challenge to anyone who thought that no one had the right to reach for what their mind could encompass.

The practical side of Jhan clamored nervously. What if this gamble didn't pay off? What if he lost everything? It was hard to ignore that little anxious voice, and far harder to not run for the kitchen and take up his job, hoping that no one had noticed his absence.

Jhan kept his feet in control with difficulty, and asked the way to Princess Margeritte's apartments. Jhan was given directions doubtfully by suspicious people, wondering his business. Three corridors, and a flight of stairs later, though, he was surprised not to find guards, ready to stop him. He was free to enter the richly carpeted hallway that led to the princess's apartments.

Statues of water nymphs, and vases full of flowers, sat in wall niches. The walls themselves were fine, white marble, reflecting the morning light which streamed in through intermittent windows. Margeritte's door was a deep, blue painted wood carved into the likeness of a flower.

Jhan used a brass knocker, shaped like a flower, and then clasped his hands together to hide their nervous shaking as he waited. Margeritte might have found out that he was a man, doubt whispered to him. She might have forgotten all about him! Maybe-

The door opened and a prim, snub-nosed maid peered out suspiciously, sweeping Jhan up and down with dark eyes. Jhan saw recognition there and dawning disgust. He held up a hand so that the closing door met with its resistance.

“I wish to see Princess Margeritte.”

“She doesn't wish to see you!” the maid exploded, her words running together in her outrage, “Who do you think you are, you-you, perv-”

“Minsa, who is at the door, child?”

“No one of consequence, Highness,” Minsa replied. “I am just sending *it* on its way!”

“Whatever are you talking about? Let whoever it is in, child!”

Minsa scowled and opened the door. Jhan hurriedly entered, before she could change her mind and disobey, and then stopped uncertainly. The room that he had entered was full of women in great flowing dresses of varying quality, all sitting like puffed flowers on chairs. The room itself was an extravagance of golden curtains over great windows, plush carpeting, and huge wall tapestries of stiff ladies lounging in gardens. In the center of it all sat Margeritte, in a profusion of royal blue silk, hair being done up by a woman standing behind her, who had so many pins in her mouth that she looked like a pincushion.

Rheumy eyes fell on Jhan, distant and almost confused. Jhan's heart sank. She didn't remember!

“My name is Jhan. We met several weeks ago, remember? Your cousin - His Majesty the king, gave me work in the kitchens. You said that if I wished, I could be employed by you instead.”

There were giggles among the looks of outrage. Minsa was whispering behind Margeritte, informing those who didn't know just what Jhan was. Shocked expressions sprang up like a wave.

There was the heavy scent of flowers everywhere. Jhan identified three types that he had seen in the forest before Margeritte moved. She smiled and a light was in her eyes that Jhan didn't comprehend. “You truly wish this?”

The question could have meant anything, shallow or deep, understanding or senility. “Yes,” Jhan replied to every meaning and Margeritte rose, flicking fingers at what Jhan was wearing. Next to the other women he was very plain.

“You will dress properly then. As my maid, you will go to the dressmakers and purchase three gowns on my account, but I will not tolerate overindulgence in fashion.

Jhan felt a flush of gratitude, until Minsa began pulling on Margeritte's sleeve, looking as if she were tugging on a tigress's tail. Margeritte turned to her impatiently.

“Highness, don't you know what he is? That isn't a lady!”

“And neither were you when I took you under my wing, Minsa!” Margeritte snapped back and pulled away. “You don't have any right to insult anyone. If I wish maids other than the daughters of highborn women, then that is quite my business!”

“No, I meant -” but another flick of those fingers silenced Minsa. She simmered behind her mistress and, if her eyes were daggers, Jhan would have been dead.

“I expect all of my maids to attend me four out of a five day,” Margeritte continued, as if she had never been interrupted. “The last day is for your own amusement. Remember that what you do reflects on me. Any impropriety will be dealt with severely. Now, you may consider this your free day and count your five days from today, since I can't have all of my maids free for a day.”

“Thank you!” Jhan replied in gratitude. “Thank you so much!”

“Enough!” Margeritte laughed and dismissed him with yet another flick of long fingers, turning her attention back to her hairdresser. “Now, more lift! I want curls like Lady Tessali!”

Heart beating like a drum, and cheeks flushed with triumph, Jhan was almost dancing as he searched for the dressmakers. No more dirty dishes to wash! No more fear! No more Master Cook! New dresses! Real dresses! Not robes that were an unwilling concession to the propriety of other people!

The dressmaker's shop was, of course, not far from the ladies quarters. An opulent room, it was lined with already made dresses of every fantastic description. As soon as Jhan entered, he was confronted by a skinny man with tape measure in hand. He bowed low to Jhan, but eyed him as if he were already measuring Jhan's body.

“Can I make a dress for milady? I've a new order of seed pearls just come in and fine lace sewn by a Kalesne daughter.”

Jhan took a deep breath and then held it a moment before letting it out, calming his nerves and attempting to think clearly through his happiness. He knew he was glowing and he felt like a little girl in a candy shop.

“I am a new maid of Princess Margeritte,” Jhan finally managed to say. “She told me that I could choose a few dresses -”

The man smiled, obviously seeing cash flowing into his hands. “Of course, Lady. . .?”

“Jhan.”

“Lady Jhan. I've often fitted Margeritte's maids. She likes them beautiful. The high ladies vie with one another for the most beautiful maids. You must be a feather in her cap with your face! Come with me and I'll help you select dresses that will most please her.”

“Thank you.”

Jhan smiled as his hand was taken by the tailor. The man led him about his shop, pointing to one dress after another and extolling their richness. It was only with an effort that Jhan remembered what Margeritte had said about nothing too grand. Jhan reluctantly turned down one glittering gown after another. The tailor began to show annoyance, but he remained gracious, even when Jhan chose three of the simplest gowns that he had and some underthings to go with them.

“Now, we will fit you properly with them...” the tailor began, but Jhan took a step back and colored. The tailor misunderstood. “No need to be shy. I have a woman who can do the measuring.”

“No,” Jhan was firm, trying to find the right words to keep the man at bay, yet not reveal his sex. “I’m straight up and down. It doesn’t matter how you nip and tuck those gowns, it won’t change that.”

The man smiled sagely. “Do you imagine that there hasn’t been other woman with such a problem, milady? I have things that will help you.” He made curving motions with his hands and then took Jhan to a bundle of white corsets with shaped bone stays. “They could even make a man look like a woman!” the tailor chuckled.

Jhan looked hard at him, but the man was only joking and hadn’t guessed what Jhan was. “Then shape your gown to one of those,” Jhan replied with a sigh. “I’ll pick them up in a few days.”

“For milady, they will be done in one night!” the man assured him and smiled broadly. “I will not have a better advertisement than to have such beauty as yours wearing my gowns!”

If he only knew what would be wearing his gowns, Jhan mused, and thanked the man again before taking his leave.

It seemed wrong to have put the dresses on Margeritte’s account, even though the woman had said to. It seemed too much like charity. Jhan didn’t dwell very long on it. It was much better to think of what he would look like in a tailored dress rather than how he had acquired it.

Jhan stopped, waking from his reverie, to find King Tekhal standing before him. The king was wearing scarlet as well, his feet in soft boots and ruffles at neck and wrist. A simple, circlet of gold glittered on his brow and his eyes were brooding underneath.

Jhan felt sharp uneasiness, but he managed a small smile and a lifted eyebrow. “Morning, your Majesty.”

“Have you found a respectful tongue at last, madman?”

“No, I was merely schooled in how a lowly dish washer should address the king.”

“Dish washer?” The king didn't understand for a moment and then he realized. “Is that what my chancellor gave you?”

Jhan put hands on hips and cocked his head. “You didn't know? He also gave me the worst room in the fortress and told me that I was lucky to get that!” The king was tall. Jhan tried to stretch a little to gain some height. “I suppose that I shouldn't complain, being destitute, but I thought that you would treat me better!”

The king looked as if an egg had hit him squarely in the face; utter shock. Jhan felt a moment of uncertainty. He'd only wanted to voice his displeasure and release all of the pent up anger that he'd felt over the past weeks, but in doing so, he'd forgotten that before him wasn't any ordinary man. Tekhal had power, power to do as he pleased.

Swallowing hard, Jhan tried to recover, adding lamely, “It doesn't matter now. I've gotten a better position on my own.”

“Oh?”

That was forced out tightly by a man deciding to hold his temper to see what was forthcoming.

There was nothing for it but to go on, even though the king looked like a storm ready to break.

“I went to your cousin, Margeritte,” Jhan told him cautiously. “I asked for a position as her maid. She accepted me and gave me some new dresses on top of that!”

The storm broke. A hard hand closed on Jhan's arm and he struggled, letting out a little cry, as the king forced him out through a side door that led onto a balcony. Blue flowers cascaded over the railings amid lush foliage, and a singing bird had been set in a cage off to one side to catch the morning sun. The balcony overlooked another garden full of flowering plants. Jhan saw none of it, all of his attention on the king and fearful of what Tekhal intended.

“I allowed you a free tongue just now, to see how far you would go! I never imagined this!” King Tekhal took a harsh breath and pointed a stern finger. “You will not be a maid to my cousin! The scandal would ruin her! She cannot have a man, dressed as a woman, as part of her entourage!”

Jhan tried to stay calm, speaking in a soft tone, reasonable. “I won't cause a scandal! No one thinks that I prefer women, I'm sure, since I want to be one myself.”

The blow almost sent him backwards over the railing. Jhan stumbled, and sank to the floor,

as the world shattered and then rearranged itself into an ache that centered on his jaw. He was stunned at first and then he couldn't keep from crying.

Tekhal said sternly, "If you thought that you could speak so freely with me, you have just discovered otherwise."

The king's roughness only caused Jhan to cry harder. He felt weak and foolish, but he was unable to stop the tears or the anger that was overwhelming him.

"Stop crying like a woman!" Tekhal demanded. "What manner of creature are you? Who raised you to be like this? What Father -"

His tirade ceased and there was a moment of silence. Suddenly, the king sighed and there was the sound of knee joints popping as the king crouched down. Firm hands took hold of Jhan's shoulders and gave him a gentle shake. Jhan's eyes cleared of tears. The king's face was close. Just close enough. Jhan slapped it as hard as he could.

Tekhal jerked back in shock, one hand on his reddened cheek. "You hit me!"

"You hit me first, you bastard!"

The king stared. Jhan felt as if there was a balance in the king's head, tipping this way and that. Why had he hit the king? Jhan started to speak, to maybe apologize, though he wasn't sorry. The king forestalled him.

"Your face is bruised, but not from my blow."

Jhan swallowed and lifted his chin, anger beginning again. "They didn't like me in the kitchens. One of the men hit me." It was suddenly easy to look the man in the eyes. Jhan had something to fight for, after all. "Even if that hadn't happened, I would still have left. I want more out of life than scrubbing dishes."

Tekhal didn't become angry in return. He seemed bewildered, instead, as if he feared this was some dream and that a young man, who was a nobody, wasn't saying such things to him.

"I've told you what I wish and yet you fearlessly tell me what *you* will do!" Tekhal said. "Perhaps, time in a cell might teach you the penalty of speaking so to a king!"

Jhan went cold and still and then managed a reply in a trembling voice. "Will you have your men come and torture me as well? I was already given *that* lesson."

Dead silence. The king's eyes dilated strangely and he seemed not to know what to say. What

in their conversation had brought out such an ugly response? Was it a memory that Jhan had fervently tried to suppress? Only the fear of being locked up, perhaps, but the king hadn't sounded serious, just testing.

Jhan tried to recover, to leave that ugliness behind. "Does everyone do what you say?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," That reply was low and quiet, almost absent minded.

"Well, I'm not going to." Jhan tried to be firm. What would happen next depended on it. "I'm afraid of you, I won't lie, but I'm also angry enough, and determined enough, not to let you order my life! I am not going to wash dishes and be content. I am not going to be grateful for anything I am given and settle for it without looking for better, even if you do lock me in a cell because of it!"

The king straightened and stood up. "I'm sorry that I hit you. That was an inexcusable loss of temper." He glanced about them as if the world had tipped under his feet and he was having a hard time finding his balance again, yet he seemed to have worked something out in his mind. "You truly want to dress in women's finery and work as a maid?"

"Yes."

"No." That was final, an edge to Tekhal's voice. "As you are dressed now, is somewhat acceptable. Men wear robes, though ones not so... feminine. If you keep to this mode of dress, and promise that you will never be anywhere near Margeritte, accept when she is surrounded by her maids, then I will allow this. You will be as a page to her."

"No." Jhan balked at any restraints put on his life.

"Then you had better return to the kitchen."

Jhan simmered and then saw sense. He nodded reluctantly. "You will have to explain to her why I won't wear dresses -"

"I? My cousin is somewhat senile. If she believes you are a woman, I will not disabuse her of the notion. She would die of embarrassment! Tell her that you are modest and she will believe you."

Jhan stood slowly, brushing dead leaves and flower petals from his robe. Out of the shadow of the railing, the sun touched his unlovely bruises harshly.

"Jhan..."

Jhan raised blue eyes to the king's gray ones. The king looked uncomfortable.

"Yes?" Jhan prompted, fearing another condition and more argument.

“Your room, the one the chancellor gave you.”

“Didn't give,” Jhan corrected sourly. “I rent it. It was a disaster, but I cleaned it up, with some help.”

“You are to remain there, I meant,” Tekhal said. “Pages and maids of royalty are privileged. They live in Upper Pekarín. You understand that it wouldn't be proper for you...”

That stung and Jhan felt an ugly flush; heat that burned from his head to his toes. “I guess that it wouldn't,” he bit back.

Tekhal pressed on. “It is best, for you. We do not blame the mad for their deeds, nor punish them, but your madness offends. It's best that you stay among simpler folk who haven't the power of lords and ladies to order you harmed for that offense.”

“Simpler folk don't order things like that done. They do it themselves,” Jhan returned acidly. “But, I won't argue. I've become attached to that room. I don't want to leave it.”

Tekhal turned commanding again, wanting to be very clear. “I am doing this, because I think that you deserve some kindness after what was done to you, but don't mistake my kindness for weakness. You are a page to my cousin and you will act in the honorable fashion that position entails. Step out of the bounds of propriety, but once, and I will see you dismissed.”

Tekhal turned then and left Jhan without another word, much like the Master Cook; as if he had ceased to be of importance. Irritating, but Jhan shrugged it off, to replace it with relief and satisfaction. He'd gotten what he'd wanted, against all odds.

Chapter Seven

(Roses)

“You're what?”

Rehn had been sitting at his ease in a chair, feet planted on a lower open drawer of the writing desk as if it were a footstool. Sunlight from the window bathed him and his apartment, but an errant cloud covered the sun just as Rehn sprang out of his chair, booted feet hitting the floorboards with a bang! His face, full of shock, was highlighted oddly by the sudden shadows.

“Maid to Princess Margeritte,” Jhan repeated and felt a moment of apprehension, though he knew Rehn was as gentle as a lamb and would never hurt him. “The king reacted the same way when I told him, but I said -”

“The king knows?” Rehn's voice was strangled and he grew very pale. “He'll have you executed! The shame - the insult! Do you wish to die, you fool?”

Jhan swallowed. He'd thought the battle won, not having expected this reaction from Rehn. “The king wasn't that unreasonable! He was startled, at first, but he came around to it after I argued a little.”

Rehn fell back into his chair with a hand to his forehead. The chair rocked with the force before landing on all fours. Rehn became very quiet, eyes bewildered.

Jhan faced him now, twisting the end of his long braid in slim hands. “Rehn, what was I to do? Let him send me back to the kitchens? I don't know why you're acting this way! We just shouted a bit, and argued, and then everything was fine.”

“Shouted, argued, with a king?”

“Yes!” Jhan scowled impatiently. “Rehn, he is just a man! He may have a lot of power around here, but I can't believe that he'd send guards and have me executed just for disagreeing - will you stop looking frightened?” Jhan leaned forward, hands on the arms of Rehn's chair, face very serious. “I wouldn't let him hurt you, Rehn!”

“Jhan...” Rehn rubbed his face briskly as if trying to awake from a bad dream. “The king is not just a man! He has total power! He could have ordered - can order your death without any reason! I can only think that he let you live because he pitied your madness! As to why he is allowing you to

serve his cousin... I am at a loss!"

Jhan straightened stiffly, smoothing the front of his robe. "I won't live in fear. Sometimes, you have to make a stand, Rehn, even though you might die for it. I have rights, everyone does, and not even a king can take them away!"

"You are a man in a dress who thinks he's a woman!" Rehn exploded, flinging his arms wide in exasperation. "What rights do you have?"

"I have the right to be a man in a dress! The right to live as I please! The right to do what I am capable of, and not to be forced to do menial labor, because I wasn't born between silk sheets! Rehn, how can you allow it? How can any of you allow it?"

Rehn was pale. "Did you say any of this to the king?"

"Yes, I did say something like that."

"And he didn't mind?" Rehn was shocked again, some inner image of the king crumbling.

"Of course he minded!" Jhan forced down his temper, trying to reason. "We shouted back and forth and he hit me, he was so angry."

"I wondered about the bruise."

"The one underneath was done by a man in the kitchen. It's another reason why I wanted a job change. I'm afraid that I won't be such a beauty until they fade."

Rehn caught onto his last sentence and was very frank. "Do you really think that you could have gotten away with any of this if you weren't beautiful?"

Jhan snorted and crossed arms over his chest. "The king is married. I hope you aren't saying that he's fallen in love with me?"

Rehn frowned, managing to look uncomfortable and indignant. "No! Don't insult the king! I merely meant that, if you were like other young men, big and gawky with a sprouting beard, I dare say no one would tolerate you, let alone the king. It's hard to think of you *as* a man. Perhaps, the king forgot that you were. It would explain-

"He knows what I am!" Jhan shouted back, feeling the sting of truth. His hands went into fists. They were such small hands. How pale and elegant they were. Like the hands on a china doll. If they tolerated him because of his small body and fair face, what would they do when his body started turning into a man? What would he do? His thoughts turned dark and something stirred deep down that

had been sleeping.

“I'm trying to make you understand,” Rehn persisted. “I don't want to hurt you, but you must realize that, sooner or later, you will have to accept that you aren't a woman! The king will come to his senses! Margeritte is senile, but even she will come to realize! This mad position as her maid is a fantasy! Accept it now, and save yourself from a fall!”

“Margeritte isn't senile! She's kind. I don't think that she would ever -”

“Margeritte is very senile and everyone knows it!” Rehn was stern. “When you fall - even before, you will embarrass her before the court!”

Jhan paced the floor, angry. “If she is senile, they won't blame her if her poor judgment caused her to make a man one of her maids, besides, the king said that I'm to be a page. She must have many male pages!”

“She does, to fetch and carry for her.”

“Then, there isn't any problem, is there?”

Rehn threw up his hands. “I'm just a farmer, Jhan! I haven't any skill in argument. I can only tell you plain truths! What you have gained through boldness, you will lose! I just hope that you don't lose your life as well!”

Jhan turned away. “I won't argue about this anymore, Rehn! Do you really expect me to wash dishes all of my life just because I might fail?” Christine's logic staring him in the face! It was time to stop making that mistake. Only reaching out and taking chances would get him anywhere. “I'll do my best not to embarrass Margeritte or anger anyone, but I'm afraid that I make a habit out of angering people.”

“You even anger the king.” Rehn quieted and his fear seemed to run out of him. He looked bemused. “He really agreed to this?”

Jhan relaxed. The argument was passing. He slid blue eyes at Rehn and smiled a little. “He feels sorry for me. He has a heart, I'll give him that!”

Rehn suddenly chuckled, wonder on his face. “You're a page to Princess Margeritte! You do realize that such a position is usually reserved only for highborn people?”

Jhan shrugged. “Think it will impress the neighbors?”

“Confuse them, more likely. I know it confuses me! At least you won't have any more

trouble with them. They wouldn't dare harm a page of Margeritte's!"

"Let's hope so," Jhan replied and then stretched as if he'd just completed a hard task. "Well, if you're through criticizing me, I think I'll go out and have some sunshine and exercise. Join me?"

"Criticize you? I'm not your father, gods be thanked, just a worried friend." Rehn stood slowly, running his fingers through his thatch of hair. "I think that I'd rather go to the square, have some talk, and maybe a game of dice."

Jhan had a thought and faced Rehn squarely. "Does it bother you, being seen with me?"

Rehn's face clouded. "I've been called names, and someone insinuated that we were - well, I punched the man out, telling him his daughter knew very well what sex I preferred!" Jhan laughed, but still felt uneasy. "I told them that you were... ill... addled in the head. That's what I believe, anyway. I told them that it was my duty, as a good man, to see you looked after until you came to your senses. Many of them believed that or you'd have had a great deal more trouble living with the bachelors as you do."

Jhan sobered. "I wondered why most of them ignored me. I suppose it's easier to think a crazy man lives near you than a thekling."

Rehn nodded and then made a confession that seemed hard for him, said roughly as if it weren't of any matter to him. "The Sahvossa told me to stay friends with you and to take care of you, but, I would have anyway, I think. Strangeness aside, you're very easy to like, Jhan."

Jhan smiled brightly, "So are you Rehn," and then, quickly, to diffuse Rehn's embarrassment. "I'm going to go now. I haven't had time to myself for two weeks!"

Jhan felt drained after the excitement of the day, and it was good to find a secluded garden, full of flowering bushes and well-kept pathways of crumbled stone. A statue of a leaping animal pointed the way to an ornate bench near a low wall. Looking over the wall, Jhan had a good view of the circles of sand where the soldiers trained. Most were bare to the waist, struggling to beat each other senseless with wooden swords or staves. Jhan saw a few faces that he knew and Vek overseeing everyone.

There was a flash of gold. The sun spun into hair. Jhan's eyes were caught, riveting on one man. *Adonis* was the only word for him. His gold curls were ringlets to his shoulders, some catching in sweat along a strong face. Mobile lips were gritted fiercely and a rock hard chin was jugged, like a battering ram, towards his opponent. He had blue eyes like Jhan's, but whereas Jhan's were deep blue

wells, this man's eyes were open clear skies under golden eyebrows. He wore brown pants tucked into soft leather boots, a knife hilt sticking from the top of one. His white shirt was down around his waist showing off a broad chest, strong arms, and a lean waist.

The *Adonis* defeated his opponent easily, shook his hand after, and turned, laughing at some jest thrown from the sideline of men. Something caught his eye, maybe Jhan's scarlet robe against the white flowered bushes behind him. Whatever it was, he looked up and both of them froze as their eyes met. Jhan had wondered, doubt filling long nights, whether the body he had was attracted to women and what he would do if it were. That question was answered. Jhan felt an overwhelming emotional desire for the man.

The blonde man handed his practice blade to another soldier, wiped his face with a towel, and, with a last look up at Jhan, walked away from the practice field.

Jhan felt almost pain when that figure vanished, followed hard by sudden doubt and confusion. He was gay! Or was he? What he was feeling wasn't exactly physical desire and that was confusing in itself. Was he feeling the soul of Christine yearning towards this man? Was he gay if it did? Another thought. If the desire *wasn't* physical, and it turned out that the body wanted women, what would he do then? Having the soul of a woman, would that make him gay as well?

Jhan put hands to his face and took a deep breath. He looked over the wall, wanting another glimpse of the man to help sort out his feelings. He didn't reappear. Jhan felt a hard lump settle about his heart. What did it matter what he wanted, physically or mentally? He was in the body of a man! He didn't want to love a man as a man.

Jhan hugged himself as he sank down onto the bench. What was his life going to be like if he couldn't be with men no matter what he pretended he was? The answer was that he was going to spend his life alone, confused, and a prisoner in his own body. It was a kind of hell that Jhan wasn't certain he could live with.

The darkness within Jhan took his moment of utter despair to attack, clawing its way up from his subconscious like a deadly snake. It took control of Jhan. He stood and leaned on the wall, looking down at the long drop below. What had been a sunny landscape, had transformed into a black whirlpool. From within it, eyes full of fire looked up at Jhan. A voice spoke to him, calling him a name that dropped like a stone into a well, quickly forgotten. The command after it was not to be denied.

'Kill yourself.'

“No!” Jhan shouted and jerked himself violently backwards away from the wall. He fell to the ground, his senses reeling. His hands ached where he had gripped the stone wall and he looked down at them in confusion. He had been going to jump! He knew it without a doubt!

“Damn you!” Jhan cursed himself, trying to gather his wits and understand. Was his sanity so fragile? First there was his attempt at suicide in the cell and now this? “Not ever again! Somehow, I am going to find a way to beat this, to make this hell bearable! Any life is better than death!”

Jhan stood up and forced himself to walk to the wall and look over. A comforting vista of green grass, sand, and struggling bodies met his eyes, not the horrific whirlpool.

“Not ever again!” Jhan repeated, challenging the darkness within him.

Working as a maid to Margeritte, turned out to be boring; each day much like the former. Jhan would sleep well into the morning before rising and going to Margeritte's apartment. There, he would help tidy the spacious rooms while proper maids helped Margeritte by serving her breakfast and dressing her. After an interminable time, Margeritte would appear with a fantastic hairstyle and a brightly colored dress made out of incredible amounts of silk, taffeta, and crinoline, and start her day.

That day mostly consisted of sitting about and sewing, or doing needlepoint, in one area or another of the palace. This was broken up only by the daily ritual of having refreshments with a privileged lady of the court. Then, while Margeritte and her companion talked, the maids would gather nearby and exchange gossip.

Jhan was excluded from their company, and often found himself far from everyone. That suited him. He didn't much like any of the other maids, and felt relieved when he didn't respond to any of them the way that he had to the blonde man in the practice field.

“I've been told that you are a man dressed as a maid.”

Jhan scowled, noticing a strange maid standing near, a fan of white feathers flipping nervously in one hand. Margeritte was having another tedious get together with a very old lady. She was shouting to be heard while attempting to keep her noble composure at the same time.

“How insulting,” Jhan replied firmly and would not even look at her.

“You dress oddly,” the maid continued with a sniff. “Princess Margeritte must be angry with you to stint your dress allowance.”

It had been painful to pick up the dresses, and the corsets, from the tailor and not to have been able to wear them. Jhan had settled for several flowing robes, in bright colors and feminine patterns, instead. They couldn't begin to match the richness of the other maid's clothing

“I was raised to be modest,” Jhan replied, hoping that she would settle for that explanation.

“Margeritte won't appreciate that. The ladies vie for the most beautiful maids in the fortress. It's a sort of contest, and they decide who's won whenever a large ball or party is held in the palace. There haven't been many lately, but the next one should be interesting. Lady Tayirri Demaggra Kalevor has gathered together the most beautiful women in Pekarín.”

Jhan shrugged. “I don't care about that. It all sounds pretty vain to me.”

The maid was shocked. “You had best care. Maids are discarded like day old linen to make room for prettier ones.”

Jhan frowned. Would he be discarded? Had he acquired his job on looks alone and not through Margeritte's kindness? Jhan took a slow look around at the other maids from under his lashes. They were all as brilliant and as beautiful as peacocks. It suddenly occurred to Jhan that the strange maid was trying to make him apprehensive by telling him all of this.

“I heard it from my father's manservant that you were a man.” The maid's voice had become barbed and Jhan finally turned to her. She was short, buxom, and dark eyed, with ruby colored lips. She continued, “I asked Margeritte's other ladies, but they wouldn't say anything. Why would a manservant think that you were a young man?”

Jhan was still new to the importance of position. Perhaps a higher position was gained by winning it? It might help the maid's chances if she could eliminate a rival by revealing that Princess Margeritte had a man as a maid and not a new beauty to show off. Jhan was astonished that Margeritte's maids had remained silent so far, but then again, they wouldn't want their mistress embarrassed. That embarrassment would be theirs as well.

“I'm not a man! How dare you insult me like this!” Jhan replied in a furious whisper. “I may not be shaped like you, but that hardly calls for -”

“All right, I'm sorry!” The maid cut him off quickly, looking nervous. “Don't let our mistresses hear you!”

“If you don't hold your tongue, mine will hear about this!” Jhan snapped back and turned away, angry. Things had been going smoothly up until then, no one remarking on his gender; mostly

ignoring him, now this. He was glad when Margeritte rose to leave and he was able to leave the maid behind. He didn't want anything disturbing him after the incident in the garden.

“It’s the madman!”

Jhan had been slipping through the crowd in the large square of Lower Pekarín on his way to Rehn's apartment to visit. As he turned to see who had shouted, a wise like hand took hold of Jhan's shoulder and propelled him till his back came up hard against a stone wall. A big hand hit the wall with its palm flat, just near Jhan's face. A very large man, with a balding head and small, black eyes, and dressed in the uniform of a palace guard, leaned in close. Jhan flinched fearfully.

“We don't want your kind here!” the man snarled, leaning in so that his shadow covered Jhan like the shadow of a mountainside. “Mad or not, you don't belong here! Our children see you! Our women! They don't need to be shown filth!”

The man had two friends behind him and Jhan recognized them from the kitchen.

“Let me go!” Jhan demanded, trying to keep his voice firm, but failing. “I’m not bothering anyone!” She said to the two other men, “I'm sick of your insults and your bullying threats in the kitchen. If someone should be gotten rid of, it's you! I'm sure the women and children don't need to see this kind of violence!”

The large man balled one hand into a fist and held it near Jhan’s face in a clear threat. “You will pack your things and leave Pekarín by morning. Understood?”

Jhan suddenly knew exactly what to say. She was the servant of a princess. In that place it was a weapon as powerful as that man’s fist. “I don't think Princess Margeritte would understand if I left, especially, if I have to tell her why I’m leaving.”

Their expressions became fearful. It emboldened Jhan. He pushed the big man's arm out of his way and he moved out of the man’s shadow. The man took a step back, stiff and uncertain, while his ‘friends’ abandoned him by disappearing into the crowd.

“I don't expect to have any more trouble,” Jhan warned. “I think the cousin of the king is capable of determining whether I should remain in Pekarín or not.”

Jhan went quickly into the crowd, before they could formulate a reply, and walked fast,

almost, but not quite, running. His heart was sinking. First that maid, and now these men, were giving him trouble. He only wanted peace and a chance to make a life. As long as they knew what he was, they would continue to make that impossible. Maybe, it would be better to save a little money and move elsewhere where no one would know? He would be able to carry on the disguise with more success.

Disguise. It was a disquieting word. It reminded Jhan that he was, in essence, attempting to fool himself more than anyone else.

Discarding the idea of seeing Rehn, Jhan sought the quiet of his own room. He found the door open. He paused, nerves tensing, and then crept softly forward. A man passed, lighting lanterns and filling others with oil. Two children began arguing as they left the apartment of some cousin or uncle bachelor, a small gift tugged between them, the bone of their contention.

Jhan slowly leaned around the door frame of his room. A man was picking up a cushion and tossing it onto the bed. He looked as if he had been pacing, wrapped in a dark cloak, hood pulled over his features.

“Who are you?” Jhan demanded and came out of hiding, indignation warring with caution. The figure lifted the hood and Jhan raised eyebrows in astonishment. It was Tekhal. The king motioned him into the room. He closed the door behind Jhan as if he feared someone might see him from the hallway.

The king discarded the cloak, sitting in the only chair; a rude affair of scuffed wood that still managed to hold the shape of a chair. “Be seated,” he commanded, but the only other seat was the bed.

“I think that's my line,” Jhan replied nervously. “It is my room.”

Tekhal frowned. “A king always sits first.”

“Even before a lady?”

“You are not a lady.”

Jhan frowned as well “We've already gone over that!”

He took a patient breath, gentle hiss between teeth. “I haven't come to argue,” Tekhal motioned crossly at the room, “and I did not come to clean your room. Either you are far from clean or someone has been here while you were away.”

Oh God! Jhan looked about. Things were out of place and there was a dent in the wooden floor as if someone had thrown the heavy bed over onto its side. Jhan closed his eyes a moment and then

opened them, stronger. "Thank you. I don't think I could have faced that just now."

"You must expect such things."

"I think I took care of the problem. Gossip hasn't gotten around to including the fact that I have become Margeritte's maid -"

"Page!"

"Page. Anyway, I informed a couple of shitheads out there in the square of the fact."

"Your speech is as indelicate as ever."

Jhan shrugged. "You never say things like that?"

"Not in company."

"It must be my low breeding."

There was a long silence. Jhan had been gathering enough courage to go and sit on the bed. He did so now, but remained tense and ready to stand again, prickling with distrust at being alone with a man he hardly knew.

"Why are you here?" That was blunt enough and patently another mistake where kings were concerned.

Tekhal tightened his grip on the arms of the chair.

"You intrigue me," Tekhal replied evenly and studied Jhan for a long moment, as if he were some strange animal. "You don't need to be frightened."

Jhan tensed, not having thought that he was so obvious. "You are a man. We are alone."

"What do you mean by that?"

Jhan shrugged like a nervous tick. What had he meant? Why was he afraid Tekhal might do something? He was a man, after all, yet... he wasn't thinking like one. Perhaps that was it. He was still judging situations with a woman's perspective. It made him smile a little, relax.

"I think I'm a woman, remember? Women have to be cautious in situations like this. I hardly know you, after all."

Tekhal replaced his look of disgust and irritation with one of understanding. "Rest assured that I would not compromise the honor of any lady."

Jhan sat more comfortably on the bed, beginning to trust. "So, pleasantries aside, why are

you here? Intrigue hardly seems enough cause for a man, like yourself, to visit.”

Tekhal's eyes became intent, leveled at Jhan's face as if to gauge his every expression. “I came to find out what you remember of your captors.”

It was like an unexpected slap. Jhan sat up straight, hands gripping the bedclothes tight. His voice came out small, but he was able to speak reasonably. “You’re by yourself? Why not send for me?” Tekhal didn't give any answer but that steady look. “Didn't Evian tell you everything? He knows as much as I do about what I remember.”

“Does he?” Tekhal sounded doubtful. “He told me a disjointed story that sounded more like a bad dream; unreal and beyond belief. I doubted that it was anything but a madman's delusion. Now, that you seem saner, and I would ask you to tell me what you remember.”

“I am trying, with everything that's in me, to forget!” Jhan felt a fierceness rise up in him and he was firm. “I won't remember for you or for anyone! Ask Evian again. He wasn't recounting a nightmare. It was all too real!”

Jhan could see Tekhal make an effort to stay calm. His eyes moved this way and that, as if looking over options, and then they rose up to meet Jhan's once again.

“Do you know where you were held captive? That is the main question I've come to ask. If you've been telling the truth, and I do have an enemy waiting to spring, I'd best know from what direction he will come.”

That wasn't too painful. Jhan frowned and made his fingers let loose of the blankets. “There were mountains outside the cell window. That's all that I remember easily. I won't dig deeper!”

Defeated, Tekhal sank into his chair, disappointed. “There are many mountain ranges.”

An image popped into Jhan's mind, blood on a white palm. Jhan jerked, blinking, as the vision seemed to overwhelm him and become real. There was another image of an overgrown garden of red flowers with thorns. Someone took hold of the hand and began sucking on the wounds. The hand was Jhan's.

“What is it?”

Jhan shuddered and the memory receded like a wave and was gone. It left him washed up in that comforting room, sitting before a man who was watching him with a worried expression one reserved for people who might be dangerous. “Red flowers with thorns.”

“Red flowers with thorns?” Tekhal echoed, raising his eyebrows. “I've never heard of such a flower.”

Jhan shook himself angrily. “That's it! Don't ask me anything else!” It felt as if something unpleasant had crawled over his skin. Deep within, Jhan wept like a lost, hurt child who didn't want to be hurt again. “What you're asking... It's like asking me to walk willingly over broken glass!”

Jhan wasn't given compassion, but Tekhal seemed resigned to the little information Jhan had provided. “I am the king,” he said. “It is necessary to ask people to sacrifice for the good of all. If my people are attacked, many will die. If I have to press you to remember further, I'll do that to save their lives. Your discomfort is small price compared to that.”

Jhan couldn't grasp the concept of his nightmares stepping into daylight and entering this very different world of work, rent, and every day small troubles. He couldn't be anything but angry with Tekhal for suggesting that it could.

“I won't answer any more questions,” Jhan warned angrily. “I want it all to stay behind me! Your concerns aren't mine! They have nothing to do with me!”

They stared at each other.

“Don't you wish for revenge?” Tekhal wondered.

Jhan felt a rough laugh at the back of his throat, but it was hysterical laughter and he stilled it with an effort. “Will you get me my revenge? Will you take whatever information I give you and attack this man? Kill him?”

Tekhal's gaze was steady, sure of himself. “Yes. He sent you to me as a challenge, I'm certain of it -”

“*If* what I'm telling you is real, you mean.” Jhan shook his head sharply. “I don't think that I was a challenge. I think I was taught to kill as an amusement; a last trick before he threw me away.”

“And who were you, Jhan, that he should have had you?”

“No one,” Jhan averred, “If I was someone, he wouldn't have thrown me away like an old toy after he got tired of -”

“Tired of what?” Tekhal pressed quickly.

“Of playing with me,” Jhan finished harshly.

Tekhal's jaw tightened as if he were going to vomit. His color turned pasty, but his voice was

still firm despite that. “You are being illogical, denying what is plain for me to see.”

“And that is?”

“That you were a prisoner of this man you name a king, and that you were trained and sent to me. I cannot believe that such a fate was meted out to someone of no consequence, or that such a plan was created as an amusement! I need information, Jhan.”

Jhan tossed his head as if shivering under a cruel touch, eyes bright with unshed tears. “Well, so far, you know he likes flowers with thorns, mountains, and torturing people! I could tell you some of the things that I remember happening to me, terrible things, but they won't help you find him. I never left that place. I was never outside its walls. No one talked... Well, some did, but a decent man like yourself shouldn't be interested in what they said to me. I can't help you. I don't want to help you. I want to forget.”

“If he comes here to attack my land, you will find forgetting very difficult indeed.”

Jhan felt like screaming, hands clenched until they hurt, and face full of the shadows of fear and pain. “Why are you here? Why are you doing this to me? You could have had Evian come and question me or someone else! Why you? Do you enjoy seeing me suffer?”

“No,” Tekhal replied quietly and rubbed a hand over his face as if he were tired. “You know nothing of court life or you wouldn't be asking why I came personally to speak to you. Court is a place full of people who don't want any disturbances in their lives. They are too ready to believe that our land is forever safe and that we don't have any enemies. I could have sent anyone, but there was no one I could have trusted to tell me the truth. They would have seen only a madman in a dress, who thinks he's a maid to the cousin of the king, and dismissed all that you have just said as fantasy.”

“You think that I'm telling the truth?” Jhan was mocking.

“Our last war was with the Sahvossa,” Tekhal explained. “They leveled two cities with Power before we found Rehn to speak to them. My land has not known any other war since I took the throne. It would be easy for me to sit back with the others and tell myself that attack is impossible, but I know that it is not. I do believe you. I can see that someone has hurt you, tortured you. Such reactions cannot be faked. I also have Vek's word about the training you must have undergone, and Evian's opinion is worth a great deal to me.”

There was a long stretch of silence and Jhan felt as if Tekhal were trying to will him to speak. Jhan held fast against his compulsion. “I'm not crazy, but I will end up that way, if you keep

trying to make me remember.”

“Will you allow what happened to you to happen to my people? Will you allow this dark king of yours to walk in to this land, unopposed, because we could not prepare due to your silence?”

Jhan looked away, distressed and angry. “You keep trying to make me feel guilty, but I haven't anything to say to you!”

The king stood up, a slow unfolding that made Jhan look up at him nervously, as if he might be threatened. “How old are you?”

Jhan blinked, caught off guard. “I don't know.”

“What is the name of your family?”

“I don't know.”

“What is the name of your land?”

Jhan bit his lip as if the pain would give him patience. “I don't know,” he replied once again, voice thin and weary.

“Until you know, you don't have anyone in this world, Jhan. There are only strangers. You don't have any real place. If the fate of my people does not move you, then try and remember for yourself.”

Again that hysterical laughter tried to erupt from Jhan's throat. It half escaped before he put a hand over his mouth. The king looked at him strangely.

“I haven't anyone to remember,” Jhan told him harshly. “They're all gone. What Jhan was, isn't what I am. Nothing of his belongs to me. I have to start over.”

Of course Tekhal didn't understand. He put on his cape and pulled up the hood to hide his face

“I will be sending scouts and extra soldiers to the borders,” he said to Jhan. “I will do all in my power to be prepared, but it is difficult to motivate an army and a council when I haven't any proof of a threat!” He seemed tense. “This may be what your dark king is hoping for. He may want me to panic, to do what I am doing now; to prepare and wait until the men grow tired of waiting and disbelieve.”

Jhan felt sorry for him. At that moment, Tekhal seemed vulnerable, uncertain. His stance seemed to cry out for some reassurance. Jhan offered lamely, “If I do remember something, I'll tell you.”

It wasn't enough.

Tekhal whirled on Jhan, darkness covering his face from the hood. "I command you to see Evian at least once every five day. He will ask you questions, maybe enough times that you will grow weary enough to answer them."

"And I'm to go along with this?" Jhan himself grow hot with anger. "I refuse to talk about it anymore as long as I'm being forced -"

"You are a fool!"

"How am I a fool for not wanting my freedom taken away from me?"

The king gritted teeth and looked down at his feet, perhaps considering modes of execution. His next words caught Jhan off guard. "If it pleases you, then, will you see Evian the Healer?"

This proud and powerful man was trying to accommodate Jhan. She found that she couldn't deny his request completely. "I suppose I can consider it."

Tekhal nodded stiffly, as if that answer was good enough, and then he was going and Jhan was closing the door behind him. Throwing the bolt, Jhan felt as if he'd just fought a battle, and somehow lost, just when he'd thought that he'd been winning.

Chapter Eight

(Shadows)

“I can't take much more of this,” Jhan muttered and pulled out another series of stitches. He sat on a bench, near a wall that bordered a garden, purposely secluded from the other maids. He could hear them talking on the sunny benches at the center of the small garden. Once in a while, the low voices were punctuated by Margeritte's shrill laugh.

The embroidery in Jhan's lap had become an enemy. It's all the women ever did, all day every day. It might have been better if Jhan had been any good at it, but his small fingers, which should have been deft at the small stitching, were clumsy and careless. To make matters worse, he simply didn't care if he did it right or not. Margeritte had given up on him, relegating to him the task of pulling out their mistakes.

Clouds drifted in fluffy caravans across a pale blue sky. The wind was brisk and held a hint of chill, a feeling of autumn. When Jhan noticed it, he wondered if it snowed there. He began thinking of acquiring heavier clothing even as he dreaded the thought of being forced to endure the same boring routine inside a winter bound fortress.

Jhan's white robe was forced tight against him by the wind, its border of blue flowers on hem and sleeve rippling as if they rode waves. Jhan's hair, bound in four tight braids, and adorned with blue ribbons, swung slightly.

“You are a vision to make any man weep!”

Jhan started, the delicate stitching crushed in tense hands, the stitch remover; a small metal hook, falling to clink against the crushed stones of the garden.

It was the Adonis from the practice yard! Clear blue eyes held Jhan's as the man bowed low. He was wearing a rich burgundy tunic, hose, boots and a large, black cape. His gold hair was flying in the wind and his lips were curved in a smile that was all for Jhan.

“Forgive me, milady, I did not mean to startle you. The vision of your loveliness pulled me forth like a holy man drawn to a shrine!” His voice had a rich tone and he said his words with the cultured accent of a nobleman.

Jhan sat staring like a fool. “Uh, hello,” he managed and then blushed furiously. He covered it by bending and retrieving the stitch remover. He smoothed out the stitched fabric, staring down at it as if he were going to continue despite the vision before him.

“My name is Kile Helarion Dor, son of Duke Dor. I am in Pekarín to learn how to command troops.”

“I saw you -”

“Milady?”

“I saw you practicing a few days ago, down on the sand.”

“I saw you as well, but thought my mind was playing tricks! I could scarce believe such beauty could exist in the real world!”

“Uh, my name is Jhan...” was all Jhan could manage after that, though his mind was working furiously, cursing him silently. Here was this man, handing him line after line as if they had just met at a party. *‘Hello, what's your name? You're beautiful! What's a girl like you doing-’* and Jhan could only mumble like an idiot!

“Lady Jhanette?” Kile guessed eagerly and Jhan raised his eyes enough to see that he was bending toward him, warm with intent. “Or is your name Jhanyni, perhaps?”

“No, it’s just Jhan. I’m-I’m one of Princess Margeritte’s maids.”

“That cannot be! Surely you are a princess?”

Jhan bit his lip. That was definitely a line! His confusion evaporated and Jhan found a little room to be annoyed, even though he couldn’t help feeling flattered to have Kile approach him like this. No, he was more than flattered, he was eager to let the man go on. Yet, hard on that realization, was the one where Jhan remembered just what he was and that, sooner or later, Kile was going to find out. How would he react? Jhan could guess; unpleasantly.

Time to end this and make Kile go away! Jhan didn’t have the body of a woman and he would never accept the alternative.

Jhan turned his face aside and swallowed hard on misery. “You have a slick tongue, Kile, why don’t you try it on some of the ladies over there?” He motioned in the vague direction of the other maids. “I’m sure they’ll be taken in easily since thinking is very foreign to them.”

Kile was astonished. Maybe he’d never had a woman resist his charms? There was dead silence, enough to make Jhan uncomfortable.

“Too much honey, milady?” Kile’s smile was enough to break hearts. “You are beautiful, Lady Jhan. That isn’t a falsehood.”

“Thank you,” Jhan replied, almost too prim. “And you are very handsome, as I’m certain you know, but-”

“Yes?”

“What is it you want?” That was blunt and Kile seemed hard pressed to know how to reply.

“I have my duties to attend to and you’re keeping me from them,” Jhan added, as if Kile were a child come to bother an adult.

Kile’s eyes widened and he shifted weight uncomfortably. He cleared his throat. “If it does not offend, milady, I should like to speak with your father about courting his daughter.”

Jhan didn’t understand at first, and then frowned, feeling a chill on his skin. He looked into that too handsome face and wondered where he was going to find the strength... and then his frown dropped. Something happened. It was as if fingers gently touched his heart and mind. He could see the same was happening to Kile. The feeling lasted a few moments and then it was gone. Jhan heard himself say, “I don’t have a father...”

Kile straightened and blinked, as if waking from some dream, his voice coming distantly. “You have a guardian then?”

“No. I’m on my own.”

Kile seemed to be considering his words carefully. “Surely Princess Margeritte will not bar you from courting?”

Stop this! Jhan’s mind shouted it. His heart was shouting something else. “I... I’m not seeing anyone at the moment. I don’t think that I want to.” That was the best that he could manage. He started pulling seams again, his hands clumsy.

“If you doubt my intentions, milady Jhan, I assure you, I am an honorable man.”

Jhan could see the man’s feet shift uncomfortably, perhaps unused to having a woman either treat him this coolly or force him to declare his honor. Jhan kept from looking up, hardening his resolve. He had the body of a man. Nothing could happen between them. He shouldn’t have let it go on this long

It was almost painful to act as if the man had said nothing, purposefully being rude. Jhan bent over the stitching, pulling furiously. Time passed and then he relaxed, certain the man had gone away. The long laugh caught him by surprise and he looked up at Kile’s beaming face. God! He was beautiful!

“I deserve such treatment for being so bold,” Kile said at last. “I should not approach women, who are bare of even a lady servant to attend them, and declare 'intentions'. You are a lady and deserve more courtesy. Forgive my impropriety and allow me to ask favor to court you from Princess Margeritte.”

Common sense melted before that gleaming smile. The truth of the matter became unimportant before those blue eyes. With a last effort, Jhan forced out a response that was hollow and lacking any real decision. “I trust that Margeritte will know how to respond to your request.”

Kile lifted a golden eyebrow. His smile faltered and then gained strength again. “I will take that as permission to ask. Many thanks, gracious lady, and good-day.” Kile bowed low, cape flying like wings in the wind, and then he was spinning about and striding off through a row of bushes.

Jhan felt tears gather in his eyes. He pinned the stitching to his robe, so that the wind wouldn't pick it up and cast it away, and leaned on the low top of the wall.

Kile was going to embarrass himself. Margeritte was never without her maids. He would go to ask her permission and those women were going to hear it all! Someone would tell Kile his mistake and then... Why hadn't he said something? Why had he let his heart get the best of him?

Looking over the wall as he wiped at his tears and tried to think what to do, Jhan picked out Rehn sitting on the knoll before the fortress wall where it curved away from the garden. He was watching Kelp show some raw recruits the right end of a sword to hold onto. He threw encouraging words and several of the soldiers seemed to know him. It reminded Jhan that Rehn knew Kile. If Rehn could gently tell the man that he wasn't a woman, before he went to Margeritte, then trouble might be avoided.

Jhan gasped in anguish as Kile strode from an archway and went directly to Rehn. He sat beside him with the ease of an old friend. He smiled that incredible smile and began talking. Jhan's stomach clenched with dread. What else would he be talking about but the woman that he had just been with? Please, Jhan prayed, let it be the weather or the recruits... not -

Rehn's face wasn't clear from this distance, but his sharp recoil was plain to sight. He stood swiftly and said something to Kile. Kile looked shocked as he stood as well and replied to Rehn. Kile looked upwards and their eyes met. Jhan swallowed and threw himself from the bench. He stumbled and ran, robe belling out still caught with its snatch of embroidery. He didn't stop until he was safely in his room with the door bolted.

“Jhan, open this door!”

Jhan let Rehn pound a few more times before he gathered enough courage to slide the bolt. The man threw the door open, stormed in, and slammed it shut again. By that time, Jhan was against the far wall near the window, fighting the urge to climb out and escape. He trembled, hands clenched.

Rehn saw Jhan's panic and reined himself in with an effort. He threw himself heavily into the one chair, hands grasping the arms as if he were trying to hold himself back. “Tell me why!”

“Why?” Jhan repeated hoarsely. His blue eyes were already stinging with tears. “I was going to tell him... he wouldn't give me the chance...”

“How long does it take to say, I am a man, Jhan? Or did you like his attentions and let him make a fool of himself? If you could have seen his face - He wouldn't believe me at first, called me a liar, until Kelp turned and said of course it was true. So, he was doubly embarrassed before me and the men! I've never seen him so angry, Jhan! He might do you harm! Why did you play such a game with a duke's son?”

Jhan turned his hands into fists. “It wasn't a game! I want to be treated like a woman, Rehn! You can't understand! I wanted Kile to say nice things to me, to be gallant and flirting -”

“And he did all of those things?” Rehn was horrified.

“Yes!” Jhan turned away, choking on a sob. “After he left, I knew I had made a mistake! I was going to ask you to tell him, or even tell him myself!”

“Don't go anywhere near him, Jhan! Not even to apologize! I wouldn't tell him where you lived, but he could get that information from anyone. If I were you, I'd keep the door bolted for a few days!”

Jhan felt the need to explain. “I realize nothing can happen between me and Kile, Rehn, but something... connected between us. I can't even explain the feeling, but it was strong. It made it impossible for me to tell him. I couldn't bear to see disgust on his face.”

That was too revealing. Furious, Rehn stood up. He pointed at Jhan as he ordered, “Don't speak of this again! Kile is my best friend! He befriended me when I first came to the fortress, a lonely farm brat, and he's ever been by my side! I won't see a - a - a, I won't see him shamed by you!”

Jhan felt the tears running down his cheeks and dripping from his chin. He wiped them away angrily. "I'm just a madman to you! It's fine as long as the madman doesn't really act like a woman, but I am a woman, Rehn, with a woman's feelings! I can't turn them off! I won't... act on those feelings, I couldn't with this body, but I can't stop feeling them!"

Rehn lowered his finger and straightened as if Jhan had hit him. He seemed to collect himself, shoulders moving a little as if he were trying to shrug away the anger. "I don't know if I can accept all of this! I did just consider you mad, but if you have urges towards..." He colored darker. "You *are* a thekling, aren't you?"

It was an ugly word to Jhan, but what else could anyone call him? What could he call himself? "I don't have urges, Rehn. It's something else, something powerful and emotional. I don't know what that makes me, except someone who's trapped."

It could have gone either way. Jhan watched the play of emotions and thoughts running over Rehn's face like clouds in a clear sky.

"Forget about Kile." Rehn's voice was rough. "He'll get over the shame if he doesn't see you again. As for your feelings, I've told you before that theklings are not well received in Pekarín. They used to be killed! Everyone thinks you're mad. Your only hope is to keep them thinking that. If you really mean that you will not act on those feelings, then no one needs know about them."

Jhan caught back a sob, half in relief at Rehn's acceptance and half in grief at what his life must be. "I hate this body! I hate it!" he screamed, the words full of rage and helplessness.

"The Gods choose what we will have. We must learn to accept it," Rehn replied quietly.

"If I ever come face to face with the god that did this to me, we'll have it out I promise you!"

Jhan felt that he was being watched. His feeling was confirmed when he discovered that Kile was following him. Jhan would catch sight of his gold hair in a crowd, or glimpse him flitting behind a bush or building when he turned to look.

Jhan should have been frightened, but he wasn't. For some reason, he felt that Kile wouldn't hurt him, even though he didn't have a basis for that belief.

"Have you a suitor?"

Sitting on the same bench as Jhan, Margeritte leaned close, a large figure in mounds of red crinoline and silk, her perfume floral and cloying. She held a skein of robin blue yarn in her hands. She had been inspecting a basket of different colored yarn a man had just delivered to her bower. The maids were debating if they should make a tapestry with the yarn. They fell silent when they heard Margeritte's question, like bright eyed vultures in their finery, ready to pounce on any new gossip.

"What do you mean, your Highness?" Jhan asked in trepidation.

Margeritte gave Jhan a patient look. "Young Dor seems eager to gaze on you from afar."

"I'm sure his attention is on one of the other maids."

Margeritte pouted. "Come now! We both know better than that, my little maid!"

Jhan squirmed. He wore a close fitting blue robe with a spray of white flowers embroidered in golden circles. The collar was high and he pulled at it feeling deprived of air.

Seeing his motion, Margeritte admonished, "You should wear the dresses the tailor made for you, Jhan. You are not plain even in that robe, but a proper tailored dress would make you so much more appealing and comfortable."

Jhan licked dry lips. What now? If he didn't speak up, these maids were going to gossip about Kile loving a man.

"I am saving the dresses for special occasions, Princess Margeritte. As for Kile, he is not courting me. We had a misunderstanding that made him angry."

"He had better not harm you, or show you rudeness, or I shall see to him!" Margeritte warned and that was the end of it.

The maids went back to arguing about the yarn. It was several minutes before Margeritte spoke again.

"It has been a long while since the king, my cousin, has held any type of festivities. I think I shall request a dance when next I see him. *That* will give you your chance to wear your fancy dresses, Jhan!"

A maid gasped in shock at the idea and another let loose a short laugh that was quickly stifled. Margeritte was serenely oblivious.

There was a glass, condensation beading the surface, cold and clear. A fingernail dipped

into the beads and began making a pattern like the branches of trees or veins. Wine dripped from the lines and ran over the finger, no, not wine, blood. The glass was sharp, the edge jagged. It was a broken shard of glass.

Jhan awoke, shaking and sucking in air. He had fallen asleep after a light dinner, still clothed. The sun was barely lighting the window with a rosy tint, as it sank behind the forest. The fireplace crackled warmly, fending off the nightmare, and the thick, white coverlet was as cozy as a nest.

There was a knock on the door, probably repeated and the reason Jhan had awakened. Blinking sleepily, he dragged himself from the bed, shivered as he put on a robe, and went to open the door. He wasn't thinking clearly. He should have asked who was there.

Kile was leaning against the door frame, his eyes bloodshot and angry and his hair and uniform in disarray. He was clearly drunk.

Jhan gasped in fear and tried to close the door. Kile jammed his foot into the opening and prevented him. Hiding behind the protection of the door, Jhan stammered fearfully, "I - I wanted to apologize... I was going to tell you... You surprised me that day and I just didn't have time to explain..."

"Explain?" Kile slurred.

The door was forced open with a powerful shove and Kile stepped into the room. Jhan backed up hastily. Kile closed the door and stood before it, staring at Jhan in a slow sweep from head to toe. "What are you?" he demanded to know.

"What you see," Jhan whispered in reply.

Something was ticking inside of Jhan, a bomb ready to go off. Kile's red coat was the trigger. There was a feeling of prickling needles in the back of Jhan's head, old scars ready to burst open into fresh wounds.

"Please, Kile," he managed to choke out. "I didn't mean any harm... I'm sorry that I embarrassed you... Please, don't - don't do anything -"

"They laughed at me!" Kile shouted. "I'm a joke now, me, a duke's son! Kile who courted a man in a dress! They like you, you know. Told me all about you and how they pitied you your madness. They told me that they would have made the same mistake in my place; would have thought that you were the most beautiful woman in the world! It didn't stop them from laughing or making a joke of me! What is it that you wanted from me, eh? What was it, madman?"

"I didn't want anything!" Jhan cried in panic. Darkness hovered at the edges of his eyes and

something seemed to move there, the remnants of a terrible memory.

“Oh, I think you did.” Kile's expression was going beyond fury. “What would a perverted, little thekling want from someone like me? Maybe I should give it to you, eh?”

Kile grabbed Jhan by the shoulders. His big hands kneaded them harshly. Jhan stared up at him, a bird transfixed by a snake. If Kile intended to go on any further, Jhan never found out. He fainted, consciousness snatched away and fluttering down into nothingness. Nothingness took form from memory and came into the light.

Jhan's wrists were tied by dirty cords to a metal bed frame. He was sitting on a filthy floor beside it in a barracks dank and dim, smelling of unwashed bodies. His torturers were gone, the club they had repeatedly beat him with discarded next to him, covered with his own blood. The torture hadn't lasted long and they hadn't been inventive. They were growing bored with their victim.

Jhan was bleeding. He watched the blood pooling, beginning a slow creep across the floor as if it were a separate being trying to escape Jhan's pain. Good. Jhan tried to will himself to bleed faster. The man was late. Maybe, he would be too late this time. Jhan prayed for it.

Cool hands. Jhan screamed against them as they traced his body with long fingers, taking away the pain, healing rent flesh.

“Quiet, you know that I must do this,” the man whispered. “I don't have any choice, none at all.”

Something brushed Jhan's mind, almost like the old touch, but this didn't hold any healing in it. It was a voice and it gently commanded him to wake up.

Jhan opened his eyes, blinking against sunlight streaming through the open window. He was lying in bed with the covers pulled up under his chin, his hair neatly braided in a long tail that snaked over the white coverlet. He felt sore in every muscle and tired beyond bearing.

The king sat in the one chair, dressed in soft blues and grays, and looking rumpled, as if he hadn't slept for quite a while. Rehn was sitting on the rug before the fire, stoking it a little and making the flames leap and crackle. Evian was bending near Jhan, bathing his forehead with a folded, wet cloth.

The touch brought memory flooding back, like a spider creeping across cold flesh. Jhan

shuddered convulsively and flinched away from Evian's touch, moaning deeply and curling up. He wanted to deny what had happened. Hide from the truth in dreams.

“Stop it! Come to your senses!” Evian commanded sharply as he laid the cloth on the side of a bowl of water. “Don't be a fool! You've been clean out of your mind for an entire day! We've had enough of waiting on you and I'm certain the king has better things to do than -”

Jhan was stunned. It seemed as if he had been in the grip of his nightmares for only a short time.

Rehn stood, wiping his hands on his pants and glancing nervously at the king. He took a few steps towards Jhan. Jhan narrowed his eyes and he stopped uncertainly. Was he an enemy or a friend?

“Kile found you in your hallway, in a faint,” Rehn whispered.

“So he said,” Evian interjected and his eyes told Jhan that he knew that it had been a lie. “Kile was drunk and not making much sense. I found bruises on you. The king put Kile under watch until you recovered and supported his story.”

“Kile was concerned for him, Healer Perazii!” Rehn was quick to defend, but he seemed frightened, speaking as if trying to convince himself. “He could have just left, but he didn't. He waited until you came and saw to Jhan. He may have been drunk, but he's not a violent man!”

Jhan was hardly listening, testing himself for hurts and finding none but the bruises on his shoulders. Kile hadn't hurt him after he'd fainted. He could have, easily, and left Jhan to try to accuse him, knowing that no one would have listened. Kile had stayed with Jhan and had called Evian to help him, instead. It was all at odds with the angry, drunken man who had threatened Jhan.

The king stirred in his chair at last, a statue coming to life. “Evian sent for me. If one of my guards, even a nobleman trainee, commits a crime, I must oversee his punishment. Attacking you for whatever reason is a crime. I need only hear you accuse him with your own words. These men will bear witness.”

Jhan slowly sat up, hands keeping the blanket under his chin as he realized he was wearing nothing but his skin underneath. Rehn's eyes were on him, pleading.

“I remember Kile... coming into my room,” Jhan began slowly. “He was angry. I won't lie about this, Rehn! He was drunk and talking about - but maybe he was just trying to frighten me, I don't know. I fainted. It seems that he didn't hurt me afterward.”

The nightmare that had followed couldn't be expressed in words, but it angered Jhan. Kile

had caused that memory to surface. Wasn't it right that he should be punished? Looking at the faces around him, Jhan knew that they wouldn't understand. They were only interested in physical harm, maybe not understanding that mental harm could be far worse.

“The wounds he gave me, I can't show you,” Jhan told them angrily.

Tekhal heard that anger, but he wasn't sympathetic. “I told you that this madness of pretending to be a woman would bring you trouble. Tell me that this wasn't caused by it!”

A surge of outrage gave Jhan the courage to face the king with a hot, blue glare. He was the victim! How dare this man say that it was his fault! He retorted, “If he had hurt me, would you really have punished him?”

“Yes,” Tekhal replied. “It would have brought me trouble with his father, but I would have done it.”

“Yet you are blaming me? Kile forced his way into my room and threatened me! I was lucky this time, he didn't mean to hurt me, just frighten, but what about the next person who doesn't like me?” Jhan demanded. “Will he have a license to hurt me just because I'm different? Will you punish him, or blame me yet again, and say that I'd been warned? I cannot change!”

Rehn started to protest, but Jhan turned to him, tongue like a lash. “And you, Rehn? Will you say the same? If Kile had done this to one of your little sisters would you still be championing him?”

“Jhan, it isn't -”

“It is the same!” Jhan shouted back. “It most certainly is!” He turned his face away. “All of you just go! I wasn't hurt so nothing happened! Kile goes free!”

“Maybe I should give you something that will let you sleep,” Evian suggested neutrally.

Jhan crossed his arms over his chest. “I've slept enough! I need everyone to leave me alone! I need time to think and recover from this!” He gave the wall all of his attention, refusing to look at them. It wasn't any way to treat a king and Rehn's gasp was shocked and frightened.

“Sire, he's ill! He doesn't know what he's saying!” Rehn's words tumbled over each other in his haste to apologize.

Evian agreed. “Jhan has had a great shock and we aren't helping by questioning and upsetting her. Let us leave and give her some quiet.”

“Her?” The king muttered, as if dazed, but then made a motion that both Evian and Rehn

knew. Rehn left the room as if he could barely keep himself from running. Evian was slower.

“I will return to check up on you,” Evian told Jhan. “More than Kile's drunken bullying upset you, I know. Am I right in thinking that the memories of the horrors you endured are slipping through the cracks? Kile made you remember something ugly, didn't he?”

Jhan did not reply and Evian sighed as he gathered up his bag.

“I can help you, but you must allow me to.” he said, and with that, Evian left, closing the door behind him.

The king stood and paced a moment. Jhan watched him apprehensively. “You try my patience, Jhan.”

Jhan ignored him, trying to lay back and relax against his pillows, easing his bruised shoulders.

“I need Duke Dor,” Tekhal continued. “I don't need to send a messenger to the Duke to explain why I must punish his son! There isn't any way to tell how he would react, especially if Kile were to deny any wrongdoing. There may be an enemy on my borders. I will need all the fighting men I can muster, including the Duke's men!”

Jhan glared at him then and replied angrily, “I am the victim. Shall I keep repeating it? Are you telling me that you *wouldn't* have punished Kile? If you are, then I don't think much of your justice!”

The king's hands balled into fists, but he was in control. “Wherever you come from, it must be a land of peace and plenty, where justice can be meted out without consequences. Here, it is very different. Some men, such as a duke's son, are very hard to punish. Offending against one man often brings an entire country to war against another. I do not condone what he did, but his crime is small, and you were not hurt. It does not merit risking war by punishing him.”

In this world, Jhan thought, the little person did not matter except when he was one of the many in a country that a king tried to protect. On his own, that person was expendable, not as important as the lord who could start wars.

“You think that makes perfect sense, don't you?” Jhan snapped. “Well, it doesn't to me. What's worth living for when you have a country where some people are above the law and can do whatever they like? I may be different, but I'm not hurting anyone! People can dislike me, even be disgusted by me, but they shouldn't be allowed to attack me!”

“I do not need to argue with you,” Tekhal replied. “Kile Dor did not harm you. You fainted by your own admission. A crime has not been committed. Kile Dor is not going to be punished. I warn you not to speak of this again. To accuse him, or to slander him, will gain you nothing but punishment meted out to you!”

“As you command, Your Majesty,” Jhan replied coolly and the king left, pausing only long enough to cloak himself into obscurity. When the door was firmly closed, Jhan turned on his side and wept.

“Stop fidgeting and do your work!” Calist complained. She was a plump maid, unfortunately dressed in yellow, a color that gave her fair complexion a watery look and her fair hair a brassy tone.

“Why do we have to do this every day?” Jhan demanded crossly and folded his stitching into his lap, glaring at it and clenching shoulders.

There was sudden silence in the bower and eyes were leveled at Jhan in annoyance. The perfume of a dozen females was overwhelming and Jhan wished fervently that someone would open a window. Their colorful gowns melted into the tapestries on the walls, the embroidered chair cushions, and the carpets, until it was one kaleidoscope of color.

“Put on pants then and do what men do!” willowy Taneya replied sharply. There were quick nods of agreement.

“You don't have to be a man to take a walk, a ride, read a book, or play a game!” Jhan protested and sat up straight, looking at them all.

Taneya sniffed. “Perhaps, you are coming to your senses at last. Everything you have named is a man's province, not a lady's.”

“Perhaps, he is just low born,” someone whispered and Jhan glared at the sea of females.

They were all pretty as dolls, Jhan thought, but just as empty headed.

“Are you bored?”

All heads turned. Margeritte was dressed in mounds of blue silk, her hair adorned in blue combs and styled atop her head like a castle.

“I suppose that I have been an old fool, content to sit in my easy chair by the fire and forget

that young maids like to play,” she said breezily. “Come, we will go out and sit in the sun.”

Jhan smiled and rose, dressed in deep blue with hair loose and flowing to his ankles, he was a match for Margeritte. As she put her arm through his, she smiled down at him.

“You must speak your mind, my butterfly,” she said. “You have a wild heart and my service is not bondage!”

“I’m not very good at stitching,” Jhan confessed with a sigh.

The maids looked anxious, rising and gathering things together and obviously not certain what was going to happen. Jhan and Margeritte waded through them slowly as if they were alone.

Jhan complained, “I need air, exercise, things to do that are exciting...”

Margeritte giggled, “I don’t think that you have much in common with my other little ladies. They would all rather stay indoors.”

“I suppose not,” Jhan agreed softly.

Margeritte gave him all her attention. “What would you like to do, that an old woman like me could do as well?”

Jhan thought quickly. “Could we have a picnic?”

“Pik-nik?” Margeritte repeated in confusion.

Jhan explained, “Let’s take food, drink, and something to sit on blankets to a nice place outside. We could go for a walk.”

“Walk, where?” a maid squeaked indignantly.

Jhan scowled at her and asked, “Haven’t you ever been for a walk? Well, you don’t have to walk if you don’t want to. I know some sunny spots where we could sit -”

“Sit and finish that pillow for my niece,” Margeritte interjected with a smile. “Come, ladies, Jhan is right! Fresh air will do us good. Walking and sunning is *not* scandalous behavior.”

Margeritte called to her man servants and orders were given. Jhan was almost sorry that he had said anything. They began packing up things as if they were going for a long journey. The food Margeritte was ordering could have fed an army!

Margeritte’s wisdom became clear, for as soon as they started out of the palace, they were quickly joined by throngs of women from the fortress. Word of mouth had passed quickly. Margeritte

was popular enough that no one would pass up a chance to get into her good graces.

They didn't go far. They settled on the hills where the forest turned to the east, and spread out like a colorful fair, laughter and talk rising and falling like the wind. Servants tended to the food and walked about serving everything from cream pastries to roasted meat.

"This reminds me of when I was a young maiden!" Margeritte sighed as a chair was positioned on top of rich carpets. She settled into it with her stitching. "We used to do fabulous things like this all of the time!"

"Fabulous," Jhan muttered sourly. They all considered this the height of daring, as if they were caged birds venturing out of confinement, but still had one foot tied to the bars!

"Go and walk, if you wish. Pick me some wildflowers," Margeritte suggested airily. "Shall I call for escort?"

"No, I can walk by myself." Jhan bit his lip after that hot reply, but Margeritte hadn't noticed. She was already chattering to the other ladies.

Jhan stole away from them, down the hillside, toward the road that led he knew not where. The breeze was cold and the sun milky behind thick clouds. Winter was definitely on its way. Soon leaves would be turning colors and dropping leaves all over the landscape.

I want more than this, Jhan thought bitterly. I can't stitch pillows all of my life!

What then? What did he want? According to these people's standards, Jhan had the cushiest job in the fortress. He was well paid too. So, what was wrong? He pinpointed the trouble without much difficulty. He needed a challenge, not a job that was slowly boring him to death.

A pounding sound began, low at first, and then slowly gaining in volume. It intruded on Jhan's thoughts. He looked to the sky for dark clouds and thunder, but, though lowering, there wasn't any sign of a storm. The pounding increased and a rumbling began under Jhan's feet.

Riders broke over a near hill, their imala all different colors and very swift. Jhan recognized the king in the lead, on his splattered colored stallion, but the king didn't give any sign that he knew Jhan, as he rode by only a few lengths away. His escort broke up, racing in two directions. The majority raced towards the stables, but a few followed after the king.

The imala thundered by on either side of Jhan, disorienting him as they passed. It was a moment before he became aware that one rider had stopped, imala breathing hard and reined tightly.

Kile was in uniform, dusty from the road and sweat beading his forehead. His gold hair, tied back severely, gave his set jaw a granite appearance. His blue eyes were like steel.

Princess Margeritte, a bevy of ladies, and a horde of servants were just over the hill, in calling distance, yet Jhan felt utterly alone and at Kile's mercy even before the man dismounted. When Kile's feet touched the earth, Jhan felt lost, thoughts of running or calling for help out of the question. Kile had a sword, though his hands were busy with the reins of his imala and were not on it. His larger body seemed capable of springing on Jhan like a lion on its prey.

Kile was silent, his eyes burning and intent as they swept Jhan from head to heel, taking in Jhan's braided, long hair, his delicate features, and slight body in its sweeping robe. He seemed determined to dispel Jhan's perfect illusion of being a woman.

"I've come to apologize." Kile said, in a deep, abrupt voice.

"Apologize?" Jhan echoed the word stupidly.

"I was drunk. I was angry."

The words didn't make any sense at first and then they penetrated Jhan's fear as if they were well placed arrows. Comprehension dawned. It was like blinking against the sun. One moment Kile was a giant he hadn't any hope of fighting and in the next, he was just a man, still large, but not a giant-not invincible. He was apologizing, looking uncomfortable and like any normal young man. It was memory, Jhan realized, distorting things again and trying to surface by insinuating itself into stressful circumstances.

"You don't sound sincere," Jhan replied, finding a voice to speak; a voice that firmed as he began taking control again. He pushed the nightmare aside. It had made him weak, had put him at a man's mercy!

Kile stiffened a little, frowning.

"I am sincere," he said. "I didn't know about you. I've been away, patrolling the borders. After our meeting in the garden, the other soldiers tried to explain what was wrong with you, so did Rehn for that matter. I was too intent on revenge for the insult that you did me. Now, I've listened. You can't help... this," he indicated Jhan's appearance. "You didn't mean to insult me. You acted out of madness."

The imala was fidgeting, wanting to go to the stable and rest. Kile had to hold him tightly. He wasn't in any position to try to hurt Jhan. It made him bold. "I'm not mad. I don't imagine that I'm a

woman. I *am* one, inside.”

Kile's chin went up and his eyes widened with disgust and astonishment, but Jhan didn't give him a chance to reply. His hands were cold, shaking as he held them out, putting himself on display.

“I look like a woman,” he told Kile, “a beautiful woman! You've said so yourself! Can you stand there and honestly say that I could ever look like a man?”

Confusion and pity wared with Kile's disgust. Jhan watched the play of emotions over the man's face, wondering which would win. Finally, Kile replied carefully, clearly wanting to understand, “They told me that you had been tortured and that it had made you mad. You're saying that isn't so?”

Had he really been frightened of this man? Jhan felt his tension drain away. Anger and irritation gave him courage. His shaking hands were suddenly steady.

Jhan wondered sharply, “You aren't apologizing because you forced your way into my room, scaring me nearly to death? You are apologizing because you think I'm mad and you disturbed an already disturbed man?” When Kile seemed unable to reply, Jhan shouted, “Take your apology and shove it! I am not mad! I am perfectly sane!”

“You're admitting...” Kile's face turned red and Jhan couldn't tell if it was from anger or embarrassment. “You're saying that you're a man who *wants* to dress as a woman? You're admitting to being a pervert?”

“I'm not a pervert!” Jhan replied, “What I am doesn't matter. You don't have the right to threaten me! To burst into my room -”

He was shouting at Kile's back. The man had turned to mount his imala. The beast surged forward, but Kile held him in check and spun him to face Jhan a last time. He gave Jhan a look of loathing, without words, before spurring the imala and galloping away.

Jhan's anger left him. Kile would probably never come near him again, he thought. He should have been relieved, but, deep down he felt the ache of loss.

Chapter Nine

(Shadows and Friends)

“I insist that you see me!”

“Not now, Evian.”

Jhan tried to push past the man to get into his room and end a wearying day, but Evian followed and shut the door behind them as if he were used to having his own way.

“Relax,” Evian commanded and settled easily in the one chair.

“I’m beginning to hate men,” Jhan muttered. He perched on the edge of the bed, legs drawn up and clasped in his arms. His robe splayed out about him as if he were the center of a great flower, hair trailing over one shoulder.

“Why?” Evian wondered, confused.

“You know me better than anyone else here. Don't you know why?”

“Are you speaking of Kile?”

“Yes, I’m talking about Kile.” Jhan sighed and put his chin on his upraised knees, pensive. “He tried to apologize to me and I, well, I told him to stick his apology. Now he's even angrier than he was before! He called me a pervert!”

“Why did you refuse his apology?” Evian sounded confused and critical. Jhan wasn't in the mood for either.

Jhan glared, nostrils flared. “Should I let people think that I'm crazy? Kile only wanted to apologize because Rehn told him that I was! I set him straight, and I'll continue to set people straight!”

“Jhan...” Evian shook himself like an owl, discarding the entire conversation. “I didn't come here to talk about your social life! If you wish to go about telling people that you have possessed the dead body of a man, and that you are really a woman, it’s your affair.” He placed his medical bag on the floor beside him and faced Jhan. “You know why I've come here, milady.”

“I didn't tell Kile any of that, and no, I don't know why you're here,” Jhan replied waspishly. “I thought that I'd made it clear that I wasn't going to try and remember my past!”

“You were a woman, newly dead, who was forced into the body of a newly dead man,” Evian said. “You were tortured and then set free. I find it remarkable that you are not irrevocably insane.

Certainly part of your memory loss is the method to which you accomplished this. Unfortunately, you cannot be allowed to forget. I say this not only because of the military information we must have, but for your own sake. I've seen men in battle who forget the carnage one day, only to remember it years later, to their sorrow."

Jhan balled his hands into fists and flushed angrily. "I landed on my feet, Evian," he replied harshly. "Landed on my feet in a strange world and managed to make a life! What I was before, I can't forget. I was a woman too long! What happened after, is easily forgotten and should be forgotten!"

There was a touch on Jhan's mind. Fingertips or a feather light as air. Jhan recoiled as if from a slap and held his hands out to fend Evian off, though the man hadn't made a move.

"Stop it! You're doing that, aren't you? Stop it, you bastard!"

Evian arched an eyebrow. The touch ceased. "My Power is limited, Jhan. I can't hurt you like that evil healer, or your dark king. I am limited to calming and reading the mind. I merely wished to see the state of your thoughts."

A cold sweat broke out on Jhan's brow. He suppressed a strong urge to hide in a corner. "You don't have any right to do that to me! It's like - like feeling under my clothes!"

Evian hadn't had any idea. His face mirrored amazement. "You are the first person I've known who could sense my touch. I didn't know that it was like that. Forgive me."

Evian's words were honest, but they were firm, saying something else. He was an army doctor and used to doing what he had to, regardless of the pain it caused. Jhan shrank into himself, apprehensive.

Evian shifted in his seat and Jhan tensed as he said, "I can read your memories without letting you relive them, Jhan. I've seen some of them, but not all. I confess I've been reluctant out of a fear of seeing you tortured. It isn't an easy thing to watch."

"I won't let you!" Jhan grated and started to stand, intending to leave if he could, anything to avoid this confrontation. "I know you're doing it because of the king's orders. Tell him I wouldn't cooperate! Tell him he's nothing but an asshole for making you do this!"

"Your language is foul," Evian grunted, holding up a hand to keep Jhan from moving. "You're much too hard on His Majesty. The kingdom always comes first. If what you have inside of your head will warn us of a possible attack, he would order you cut open to get at it! He holds many lives in his trust, Jhan. You must understand."

“Understand?” Jhan repeated sarcastically. “Do you think that I'm whining like a child? You don't want to see what happened to me! If what I remember is only the better parts, then what I've forgotten must be horrible!”

“Enough!” Evian snapped and Jhan fell silent. “Look at me!”

Jhan looked, blue eyes locking with gray ones. They captured him and held him prisoner. A mind grabbed his as firmly as a vise. No, Jhan thought desperately, I won't be controlled again! He struggled to free his mind, reaching down deep for something that pulsed at his being. It started to spring free, a power that would destroy, not just his enemy, but everything.

Jhan felt a sharp slap across his face. He rocked with the force, coming back to himself all at once.

“What - What happened?” Jhan asked fearfully.

Evian was pale, backing away as if he were on the verge of vomiting, hands wiping the front of his robe. “I looked into your memories and kept you shielded as I promised.” His voice was thin, trembling. He sounded like a frail old man.

There was a pitcher of water and a cup on the nightstand. Evian poured a glass with shaking hands and gulped quickly. He returned the cup and pitcher to the table with a thud and looked at Jhan with haunted eyes. His voice was firmer now.

“I must speak with the king. I - I don't think that Vek has broken all of your conditioning. Much was done to you and it wasn't simply to kill Pekarín soldiers.”

Jhan cried out and sprang to his feet as if unleashed. “You won't put me in a cell again, you son-of-a-bitch! I'll kill myself first! I swear it! Tell me what you saw!”

Evian rubbed his eyes, trying to chase away the nightmare. “Torture most foul! That's what I saw! Never remember it, Jhan! Never! You wouldn't stay sane! I take back what I said before. The man is a monster! I couldn't see him, or the healer's face. I just felt darkness, evil, despair! “

Evian leaned forward as if he longed to take Jhan into a comforting embrace, but then hugged himself as if his fingers burned.

“Forgive me for being foolish,” he said. “I never imagined... I only half believed what you told me.”

Jhan staggered forward and clutched the front of Evian's robe frantically. “Tell me... Tell me

that you won't put me in a cell again!"

Evian pulled away and snatched up his bag. "How can I promise you that? The king will decide. I'm sorry, but I must tell him." His eyes pierced Jhan as if he were about to weep. "How you managed to survive - Gods! The evil of what they did to you! I saw enough to haunt my sleep until the end of my days!"

Jhan felt betrayed, as if his entire being had been put on display. "Did the king order you to use your Power on me?"

"No. He doesn't know about my Power," Evian confessed, pulling himself together with an effort. "He ordered me to question you until I had answers. That I did."

"Damn you!" Jhan shouted in his face and struck him hard with his open palm. Evian only flinched. "I'm not a puppet that anyone can control!" Jhan felt his body shake and the tears caught him unawares. He turned away roughly.

"Get out! I hate men! I hate them!"

Evian went quietly and only the closing of the door heralded his departure. Jhan wept then in earnest, until his eyes were puffy and his nose red, before he went in search of his one true friend; Rehn.

There was the sound of bird song and the feel of sunlight warm on his skin. Jhan stretched with delicious abandon, smelling fresh bread. He climbed out of the comforters and smiled at Rehn. He was sitting in his chair with feet propped on the windowsill, staring out at the new day while he munched on a hunk of steaming bread.

"I'm sorry that I forced you to sleep on the floor," Jhan apologized.

Rehn modestly kept his eyes averted while Jhan slipped on a simple brown robe, with belled sleeves and a white belt, and then turned his head to smile at him lazily.

"It's all right. My back needs a good hard surface once in a while."

Rehn motioned to the sill and Jhan dutifully sat there while Rehn straightened, took up a brush, and began brushing out Jhan's long hair as if Jhan were his little sister. It was Jhan's turn to stare out at the sun dappled trees.

Jhan had time to reflect on the past evening. He had run to Rehn's apartment, intending to

tell him everything, but, in the end, they had only spoken of trifles and gone to bed, he in Rehn's bed and Rehn on the floor in his blankets. The past evening had hurt too much to talk about and Jhan had wanted to forget it and the pain. Rehn had been a comfort just with his firm presence and simple manner.

“You need to eat more,” Rehn commented absently and began braiding Jhan's hair as if it were intricate knot work in a rope, “You need more sun and exercise. The lady's bower isn't good for a growing young man, no matter what that man imagines he is,” he amended quickly.

Jhan tensed as a new fear surfaced. “Am I growing?”

A pause and then, puzzled, “No, and you should be. How long have you been here and you seeming on the edge of turning man? It isn't right, not at all. Most grow inches a day... all legs and arms.”

“Maybe, I won't grow. Maybe... “

“You will.” Rehn was realistic, not cruel. He finished the braid and tied it off with a red ribbon.

Jhan's hair was now a little over shoulder length and braided like the crust on a pie. Jhan touched it appreciatively and then turned to Rehn. Rehn looked uncomfortable. He didn't say anything until Jhan had gone over to the tray and poured himself a cup of spiced drink and bitten into a crust of bread.

“I was going out riding today. Would you like to come along?”

Jhan was caught off guard. “It is my day off, but I don't know how to ride very well, Rehn. I've certainly never rode anything like an imala.”

“It isn't any secret that you were troubled last night,” Rehn pressured. “Riding will help you, body and mind. Come on. I still have those trousers Vek tried to make you wear. They can go under that robe and you can hitch it up as we ride.”

“I don't know...” Jhan considered pants with a shudder as he ate. He watched Rehn dig them out and eye their size. “If I put them on...”

Rehn gave a sigh full of patience. “I'll help. Come on.”

Jhan reluctantly put his food aside and took the pants in hand. “Don't look,” he warned absently, almost cross that Rehn was putting him through this. The chance at fresh air and some other

scenery besides the fortress though, wasn't that worth a little embarrassment?

Jhan slipped off his sandals and put one foot after the other into the trouser legs. He pulled them up slowly and then flushed and reddened at several difficulties. At last, he had the pants buttoned down the front and he was letting his robe drop down over them.

“Well?” Rehn prompted, his back still turned and arms crossed over his chest.

Jhan pulled at the inseam uncomfortably. “I don't like them!”

Rehn turned around, chuckling. “You'll get used to them.”

“I still haven't gotten used to pissing standing up!” Jhan shot back and Rehn looked suitably embarrassed. “Sorry. Do you really think that I can ride in these? I feel like I'm being squeezed in parts I'm trying to forget that I have!”

“It'll be fine!” Rehn promised. “Now, I've rented imala for the day and packed lunch -”

Jhan scowled and put hands on hips. “You expected me to go along?”

“Now, don't get cross and change your mind! You need to get out and I need to have a ride. All I've done is walk about within a square mile for ages. If you do well on this ride, then I'll take you into Sarvoy next time and you can see a city.”

That perked Jhan up. The enclosed life of Pekarín fortress was nothing like the hustle and bustle of a real city and Jhan longed to see different sights. “I like that. Let's not ride far though, this first time. Saddle sore is not something that I want to experience.”

They finished breakfast and made their way to the stables. Jhan expected Rehn to lead him inside the lines of stalls, but, instead, he made straight for a picket of saddled imala. Kile, in his red uniform, was standing next to them, talking idly with a stable hand. He seemed to be arguing about the three mounts that the man had brought him; two nondescript imala, dusty bays of uncertain breeding, and his own imala, a spirited creature the color of washed stones.

“I don't need three!” Kile was growling when they came into earshot. “Only Rehn and I are riding out and we don't need a pack beast!”

Jhan spun on Rehn with a start of realization that quickly turned into anger. “I am not going anywhere with that man!”

“It's you!” Kile erupted, pointing a finger at Jhan. “What are you doing here?”

“I was going for a ride with Rehn!”

“So was I!” Kile shot back.

Both of them turned on Rehn.

“We are all going for a ride,” Rehn was as calm as milk, a twitching smile his only sign of uncertainty. “While we ride, you and Jhan can try to get to know one another. Hopefully, Kile, you will understand why I’ve become friends with Jhan.”

“No!” Kile chopped out the word and took a step to leave, tossing the reins of the imala to the stable hand.

“No!” Jhan echoed almost at the same time.

How could Rehn have done such a thing, especially after what had happened the other day?

Kile and Jhan both turned to go.

Kile stopped. “Well, if you’re not riding, then there’s nothing to stop me from going with Rehn.”

Jhan stopped and spun on him, retorting, “Oh, no you don’t! You stay here and I’ll go with Rehn!”

“Why should I be the one to stay?”

“If you were a gentleman, you would stay!”

“If you were a lady and not a madman, I would be a gentleman!”

“I am going with Rehn!”

“So am I!”

“Good!” Rehn exclaimed with a smile as he took the reins of the imala from the open mouthed stable hand and handed a set to both Jhan and Kile. “Shall we ride, then?”

“Yes, let’s get this over with!” Kile snapped back with a scowl and mounted his imala with a flourish.

Jhan was slower to get on his imala. Rehn held the bridle while he mounted gingerly and found his seat, seething and giving Rehn a look the man pretended not to see.

“Does her Highness want a sidesaddle?” Kile ground out sarcastically.

“You shut-up!” Jhan snapped back. “Don’t say another word to me!”

The imala shivered nervously at Jhan's tone of voice. Jhan gathered up the reins uncertainly as Rehn released the bridle to mount his own imala. Jhan's imala didn't show any other signs of being high strung and followed the others placidly as they rode out of the stable yard. It ignored Jhan's inexperienced fidgeting with the reins and kept in single file with the others.

Rehn chose the way, taking a broad forest path that was like a green covered tunnel cutting through the trees. The weather had turned unseasonably warm and the smell of imala mingled with forest loam and green growing things. Insects buzzed and strange birds sang raucous calls.

Jhan wasn't certain who he was angrier at, Kile or Rehn. He watched them speaking together with the ease of old friends. Jhan felt invisible; ignored. Of course Kile was doing it on purpose, but from Rehn it stung like betrayal, even though Jhan knew it was unintentional.

What was Rehn trying to do after all, Jhan wondered? Did he really think that Kile could come to understand him? The man had called him a pervert! The tension between them could be cut with a knife! There were other problems, the problem of his attraction to Kile foremost. It was an attraction that reminded Jhan brutally that, no matter how much he pretended, he wasn't really a woman. He would rather never see any man again, than to be forced to endure that stark reality!

The imala tossed its head and flared nostrils at some scent. It had a gait like a camel and it didn't seem to respond to any of the rein tugs that a horse would have responded to. Jhan forgot about his problems for a time, trying to learn how to control it and to keep its feet away from dangerous tree roots. The struggle fueled Jhan's anger at the entire situation.

"Let him know you are in control!"

Jhan's head turned angrily at Kile's suggestion. The man had dropped behind Rehn to ride side by side with Jhan, his face and bearing advertising his discomfort.

"I don't need your help, thank you!" Jhan spat back.

"Don't be stupid!" Kile's eyes were blazing, his voice charged with anger. "I'm trying to save the animal from harm!"

"Oh, now I'm mad and stupid?"

"I'm not the one wearing the dress!"

"What do you care what I'm wearing?"

Kile bit back a reply with effort, visibly tried to control his anger, and slowly let out a breath.

“Pull the reins tight and keep them tight, thekling,” he said more calmly, “or your mount will take it into his head that he is free to go where he will. He might go into a gully, or lame himself on tree roots. Keep him in control!”

Jhan silently obeyed and the imala quickly came to order, smoothing out its paces. Jhan chewed on his lip viciously for a full minute and then released it. He said tightly, “Thank you. It works.”

“Civility works as well.”

Jhan erupted. “I started all of this? I seem to recall it differently!”

Rehn glanced back, disturbed, and then gave them his back, either deciding to let them argue it out or perhaps determined to enjoy the ride.

Kile's hand gestured at Jhan's appearance. “I don't see how you could blame me for taking offense. Everything about you begs for offense! You are a thekling, a perverted man dressed as a woman! Rehn wants me to understand you, but I can't!”

Jhan was so angry that he felt tears in his eyes, the stress of the last few days becoming too much for him. “You're good at calling me names, but you don't know me at all! This body is not mine and never will be! I'm trapped in it! I can only dress it and hide it in a pathetic attempt to be what I was, a woman. It never quite works. People like you keep reminding me that I'm only fooling myself. Still... I can't accept what's happened. I can't be a man and I can't be a woman. I'm doomed to be a freak; someone people stare at and despise. It doesn't matter to me whether you understand it or not, so just leave me alone!”

Kile's disgust was so strong, it was like a heat that Jhan could feel on his skin, blistering. “You *are* mad!”

Why had he bothered saying any of that to Kile? There wasn't any hope of sympathy or understanding from the man. Damn Rehn for putting them together like this, for upsetting them both, for ruining a perfect day!

“I am not mad. I am a woman, inside.” Affirmation said to himself, not Kile.

Kile called out, furious, “Rehn, do you hear this? Your little monster should be locked up!”

Jhan's anger flared white hot. He kicked out and landed a solid toe into the side of Kile's imala. It reared and honked like a goose, darting sideways to escape while Jhan's imala jumped to avoid its backlash of hooves. Jhan grabbed for the saddle and let go the reins to keep his seat. With the bridle slack, his imala bolted like a rocket into the forest with him clinging on and crying out.

“Oh God! Oh God!”

Jhan felt his fingers slipping. The imala's hooves seemed to strike every bump and root on the ground, jarring him again and again while sharp twigs and thorns lashed and vines slapped in their passing. A horse would have run for home and the stable, but this creature seemed bent on finding enough cover to hide in. It was willing to gallop for hours to find it in the sparsely covered forest floor.

When the beast was finally satisfied, it stopped so abruptly, that Jhan flipped over the creature's neck and landed hard on his back, the breath knocked out of him. That startled the imala fled again, a brown rump quickly fading through the forest.

“St-stupid p-piece of shi-shit!” Jhan swore between great gasps for breath. He rolled over and sat up, head spinning.

He was surrounded by ancient, gnarled trees hung with creepers, air plants, and moss. It was like being encircled by old men, bent close to examine him. One specimen was hollow at the base, a dark pit of arching roots like a matron lifting her skirt.

He was lost. Jhan didn't have any idea in which direction the imala had fled or what part of the forest he was in.

Jhan stood shakily and turned completely around, heart pounding. “Don't panic!” he told himself crossly. “Just stay in one place! Rehn will follow *shithead's* hoof prints and be here in no time.”

Good advice. There was a tree root sticking up like a ready-made seat. Jhan sat on it gingerly and huddled, staring out at the expanse of forest all around him. He thought of the Sahvossa, hard, and then gave it up. He couldn't imagine those wild creatures coming to save him. They were too much a part of the forest and its *'survival of the fittest'* law.

There was the sound of thunder. Jhan cringed apprehensively. The humid air became threatening. If it rained, all tracks would be lost! Rehn wouldn't be able to find him!

Just when panic threatened to overtake him, Jhan heard something heavy running fast. He stood like a spring, smiling in relief, but the smile dropped when he saw Kile, on his imala, come trotting into the circle of trees, red in the face and obviously out of sorts.

Kile swore and dismounted, feeling the legs of his mount. “I nearly lamed him back there!”

“Where's Rehn?” Jhan asked in trepidation.

“He went to make sure that you didn't double back and head home like the foolish child that

you are!”

Jhan balled up his hands into fists. “I am not a child! Don't talk to me like that!”

Kile let fall the reins and took several large steps towards Jhan with hands on hips, face growing darker. “I think it's time that we stopped this game! I should take you straight to Sarvoy and dump you into the lunatic house there, freeing Rehn of you forever!”

Jhan stepped back to every pace of Kile's advance, looking for a place to run that an imala couldn't. “I don't think the king, or Margeritte, would appreciate your harming me!”

“Harm you?” Kile was shocked. “I have honor, child!”

“I am not a child!”

“Barely what, seventeen or eighteen winters?” Kile guessed mockingly. “Grow a beard on your face before you ask to be called anything other than a child, or are you hoping to grow breasts instead?”

“Stop it!” Jhan shouted and Kile scowled and stood still. Rain began pattering down. Jhan ignored it and drew himself up. “I'm sorry that I kicked your imala and I'm sorry mine ran away and made you chase after me, okay? It was childish, but you made me angry! Let's go back to the fortress and forget that we ever saw each other!”

“Are you offering me an apology?” Kile snorted and cocked his head. “I wasn't asking for one. Are you frightened of me, out here all alone, that you should offer me one? You shouldn't throw the king, or Her Highness, in my face as a shield either. They'll never know what happened to you if I take you to Sarvoy.”

Jhan shivered. His eyes caught on Kile's red uniform and his imposing size. A dark veil seemed to move over his sight and he couldn't seem to focus. He spoke through the strangeness, struggling. “I'll find my own way back, if you won't help me! I won't let you take me to Sarvoy! What's wrong with you? Why do I bother you so much? I only want to live in peace and try to be what I am; a woman!”

“Does a woman have what you have between her legs?” It was utterly crude and said as Kile advanced with hands out, threatening.

Jhan snapped. He spun and jumped straight at Kile, hand coming down in a blow that would have crushed the man's windpipe! It happened all of itself, as if practiced over and over until it was a reflex that Jhan hadn't the slightest control over.

Kile evaded the blow, just, and his fist caught Jhan in the jaw just as Jhan was landing on his feet and recoiling in horror from what he'd tried to do. The blow sent Jhan flying backwards and darkness took him with its blessed relief.

Jhan lay on a bed of darkness and black silk while a cold body lay beside him and whispered horrors in his ear, gnawed him there, and made his blood run. A hand touched flesh, like the slither of a snake, and something changed; breaking, mending, and becoming something else. Laughter, like sweet wine, rippling, pleased.

“Your father will never know you now.”

Jhan sighed. He was being rocked gently and a voice murmured soothingly. It wove in and out, taking the sweat of terror away and replacing it with peace and the gentle patter of rain.

Jhan opened his eyes slowly. Kile was staring into them. He lay in Kile's lap, held by the man's great arms to keep him inside of the old trees' crevice and out of the rain. Jhan should have been afraid. He wasn't.

“So close, and yet I still can't tell if you're a man!” Kile said it softly, as if it were horrible. “Are you... really?”

Jhan found a smile, but winced as it stretched the swelling bruise on his face. “Didn't you check to be sure?”

Kile stiffened and Jhan felt he was close to being thrown out into the mud, but Kile controlled the impulse. “What do you take me for?”

They were cramped, but Jhan was able to shrug a little. “I don't know.”

“Why do you insist on making me angry?”

Jhan tried to sit up, but there wasn't enough room. “I am not trying to make you angry! It is you who insist on judging me and telling me what you think I should be! Man or woman, it's my decision!”

“Do you wish me to believe that such as you should be allowed to do as you please?”

“Believe what you will, but don't believe that I'm mad and need to be locked up in Sarvoy! Accept that I am different and forget me! I am none of your business, so stop making me your business!”

Kile took a deep breath, gathered words for ammunition. “I am -”

“Pig-headed?”

“What?”

“Stubborn? Stupid? Meddling? For my own good, I'm sure you thought.”

“No, I worry for Rehn's good. I don't care a wit for yours.”

“You could have left me out in the mud,” Jhan reminded him pointedly and had the relish of seeing Kile uncomfortable. Maybe he wasn't such a bad person under his harsh, manly exterior. Not that it mattered. In fact, it made things more difficult.

Kile gazed down at Jhan for the longest moment and then tried to explain the act of kindness as if trying to understand it himself. “You tried to kill me. They told me in the barracks, about how you could almost best Vek, but I thought that they were joking. It was my threats and my red uniform, wasn't it, that made you attack?”

“I don't know,” Jhan replied, but Kile was firm in his own opinion.

“I threatened you. You were frightened. After I punched you, you lay in the mud; just a child I'd hit with the force I would have used on a man. I felt... bad about that. When it started raining, I brought you in here. We've been sitting here for nearly an hour. You were having a nightmare...”

“I have lots of nightmares,” Jhan replied quietly, rubbing at his aching jaw.

Jhan relaxed in Kile's embrace. This doubled the man's nervousness. The rain slowed and stopped.

“You're sitting on my hair,” Jhan complained to get them out of a difficult situation.

Kile moved and let him go so that he could carefully slide out of the tree and free the long, black, length of hair that had fallen out of its braid. He followed Jhan out and stretched. The sun was coming from behind clouds and it glinted on everything.

“What are you going to do?” Jhan asked with his back to Kile, not bothering to hope that the arguments were at an end. “I tried to kill you.”

Kile's imala shook off the rain and stamped irritably as Kile took the reins. "Make you walk back to the fortress," he said as he mounted, "I think that's a fair punishment."

Jhan turned with a hiss of anger, but Kile was already walking his imala into the forest. Jhan followed, hands clenched, not letting himself believe that Kile would take him back to the fortress. He nearly caught himself hoping that he wouldn't. He had tried to kill Kile! Being locked up in an asylum in Sarvoy seemed small punishment for that!

He felt disoriented. The world blurred and stretched. Jhan was numb. Was he still walking? Had he fainted? Anxiety overwhelmed him. Killer! A voice shouted from all about him. Killer!

"Jhan," it was a different voice now sounding anxious and strained.

Jhan blinked and screamed, the world coming into sudden, sharp focus. He was standing on the lip of a gully with a twenty foot drop! Rain water cascaded down to a green pond where water reeds bobbed, half hiding jutting rocks that would have cut Jhan to pieces if he had fallen.

A hand took Jhan's arm and pulled him back to safety. Jhan hugged a broad chest as he was picked up and carried far from danger. When he was set down again, he sank to the ground and wept while Kile crouched beside him.

"Why, Jhan?" Kile wanted to know. "I looked back and you were walking off the path straight for that cliff!"

"I - I think that I tried to kill myself again," Jhan managed through his tears. He couldn't help the way that his body was shaking like a leaf. "I don't know why... I don't want to die! I truly don't! Why do I keep trying to?"

"Shhh!" Kile reached out and wiped roughly at his tears. "You need a warm room and some rest. Come on. I'll let you ride."

He helped Jhan onto the imala and then began walking. Jhan sat dazed in the saddle, beginning to doubt his own sanity.

"I suppose I refuse to give up, but my mind isn't so strong," Jhan finally said. "I don't know what else it could be. I try so hard, but people like you just won't leave me alone!"

Kile was stung. "You think you're a woman!" he shot back. "You tried to kill me and, just now, you tried to kill yourself! You shouldn't be left alone! You need help!"

"I need to go back to Vek. I shouldn't have stopped seeing him."

“Vek isn't a healer.”

“He can heal the compulsion in me to kill,” Jhan told Kile. “Once that goes away, maybe the other will follow. I don't want to die! I don't want to kill anyone! I don't want any more nightmares! I want a life!”

“As a woman?”

“Yes!”

“You *are* mad!”

Chapter Ten

(The Dance)

It was a long ride back, mostly in a silence that clung and wrapped each of them tightly, so tightly that neither spoke even when daylight broke through the clouds as they exited the forest. Rehn came running up to them from the stables.

Jhan dismounted stiffly, stumbled, and was upheld by the elbow by Rehn, who asked questions in a worried stream to Kile as if Jhan weren't there to answer them himself.

Kile cut him off briskly. "Take your maiden home, he's ill and wet," was all that he would reply and strode off to the stables with the imala.

"What's wrong with him?" Rehn demanded, but Jhan was beyond talking until Rehn had helped him back to the fortress, to Rehn's room, and into a tub with hot water. Even then, Jhan stared down at the water while Rehn washed the mud and weariness away with a sponge as if he were a nurse.

"Your face is bruised," Rehn said at last.

Jhan left the tub and dried off, for once too tired to care whether Rehn was looking or not. Sinking heavily onto the bed, he wrapped the towel about him as he curled up in the soft quilts. Quietly, then, he told Rehn everything that had happened.

Rehn was mortified. "This is my fault! If I hadn't insisted and played the fool -"

"No, it was better to find out that I'm still... unbalanced," Jhan interrupted, eyes large and sad. "What shall I do, Rehn? If I go to Vek and tell him that I'm still dangerous, he might lock me up again! If I don't, someone else may not be as lucky as Kile!"

Rehn took his time, draining the water from the tub and putting things away before turning to Jhan with a serious expression of worry. "I think that you should go to Vek. If you had hurt Kile, I don't think that we would have remained friends."

It stung, but Jhan didn't blame him for being blunt. He slowly handed the wet towel to Rehn, who folded it nervously as if it were clean and put it on the table. "I know why you like him, Rehn. I tried to kill him, but he still cared whether I was wet or not, whether I was hurt. I don't think that I would have been so kind."

Jhan felt better. He sat up and took the rumpled robe that Rehn fished from the bottom of his closet. A worn thing, probably only used on the coldest nights, Jhan put it on reluctantly and pushed up

the long sleeves. The material grated on his skin. He hugged it to him as if he deserved it.

“When Kile rode after you, I was afraid not to follow,” Rehn admitted. “He seemed very angry.” Rehn looked away, hands working together. “I only wanted you to get to know each other!”

Jhan sighed, again going over the turbulent past hours in his mind. “I think we understand each other better, but Kile will never accept what I am, Rehn. I'm sorry.”

Rehn shrugged despondently. “Kile wants me to stay away from you. He doesn't understand why we're friends. I don't really understand it either.” He gave Jhan a quick look. “Are you angry?”

Jhan stood and squeezed Rehn briefly on the shoulder. “I did get my exercise and fresh air,” Jhan admitted sourly and then relented at Rehn's sad expression. “Don't blame yourself, Rehn. I don't think that anyone could have foreseen that fiasco!” He yawned and stretched, feeling sore muscles twinge. “I'm going to my room now and try to rest.”

“When will you see Vek?”

“I'll see him tomorrow, when I've worked up the courage. I don't think that I can manage to face what he might say to me now.”

On that, Jhan left Rehn and made his way back to his own room. Two people were waiting for him there, leaning against the wall outside his door as if they had been waiting for some time. They wore page tunics, one with Margeritte's crest and the other with the king's colors, silver and pale blue. Both looked cross at Jhan's approach and their letters were handed to him unceremoniously.

Jhan took them, going pale. Had Kile told everyone so soon? These had to be orders to appear and make some accounting. He found that he couldn't read the script on the letters. He handed them back to the pages, embarrassed.

“I can't read your language. Could you read them to me, please?” He sounded stupid in his own ears.

The pages opened their letters without comment. Perhaps they were used to people who couldn't read? Margeritte's page was first.

“Dearest Jhan, please be advised that a party in honor of the noble ladies of the court will be held in one five day at full sun. You are to order one dress from the tailor of spectacular beauty and are hereby ordered to wear it to honor your mistress. It is signed, Her Highness, Princess Margeritte Tia Khelav.”

The king's page looked scandalized as he opened his own message. His eyebrow arched in satisfaction as he read his letter to both Jhan and Margeritte's page. "His Majesty, the king, advises Jhan, of unknown parentage, to *not* attend the party in honor of the noble ladies of the court, since it is open only to those of elevated birth and marriageable circumstances. It is signed, His Majesty, Tekhal Tal Khelav."

For a moment, Jhan was only relieved that it wasn't what he had thought and then, he grew angry. First Kile and now the king! Well, they were going to find out that he wasn't to be ordered or forced to be what he wasn't, and no one was going to tell him what to do!

It took all of Jhan's courage to meet with Vek the next day. He was terrified of what the general might say to him about the incident in the forest, and he was struggling with an inner voice that pleaded with him not to tell Vek about it at all. He surprised himself when he reached Vek's office without turning and running.

Vek's office would better have suited a supply clerk. Neat stacks of equipment took up most of the room, Vek's desk and chair perched among it as if it were an eagle's aerie. Vek sat behind that desk, chewing a coal stick savagely, and scowling at some sort of list, as if he couldn't see it properly or didn't believe what it said.

Jhan stood quietly, words sticking in his throat while Vek seemed not to be aware that he was there. It was some time before the general glared up from his paper and put the coal stick down. "Yes?"

Jhan swallowed, clasping his hands to hide their shaking. Vek's eyes swept him up and down, noting his carefully combed and braided hair and full skirted black robe. His jaw tightened.

"Well?" Vek grated

Jhan looked away to gather his nerve, staring out of a window at the morning sunlight instead. "I - I attacked Kile Dor yesterday. He threatened me... I was frightened. I just - just did it. I wasn't in control. I don't even know... I don't know how I did it."

Vek stood up and Jhan flinched, backing away as the man moved from behind the desk, his face dark. He was in uniform, the gold on his sleeves flashing in the light. He passed Jhan and closed the door to the outside and stood before it.

"It was only a matter of time before you consciously tried to use the skills that you were

taught to use unconsciously,” Vek told Jhan, “You seemed such a frightened little girl, I thought that you wouldn't have the courage to ever fight back willingly.

Jhan hardly heard him, all attention on the closed door and the big man that stood deceptively at his ease before it.

“Healer Evian warned the king and I, that you might still be dangerous, that there might be more hidden trip wires within your mind, “ Vek said. “The king hasn't given his decision in the matter yet, but I've already made my decision. I want to try and trip those wires. I want every hidden thing about you exposed, and then I want to bring all of your magnificent training under your control. You would be such a warrior -”

“Why did you close the door?” Jhan finally asked aloud. Darkness reached out for his senses, transforming Vek into someone else, a figure from memory that held pain in its shadowy hands. “I-You're frightening me!”

Vek raised an eyebrow, looking very fierce. “Have you heard anything that I've said?”

Jhan backed away, searching for another exit. “Stay away!” he shouted to the shadow.

“I closed the door so that you would hear me out,” Vek told him. “I also closed it so that you would be easier to put into bonds should you refuse my offer. You cannot refuse. I cannot allow you to roam free, a killing weapon in untrained hands.”

Jhan was nearly ready to jump through the window, anything to escape that shadow. When the door opened suddenly, sunlight streaming in, Jhan watched the shadow melt like mist and turn into Vek again. The man was striding out as if he had business elsewhere and he'd forgotten all about Jhan.

Jhan took a step, stumbled, and then ran from the room. Reality crashed into his senses. He stopped and stood stupidly, rubbing at his eyes as the sun stung them, making him see the normal roll of green hills and the safe normality of the trees and the open sky.

Vek had stopped, too, looking back expectantly. “Come with me, Jhan. You don't have any choice.”

Not any choice, meaning Jhan would be put into a cell if he refused. Jhan felt tears in his eyes as he struggled to calm his hammering heart. He wanted to scream and to run again, as if that would take him away from the memories that so easily slipped into the here and now, but, running wouldn't help, he knew. He needed to lock those memories up. Control them, somehow. Yes, control. Wasn't that what Vek offered? Control over at least the most dangerous of those memories?

“You are trying my patience!” Vek shouted, his voice shaking Jhan from the last vestiges of his confusion. He began walking quickly to catch up to the man, as if Vek had jerked on a leash. Vek didn't wait for him, striding towards the rings of sand where a man was training recruits. That man was Kile.

Vek grabbed a padded vest from a pile of equipment and tossed it to Jhan, who caught it awkwardly. “Put the vest on,” Vek instructed impatiently. “It will save you some bruises.”

Jhan slowly donned the vest, tying it in place with fumbling fingers.

“What is that?” There was laughter from the men at the anonymous jibe. Jhan looked up to see a ring of faces that all echoed anticipation of some sport to come at Jhan's expense.

“Give us a clear space for a few minutes,” Vek ordered and waved Kile back. “No one is to intervene, understood?”

“What will you be doing, sir?” Kile wondered. His hair was tied back and his face was flushed handsomely from his earlier exertions. His tone was that of a man who thought trouble was close at hand. “Perhaps a more private -”

“Are you a general now, Kile Dor?” Vek barked and Kile straightened to attention. “Do as I order. Keep the men silent and out of our way!”

Kile met Jhan's eyes briefly, before moving aside and growling at the men to come to order. They were talking among themselves, still laughing. Jhan caught a few words. They *were* expecting something, not believing Vek would have any serious intentions with a creature like himself.

“Now, I am going to teach you how to fight,” Vek began. “Your body knows, but your mind does not. We will bring the two into accord and, hopefully, this will bring control. Each day, for a short time, we will meet here and train. If you fail to appear, I will suggest to the king that you be executed as a danger to the kingdom.”

Jhan was stunned, mouth open, but he didn't have any doubt that Vek was speaking seriously. He could see by Kile's face if nothing else.

“Tie up your robe,” Vek ordered, but Kile came up to do it for Jhan, since the vest made it hard to bend.

Jhan stared down at him. He was surprised Kile would come so close or even want to touch him. The man was quick, knotting the material of the robe above Jhan's knees before backing away. He looked uncomfortable, as if he had just bared the legs of a woman, something scandalous in that place.

Vek began with stretching exercises. Slow movements to help them both warm up. After that, he demonstrated one move, not once, but several times. Jhan frowned, almost snapping out that he wasn't stupid, before thinking that maybe Vek was used to training men who weren't very bright and did it out of habit.

Jhan repeated the move easily and Vek nodded, satisfied. They passed to another and then a third. "Combine them. Come at me!" Vek ordered suddenly and crouched in defense.

"Dance girl!" A soldier laughed and then fell silent as Jhan started to move.

It happened, some other hand taking control. Do this, this, and this; it was a voice without words, a spider pulling threads in a complex web. Jhan floated through the moves Vek had taught him and then leapt into the air like a cat, foot striking out to take Vek in the head. Vek was prepared. He rolled under the blow. Jhan flipped downwards in mid-air, body making an impossible folding motion that brought his hands striking towards Vek again.

A body plowed into Jhan's and sent him clear of Vek. He landed on top of Kile, Kile's big arms wrapped about him, staring into blue eyes that were sharply aware that death could come instantly from Jhan's small hands.

"It's all right!" Jhan panted. "Let me go!"

Kile cautiously complied. They both stood to face Vek. Kile was expecting a reprimand for interfering, but Vek wasn't a fool. He gave a curt hand sign and Kile stepped back.

"It seems that we must move even more slowly than I had thought," Vek growled. "Practice the first move that I taught you."

It went on for an hour and Jhan soon became sore in every muscle. He was victim to many rude comments as one group of new recruits was replaced by others ready to train. They hadn't seen his demonstration of ability and couldn't understand why their general was taking the time to train a thekling to fight. Kile had stayed through it all, the recruit's trainer, but his attention had never wavered from Jhan and Vek no matter what exercise he had been explaining to his men.

Jhan thought Kile's attention was out of concern for Vek, in case things became out of hand again, but he found those blue eyes on him most often and they were not full of concern, but puzzlement.

The training ended and Jhan thankfully left the practice yard. Kile followed and stood close while Jhan dipped water from a nearby trough and wiped at his face to cool the sweat on his brow.

“You are as deadly as a blade dipped in poison,” Kile finally muttered and Jhan turned to look at him, wary. “Do you dress this way to make your victims doubt your ability?”

Jhan sat on the edge of the trough and untied his robe, smoothing it down over his legs. “I shouldn't have worn this robe. It's too fine to be crumpled and too dark to be out in the sun exercising.”

“That's an answer?”

Jhan blinked up at him. “Yes.”

Kile's jaw tightened. “I still can't understand! You have the ability to be a great soldier, if Vek ever gets you under control. With a little working out you could grow muscular and look less... feminine! You could...”

Jhan had had enough. Daringly, he stood and slipped arms around Kile's waist, first making sure no one was looking their way from the distant practice sand. He gazed up into Kile's stunned eyes and gave him a dose of his own liquid blue eyes under their dark lashes.

“Can you really see me as Jhan the warrior? Do I feel like a brawny man?” Jhan leaned close. “Do I smell like one? There is only a woman in your arms. Can't you believe it?”

The violent shove was not unexpected. Jhan regained his balance a few paces away and smiled at Kile's confused and embarrassed expression.

“You are trying to make me your business again, Kile. For the last time, I'm not!”

“You are a waste!” Kile exploded at last. “You are a perverted waste of ability! How can you delude yourself with this fantasy knowing that it will always be just that and nothing more! You have a chance to be a man, a soldier! With your ability you could go as far as you wished!”

“So I should use my ability to kill people?”

“You should use it to protect them!”

Jhan laughed, but it was rough laughter without any humor in it. “Can't you hear what I'm saying to you, Kile? I'm not the kind that thinks women can't do as they please. I could join your army, wear pants, and fight along with the best of them while still being a woman inside, but I'm not that kind of woman! I am someone who enjoys sweeping dresses and perfume and lace. That's why I can't accept this body! I cannot be masculine!”

“Why do you speak as if you were not born a man?” Kile shouted, raising his hands in exasperation.

Jhan almost said it and then bit his lip. Evian's words came back to him. It was death to be possessed. It used to be death to be a thekling. One reply could get him killed, the other... “Kile, there is the spirit and the body, do you understand this?” Kile nodded reluctantly. “The body is a man. My spirit is a woman! The two have been forced together by some gods' mistake!”

“Or your dark king has made you think so.”

They stared at one another, Kile in sudden sympathy and Jhan in utter frustration. What was the use? A devil pricked Jhan and the words shot out before he could think; a scathing retort sure to make Kile leave him alone forever.

“Kile, if I were a woman, I would enjoy making love to you.”

Kile went white, and then scarlet, and then, surprisingly, he calmed.

“Are you - Are you telling me that you only want men if you are a woman? You can't be a thekling, then. You're just confused!”

Jhan supposed it was as much of the truth as Kile could accept. “Oh, of course,” he replied softly, “I *must* be confused!”

Kile wasn't going to let it go. It was the safe explanation he needed. “Training with Vek and being with the men will help you, I'm certain of it! It's just a matter of time before you remember who you were and...”

He went on, but Jhan stopped listening. He sighed heavily and then cut Kile off. “It's all right if that's what you want to think. Could you please leave me alone now?”

“I still don't like the fact that you and Rehn are friends,” Kile persisted. “It makes him look bad when he should have everyone's respect as the speaker to the Sahvossa.”

“I like Rehn just the way he is!” Jhan shot back, angry now. “I don't want him to be like those snotty nobles who won't even look down their noses at you!”

“Like me?” Kile wondered sharply.

Jhan flushed. Kile was a noble. “I'd forgotten. You aren't like them,” Jhan amended. “Still, Rehn is my friend, and, whether we remain so, is our decision, not yours!”

The sun slanted into Jhan's eyes. He squinted and then remembered the time.

“I'd completely forgotten!”

“What?”

“I was supposed to be fitted for a party dress this afternoon!” Jhan explained. “I never expected my little talk with Vek to take so long!”

“Did you say *party dress*?” Kile asked with a shocked and disgusted look.

Another argument! Jhan wasn't up for it.

“It’s just an indulgence on my part. I don’t have anything to wear except flowery robes and three plain dresses that Margeritte gave me. I... I wanted something finer... just to look at.”

Kile snorted. “Yes, it would be just to look at! No man would ask you to attend any gathering wearing it!”

Jhan fluttered dark eyelashes and smiled sweetly. “Are you saying that I'm too ugly to be asked anywhere?”

Kile started to apologize, caught himself, and swore. “Stop doing that! This illusion of yours is unnatural!”

“It isn't illusion, Kile.” Jhan taunted and turned on his heel gracefully. Walking back to the fortress, he wondering if he smelled of sweat and what the tailor would think of his disheveled appearance?

The tailor was annoyed that Jhan was late. With a harried expression, and tape measure in hand, he approached Jhan and hustled him into his rooms. Material lay strewn everywhere along with brocade, velvets, shimmering gauzes, and fur lined leathers.

“Now, *milady*, we must hurry to fit you! Princess Margeritte has left strict orders on how your dress is to be done, but she does not realize the *complications* that arise from the design, or that I have a bevy of ladies waiting their turn to be fitted for their dresses!”

He knew.

Jhan stood with hands clasped together, trying to see what mood the man was in. He seemed every inch the professional dealt an unusual request, yet ready for the challenge.

“Undress,” the man ordered curtly and, when Jhan hesitated, he snapped, “I will not have a

lady assistant measure you, since it would shock her to tears. You must allow me to work from bare skin. Come, *milady*, I am not interested in what you are, only in the craftsmanship of my work and the jingle it will give me in my pocket!”

Jhan shivered as the man locked the outer door. He slowly, reluctantly, undressed, leaving only the wrap about his hips. The tailor wisely didn't argue.

Measurements were taken quickly and the man frowned as he wrote them down, shooting quick glances at Jhan as if he couldn't yet believe that they had come from a man.

“Your waist has curve, thank the gods! Your hip is smooth, not sharp like a man’s. This will not be as hard as I had imagined, but still we have the one great problem... or two if you like.”

Jhan touched his flat chest self-consciously. “You made me three dresses already,” he pointed out softly.

“Have you worn them?”

“No, I wasn't allowed to.”

The man sighed. “The gods know why!” he muttered sarcastically.

The tailor picked up white, frilly undergarments and helped Jhan into them, making notes once or twice on adjustments.

The corset came next. It had a shaped bust that was very small and petite. The tailor pulled out the bust impatiently and then slid the corset onto Jhan. Tying the back laces cruelly tight, he then approached Jhan from the front.

“Forgive me, *milady*,” he said automatically and then reached into the top of the corset. His fingers deftly made a cleavage out of Jhan's compressed chest. “Better not to pretend that you have something that you don't. We work with what you have.”

Jhan was staring down at his new cleavage in amazement and had to be called back to attention by an impatient cough from the tailor. Jhan gasped in awe. The man was holding up an emerald green, velvet gown trimmed at sleeve and hem with fanciful points of white lace. It had a long, sweeping hemline and tight, long sleeves. The shoulders were puffy and the neckline... it plunged daringly.

“I measured this from a corset,” the tailor explained tersely. “We will have to do some pinning and taking in.”

Jhan nodded dumbly as the man slipped the glorious yards of velvet over his head and settled it down about his body. He quickly pinned before Jhan could be depressingly aware of the extra room given for female shape. When Jhan stood before a mirror the tailor hovering behind him as Jhan stared at his reflection.

The tailor became impatient. “*Milady* is pleased?” It was the pained tone of a man used to working with temperamental women.

“Very, very pleased,” Jhan whispered back, emotion overwhelming him..

In the mirror stood a beautiful woman; a forest goddess all in green. His black hair trailed over one shoulder like a shiny, black waterfall and his eyes were blue pools filled with tears. He started to weep. The tailor clucked and gave him a handkerchief in disgust.

By the time that the day of the dance arrived, Jhan was a nervous wreck. He had spent days watching women flutter and go into hysterics over dresses and hairstyles, never guessing that the actual day would be much worse.

Jhan almost went into his own hysterics when he discovered, belatedly, that he couldn't dress alone. He needed someone to assist him. Knowing that the women wouldn't help him, Jhan knew that he had to convince Rehn to take up the task.

Rehn wasn't prepared to see Jhan sitting dejectedly in a chair, with a mound of velvet and lace in his arms, and dressed in women's frilly undergarments.

“I came to see if you wanted to go to the common man's party in the gardens...” Rehn trailed off. “Jhan, are you truly going through with this? You told me that the king himself ordered you not to attend!”

“I'm following the orders of my mistress first.” Jhan straightened primly and then remembered his problem. “Rehn...”

“I don't know the first thing about it!” Rehn cut him short, guessing Jhan's request. “I had enough sisters who helped each other. I can braid hair, but I've never touched a woman's laces, certainly nothing as fine as what you have!”

Jhan scowled. “Don't tell me that you've never undone a woman's underthings?”

Rehn put hands on hips to argue and then smiled, laughing. “You know I have, but Jhan, plain women don't wear such contraptions!”

“I'll talk you through it.” Jhan suggested beseechingly. “Please, Rehn? No one else will help me.”

Rehn relented and took hold of the garments, laying them out carefully on Jhan's bed. Jhan already had on the lace slip, pantaloons, and white hose. The corset went on next and Rehn went at it as if he were harnessing an imala, everything brisk and business like to stave off embarrassment. He tied the laces tight and Jhan turned from him to make the little bit of cleavage. Still turned, he allowed Rehn to slip the dress over his head and lace and hook it up the back.

Rehn hummed a song under his breath as he took up a brush and unbraided Jhan's hair. He took his time brushing out knots until it was a silky mass down Jhan's back. Then, he chose a green ribbon, from a basket of different colored ones, and braided just the last foot of Jhan's hair to keep it from flying about.

Jhan stepped into white slippers and then turned around. Rehn was stunned. He stared with his mouth open and then said, “You're... beautiful.”

Jhan blushed, suddenly shy as he replied, “I bet that you say that to all the men dressed as women.”

Rehn blinked rapidly and seemed to come out of a daze. He said firmly, “I don't see a man here, milady.”

Jhan was moved. “I hope that no one else does today, either, Rehn.”

Jhan left him to go to Margeritte's apartments. It was disconcerting to see people stop dead to stare at him, curtsy, or bow as if they didn't recognize him for the man that they despised. They were treating him as if he were some great lady of Upper Pekarín and Jhan's confidence firmed. In fact, it was hard to remember that things could go very wrong, very quickly, especially when, upon entering Margeritte's apartments, all hurried efforts to dress and primp where halted. All the maids stared at Jhan in dumb amazement, envy, and astonishment at his beauty.

Margeritte alone was unaffected. “Come now!” She clapped her hands briskly. “We have only one hour left before we must make an appearance! Let us hurry!”

Preparations were continued haltingly, and then everything sprang into high gear, as Jhan was surrounded by women arguing over cosmetics, jewelry, and their choice of dress. Many were

changing, suddenly deciding that they had made wrong choices.

“Jhan, there you are!” Margeritte swooped down on him and led him away from the press of females. She wore a shimmering material like silk that was gray one moment and then iridescent silver and blue whenever she moved. Her hair had been bleached white to match and gray ribbons weighed down its fanciful curls.

“Why aren't you wearing any make up?” Margeritte wondered. “Pink blush for your cheeks and lips, and black kohl for your eyes, I think. Your skin is so pale, dear. We need to make your beauty stand out more.”

Jhan was handed over to a servant, a harried woman nearly worn out by seeing to the other maids. She applied the makeup while trying in vain to see under Jhan's disguise, knowing he was a man but unable to see any hint of one.

Margeritte applied a broach to Jhan's shoulder, a spray of sparkling jewels.

“No, Your Highness, I couldn't!” Jhan protested and started to remove it.

“A jewel for a jewel,” Margeritte insisted and patted it in place before turning to her other maids. “You all must hurry!”

Jhan was left in a corner, alone, and he suddenly felt ridiculous. He touched the fine material of his dress and the world slowed and halted, a silence hovering about him. He wanted to weep, to shout, to protest, to run away and not go to this dance. This was ultimately all a lie. A man dressed as a woman. A court joke, he might turn out to be, fingers pointing and people laughing as if he were a clown.

His fingers tightened on the material, but then Jhan forced them to relax and smooth out the velvet. His chin lifted. They would see a woman today, not a clown. A forty one year old woman who knew how to be feminine, not an awkward man bungling through an act!

All was prepared at last. The maids fell into position with Margeritte at their head, Jhan hanging back by the rear. They swept out of the room, laughing and chattering, to make their way to the dance hall.

Jhan was impressed. They joined other entourages of nobles and ladies, but they all moved aside and bowed like a wave as Margeritte passed. The maids had their heads held high, eyes sparkling with pleasure at the acknowledgment of their status, but Margeritte was oblivious, attention on what was to come as if it were some important business rather than a function for enjoyment.

A long hallway, lined with silver and blue liveried men, led to a great archway. Margeritte passed inside and someone loudly announced their entrance. The room stilled and then the wave of curtsies and bows began. Margeritte gave a small, noble wave and the room returned to normal.

The room was a collection of wide spaced arches holding up a vaulted ceiling. That ceiling was white but painted with gilded, golden flowers. Real flowers were spilling out of a hundred free standing planters and cascading over food laden tables. Music came from behind a silk partition where musicians were concealed. A wide dance floor of white marble still remained empty. At the far end, two thrones of gray marble echoed that emptiness.

Margeritte made directly for a circle of older women sitting in great stuffed chairs away from the younger people. These women were attended by several beautiful maids.

At a discrete distance, Margeritte halted and turned to her maids. Jhan felt tension surround him and he became anxious. The women strained towards Margeritte, eyes hopeful, like a pack of puppies wanting to be noticed. Margeritte did not even glance at them. She held out her hand to Jhan.

“Come with me, Jhan,” she bade him. “You will wait on me. The rest of you may enjoy the dance, but stand ready for my call.”

Jhan heard gasps of disbelief and outrage, but none dared speak their minds. He took Margeritte's hand and she led him to the old women, motioning him to stand by the chair that she slowly lowered herself in to.

There was small talk at first. An old, wizened grandmother, holding a black cane, used it to point as she spoke in her croaking voice, while a more timid woman, with white wisps of hair pulled unsuccessfully into a coiffure, interjected comments like a bird darting under a raven for seeds. The other three ladies were nondescript, one almost asleep in her chair. Jhan tried to follow the conversation, but they were speaking of things that he didn't understand; points for this and points for that as if they were speaking of imala, but weren't quite.

The old crone finally sat back in her chair with a sour expression. “I suppose that you must win this time, Margeritte, but my Filaya was very close!”

There were nods and the maid behind the crone, a blonde beauty with a high nose, was flushed with anger. It must have been Filaya. She pointed a finger at Jhan furiously. “Milady's, are you saying that creature is more beautiful than I! I heard it from my father that it's a man and that Her Highness Margeritte kept him as a sport! Now you say that he is more of a woman than I am?”

There were shocked looks. Jhan felt an arrow of embarrassment take him square in the heart. Of course! This was the game of beauty played by the ladies of the court! They had been speaking about the good and bad points of their maids to see who would win. He was shocked to realize that he had been the one to win. He had also been exposed, though, and some of the ladies were rising, demanding an explanation.

Margeritte was as calm as milk. She smiled faintly and touched Jhan on the hand when he made as if to leave. "My Jhan won fair and square. You voted... all of you. Jhan is my maid. Whatever else is not anyone's business, or must we speak of your mercenary daughter, Lady Kevelor?"

The crone went white lipped, her hand squeezing her cane so hard that Jhan thought that it might break, and then, she relaxed and laughed; a harsh sound. She settled back into her chair. "Well played, your Highness. I thought that we had all grown too old for such... plots."

"Who is too old?" Margeritte retorted and laughed. The rest joined in reluctantly as Margeritte waved to Jhan airily. "You may leave me and enjoy yourself. I have attendants who will see me served well."

Jhan felt like a doll that had been briefly played with and then set back on a shelf. He felt hot and dizzy with fury as he made his way through the crowds to a spot near a food laden table. He shouldn't have been treated like that! It made him feel less human than the high and mighty ladies!

It was awhile before Jhan cooled enough to notice the food. His wages were only enough to buy plain bread, cheese, and occasional meat and vegetables. The buffet before him was mouthwatering. It made him forget his anger, for the moment, and think about his long neglected stomach.

Fowl were stuffed with nuts and herb bread. Pastries were oozing with fillings. Platters of steaming meats were arranged in fanciful designs, along with meat and vegetable pies. Jhan reached out to choose a bird leg basted with something sweet smelling.

A hand grabbed Jhan's and pulled him away from the table. Jhan was suddenly staring into Kile's angry face, the man bent over to accomplish the feat.

"What are you doing here?" It was one rapid rush of words said under Kile's breath.

Jhan scowled and pulled away. "Getting something to eat, what's it look like?"

Jhan was going to follow that up with something even more acidic, but he became aware of Kile all at once. Kile was very handsome in a blue velvet tunic cut at the sleeves to show a red silk undershirt. His pants were black leather and his boots were the same rich blue as his tunic. A sweeping

cape of red leather, lined with blue velvet, finished the effect.

“My...” Jhan trailed off, staring at Kile appreciatively.

Kile was having a similar lack of coherency only much worse. He dumbly looked Jhan up and down, mouth open in shock. “Y-You - You're... How can you... this is impossible!”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Jhan asked sourly, finding his tongue. He tried to pull himself together. It didn't matter how handsome Kile was! He had to stop acting like a fool!

Kile was looking a little frightened. “This - This is some sort of magic! You're... beautiful! You even have...” He was looking at Jhan's cleavage and then he hurriedly averted his eyes. “How did you accomplish it? It's - It's sick!”

“I had a very good tailor and, no, it is not sick!” Jhan turned his back and crossed his arms over his counterfeit cleavage, chin high and haughty. “If I disgust you, then go away!”

“I think that you will be the one to leave!”

Kile put a hand to Jhan's elbow. Jhan felt an unvoiced threat He had pushed Kile too far. Kindness stopped now.

A trumpet sounded and a man shouted over the crowd for silence. Kile's grip tightened and Jhan was spun to stand with a forming line of lords, ladies, maids, and man servants. It was a double row that led to the twin thrones. Jhan was close to the throne.

The king and his queen entered the room. They were both dressed in silver and blue. The queen was not what Jhan had expected. She was large boned with a head of red-gold hair atop broad features. She was the equal in size of the king, but looked as if she could pick him up and carry him over her head. She moved with grace, though, despite her size, and she was obviously well bred, nodding warmly to the bows and curtsies that began on both sides of the welcoming line as they passed.

Jhan watched closely how it was done. When the king and queen reached them, Jhan pulled his elbow away from Kile and then held his hand out delicately. Kile automatically took it as Jhan went down in a deep curtsy, his skirts pooling around him like green water.

The king's eyes came up and locked. He stopped and his queen took one step alone without him, before turning in surprise to see why he had halted. Her face turned unpleasant when she spotted Jhan. It was clear that she was wondering if Jhan was a rival.

The king remembered himself and took his queen's arm, continuing to the thrones. They both

turned and sat as one and the crowd relaxed.

“Be merry and all honor to the ladies of the court!” Tekhal exclaimed.

Music began and Jhan straightened, feeling a knee crack with being bent too long.

“Now will you leave?” Kile demanded in his ear.

Jhan fixed him with determined blue eyes. “No, now go away!”

People began to dance, slow and graceful.

“Jhan, please attend us.” The king only had to raise his voice a little for Jhan to hear.

Jhan approached the thrones cautiously. Several courtiers moved out of his way, looking at him curiously.

“At Your Majesty’s service,” Jhan said to the king and nodded respectfully to the queen.

The king was obviously not happy. “You were given my command not to attend.”

“I was commanded by my mistress to attend,” Jhan countered. “You must speak with her if it was against your wishes.”

Tekhal let out an annoyed gust of breath. “Are you trying to embarrass me?”

Jhan motioned to his appearance. “Am I ugly or foolish looking? How am I an embarrassment to you?”

“Who is this woman?” The queen finally asked, “Why do you speak to her with such familiarity?”

The king looked uncomfortable and took several moments deciding on his reply. “This is Jhan of unknown parentage,” he replied at last. He had decided to tell the truth. “He is a man who fancies himself a woman, my wife. We allowed for his madness and my cousin Margeritte shows him kindness in letting him serve her.”

The queen did not look as if she were disgusted. Strangely enough, she looked overwhelmed and somewhat frightened. She asked the king, “You barred him from our festivities?”

The king scowled and replied irritably, “Of course, I did, but he ignored my orders.”

“Forgive my husband's unkindness, Jhan!” the queen begged. “He did not mean any disrespect to you.”

Jhan was confused. When he looked at the king, he saw his confusion as well.

Tekhal turned to his wife and asked, "What are you saying, Denaya?"

Denaya put a hand over his in supplication. "My husband, in my land, such as he are thought to have spoken to a god. Such speech makes the brain addled. No insult is given them and they are honored in every hall. To insult them is to call down the anger of the god who honored them."

Jhan didn't know how to reply. The king looked about them to see who was listening, but everyone, of course, pretended that they heard nothing. One did not eavesdrop on royalty. It was as if the spot that they stood on was a bubble surrounded by merrymakers.

"Please allow me to speak with you, Jhan." The queen motioned and a pillow was placed at her feet. "Please be seated."

Like a dog called to heel, Jhan though sourly. "It will wrinkle my dress sitting there," Jhan replied. "I will stand by your chair instead."

The queen looked uncomfortable now. This was against some sort of protocol. Jhan didn't care. He fluttered lashes at the poleaxed face of the king and bent to hear what the queen had to say. He didn't have to bend far. The queen sat tall in her chair.

"You appear to be a woman indeed," the queen began, recovering and turning to look at Jhan. "You make a most lovely woman. You could most easily win the beauty game of the ladies."

"I did." Jhan remembered that he was angry and it didn't help his temper that Tekhal forgot his and laughed.

"My cousin has been a trickster since birth!" he told them. "The ladies must have been very put out when they discovered Margeritte's deception!"

"I don't appreciate her humor," Jhan replied coldly. "I don't like to be used!"

The queen looked frightened again and put a soft hand on Jhan's arm. "If you are displeased by serving her further, I would be honored to have you among my servers."

"No!" Tekhal's laughter died abruptly. His hands slammed on his chair arms. "Jhan will not serve anyone any longer! His tongue full of insults hasn't any respect for his betters. I will not humor such nerve! Leave this hall at once, Jhan!"

That order was the last straw. Jhan stepped away from the thrones and faced them, anger making him brave.

"How dare you order me around!" he shouted furiously. "I'm not a dog!" He glared at

Tekhal. "Don't threaten to have me executed either! I'm really tired of that!"

"Guard, take Jhan away!"

Jhan felt his elbow grabbed. It was Kile, of course, shoving another man aside to do the honor. "What are your commands, Your Majesty?"

The queen was white with trepidation. "Husband, you must not insult him. Please! It will bring us ruin!"

Faces turned their way; bored nobles hoping for some excitement. The king glanced about sharply and saw a situation in the making. "Release him."

Kile did not obey at first, but then he unclenched his hand from Jhan's elbow. Jhan rubbed it with a wince and glared at Kile with venom, but the king spoke before he did.

"Come close." When Jhan obeyed cautiously, the king asked, "Do you wish to die?"

Jhan leaned forward, eyes bright. What was there to lose? "I'm not your slave!" he said it quickly and softly so that no one else but the king could hear. "You can throw me out of your party, if you like, and I'll go, but don't insult me and don't let your cousin Margeritte insult me! She used me, embarrassed me, just for some silly game! If you were in my shoes, how would you feel?"

The king arched an eyebrow. "If I were in your shoes, I would know better than to come to a royal party in a dress and speak of a princess of the blood embarrassing me!"

The soft dance music, and the sound of many feet treading in time on the dance floor, seemed a strange backdrop to their tense drama. Jhan knew that he had only to say the wrong thing... but what else could he do? It was the same decision that he had made when he'd decided to remain a woman, only this had to do with freedom. These people were trying to deny him both and Jhan was willing to die to stop them.

"I am a person, Tekhal, just like you are. I feel like you, hurt like you, bleed like you. I am equal. Who your parents were, or your position in life, doesn't change that. I refuse to be treated as if I don't matter!"

The king stared as if some strange beast had uncovered itself before him and he was trying to discover what it was. "Equal," he muttered. "I have often thought that men should be equal, but I have long kept it to myself. It is not a popular view, especially for a king. When a madman spouts it before me, I wonder at its sanity." He shrugged irritably. "I am sorry if you were embarrassed by Princess Margeritte. She was wrong to use a good servant thus. Will that satisfy you? Will that quiet your

lightning tongue?”

Jhan nodded, reluctantly, almost not willing to bend.

“Remain,” the king commanded, surprisingly offering more. “It will cause talk if you are seen being sent away and I do not want gossip about my cousin's so-called maid.

“I can understand that,” Jhan agreed.

The king became very stern, threatening. “Jhan, if you go on being disrespectful, there will come a time when too many ears hear and I will have to do something that we will both regret.”

Jhan glanced from one side to the other, at the courtiers who were trying their hardest to look as if they heard nothing, the guards who stood at attention awaiting an order, and the queen herself who was looking strange and frightened. How many was too many, Jhan wondered, but held his devil's tongue. He had won for the moment, his boldness paying off. He felt a tingle spread through him. He had walked the edge. It was almost exhilarating.

Jhan curtsied, head held high, and smiled. “Thank you for your mercy, Your Majesty.”

“You are given leave to join Margeritte's other maids,” the king grunted in reply and turned his attention away as several lords bowed and hurried forward to speak with him.

Jhan went back into the crowd. Kile didn't follow. Jhan was nervous a moment, wondering what everyone had thought of seeing the king and himself together, but all the looks were curious and even envious. Jhan smiled again. They thought that he had been granted some fine favor by being called from among them to speak to royalty!

Jhan found himself near the food again and, once more, he was tempted. He reached out a hand for a pastry and groaned in frustration as it was taken and he was turned.

“Kile, leave me alone!”

But it wasn't Kile. This was a man of middle age in a burgundy outfit and a white cape. He was dark skinned and handsome, his white teeth flashing and his brown eyes taking in Jhan as if he were a pastry.

“I am Count Havar De Oro, milady. May we dance together?”

It was someone who didn't know who or what he was. Jhan blushed. Margeritte had schooled him on a few steps but... He tried to decline. The man would not take no for an answer. He turned and led Jhan towards the dance floor. Once there, he turned and took Jhan's other hand. The music was light

and airy as they began to dance. The man led easily and Jhan did not falter in his steps.

This was beautiful! This was right! A few knew and looked scandalized. The rest marveled at the tall, dark man and his pale, lovely partner and didn't guess. At that moment he was a woman; a woman at a party who had been asked to dance! Jhan smiled into the eyes of his partner. He was surprised by the hungry look he saw there, a look that reminded Jhan of something, something disturbing.

"May I have the last of this dance?" Jhan was pulled neatly away from his dance partner by Kile. There was nothing De Oro could do without making a scene. He bowed angrily, conceding his place, and stepped away. Kile glared down at Jhan as he began leading Jhan in the dance.

Kile struggled to keep his voice low as he said in outrage, "How dare you dance with another man in public!"

Jhan retorted, "You're the one that cut in! You're dancing with me!"

"I did it in order to save De Oro from scandal!"

"And exposed yourself to scandal in his place, how noble," Jhan mocked. "Maybe you were just jealous?"

Kile reddened and Jhan was amazed to realize that he had struck a nerve. "I am not a pervert!" Kile enunciated each word. "I am a guard of His Majesty, the king, and it is my duty to make sure that you do not turn this gathering into a hotbed of gossip and shame!"

"The king gave you that duty?"

Kile was silent, jaw working. The king had not. Kile had taken it upon himself.

"I'm warning you, Jhan," Kile said angrily. "Don't dance with anyone else and don't dance with De Oro. He's on the council of the king and he could be very dangerous to you!"

"How could he be a danger to me?" Jhan wondered skeptically.

"The king rules, but he bends to the will of the council. If De Oro brought up the fact that a thekling in a dress attended the king's dance and shamed him, he could ask that you be imprisoned! Do you understand?"

Jhan felt a chill and understood.

"You are very naive, Jhan. I've watched you insult the king himself and his cousin, today, and live to tell of it. Such luck doesn't last forever!"

The dance ended and Jhan was led to two glass doors that opened into a garden.

“Go join Rehn,” Kile told her, “or better yet, forget both parties and go to your home.”

Jhan measured Kile with his eyes, slowly up and down. The large man stared back steadily, undaunted and firm.

“Kile...” Jhan felt his eyes sting. “I just want to be what I am inside and to be treated normally. The only way that is going to happen is for me to stay in public and force them to see me. They need to get used to me. We have a saying where I come from, *‘People fear what they do not understand.’* I intend for these people to become familiar with me!”

“There you are beautiful one.” De Oro came up smoothly and took Jhan's arm, bowing a little to Kile. “The garden is magnificent. I would like nothing better than to walk there with the grandest flower that I have ever seen.”

Kile tensed, protests on his lips, but Jhan forestalled him. “I would love to walk with you. Excuse us, Sir Dor.”

“Lord Dor,” Kile muttered under his breath, but Jhan only smiled and walked with De Oro out into the garden.

Chapter Eleven

(Enemies)

Tension eased. Jhan listened politely as De Oro showed him his knowledge of the plants about them, speaking of small things. Jhan had accepted the offer of a walk just to get some air and to gather his nerve to finish out the rest of the party. He also had some grave matters to consider. One was whether he could return to Margeritte's employ after what she had done to him. Another was whether the queen's offer of a position with her was valid and if he dared take her up on it.

When two men appeared on the path ahead, Jhan hardly took notice of them until he realized that they were barring the path. Jhan stopped and glanced nervously at De Oro. What happened next was a blur. He felt De Oro hit him, fist thudding against his ribs with bruising force. Jhan fell, blinded by pain, and someone dragged him into the bushes. There were more blows, not many. Jhan was surrounded by booted feet that forbore to kick. Thunder rolled overhead and rain began coming down lightly.

“This is a warning, little pervert,” said De Oro's voice. “I don't know how you managed to get into the king's confidence, but it ceases here. You are stepping into a game already in play. Try to join it again and your life will be forfeit!”

There was silence. Jhan blinked and the boots were gone. He lay in the dirt and watched the rain start to pool nearby, covering the leaves of the bushes around him. It splattered his face and he felt himself grow slowly wet. He couldn't move, whether from some damage or shock, he couldn't tell. He simply hadn't the will.

There was the sound of laughter and footsteps. The rain ceased.

“But, it's wet out here!” a feminine voice said, sounding full of false reluctance.

“I'll lay my cape down and it will be a soft bed, my pretty love,” Kile's voice, smooth as silk. “Come now! My arms long to enfold you in tender embraces!”

“I see that other things are *longing*,” the bold woman giggled.

Jhan felt a surge of jealousy? Or was it anger? Whatever it was, it filled him with strength that surmounted the pain. He levered himself up on shaking arms.

“Don't let me interrupt.”

The woman cried out. Jhan saw a pretty blonde wearing a rose colored dress in the arms of

Kile. They were both looking down at Jhan in startled amazement.

“Jhan, what happened?” Kile exclaimed.

Jhan was glad when Kile left the woman to quickly crouch by him in concern.

“Are you injured?” Kile asked.

“I'll get help!” the blonde announced.

“No!” Jhan shouted and she froze like a rabbit. Jhan didn't want a healer touching him. “I'm fine! I slipped and fell on the wet path and knocked myself out, that's all. I'll go to my home and clean myself up, now.”

“I'll help you,” Kile was firm. “Chelise, you go back to the party and keep silent about this. We wouldn't want the lady embarrassed, now would we?”

“No, certainly not,” Chelise agreed, but then petulantly. “I will see you later, my gallant lord?”

Kile flushed. “Of course, this will only take a few minutes and then I will return.”

Jhan watched Chelise go. “She'll tell everyone, you realize?”

“And let everyone know that she went out into the garden with Kile Helarion Dor for a romp on the grass? Hardly!” His tone sounded amused, but Kile's expression was serious. “Are you badly hurt? What really happened? De Oro?”

Jhan sat up completely, nearly weeping at the state of his dress. He felt dizzy and sick. Should he say anything? He didn't understand what De Oro had said about a game already being in play; politics? How could he affect that?

“I guess he found out what he'd been dancing with.”

Kile sighed and forbore to say *I told you so*, still it hung heavy in the air between them. Jhan shivered. Kile looked indecisive. “Can you walk?”

Jhan shook his head. “My ribs hurt, my hip, my knee. He didn't hit me in the face at least, but he dragged me through some bushes and they scratched me. I got off pretty easy. I don't know why I'm shaking. Maybe I'm one of those women... you know? Wilting, fainting flowers at the first sign of danger?”

Kile's cape dropped about Jhan and the man wrapped it tight. With one great heave, he

picked Jhan up as if he were a small child. "I hope that no one sees us," he growled irritably.

No one did see them. Everyone was at either of the two parties and the hallways rang to the sound of Kile's footsteps, an eerie, lonely sound.

Jhan reached to open the door to his room and Kile used his foot to push it open. He used the same foot to close it behind him, as if yet afraid of someone seeing him entering Jhan's apartment in such a manner. He lowered Jhan to the bed and pried his cape off of him.

Jhan sat in a miserable huddle, hair in wet strands everywhere and his beautiful dress full of mud and ruined beyond repair. Kile started to leave, duty done, and then paused. By his expression, Jhan could see that he was thinking of something unpleasant. He seemed to wrestle with his own thoughts.

Jhan watched the silent war for a long moment and then asked, "What's wrong?"

"Your dress..." Kile trailed off and then swore as he approached Jhan again.

Jhan became apprehensive. "It's ruined. Margeritte will be very angry."

Kile shook his head impatiently. "You won't be able to get it off alone."

Jhan felt himself tense in trepidation, guessing what Kile was about to suggest. "I'll wait for Rehn. He helped me put it on."

"Rehn will be doing other things, I'm sure," Kile told him sourly. "You may be sitting in that all night."

The prospect made Jhan's eyes sting. He wanted the yards of wet material off so that he could climb into bed and collapse. He met Kile's eyes and knew what the man was offering to do. Jhan blushed and hugged himself as he turned his face away shyly.

"You are a man!" Kile shouted. "You don't have anything that I want to look at!" He strode to the bed and sat down, ordering briskly, "Turn so that I can undo these laces and hooks! If you sit in this dress, you will become ill from the wet!"

Jhan should have been terrified. The thought of undressing before a man... but there was only the shyness. He turned and felt strong fingers begin pulling at the laces. It was a long business until the material was freed. The long row of hooks came next and then Kile pulled the back of the dress apart. He swore when he saw the corset and more lacing.

"Get this off first," Kile ordered.

There was a short struggle with wet material, and then the dress was off and flying to land in

a heap in a corner by the fireplace.

Kile paused and then his fingers went to work again. Soon the corset parted too. Jhan slipped it off and then covered his bare chest with his arms. He was left in the pantaloons, hose, and shoes.

A hand touched bare skin. Jhan shrank, but the hand was touching fresh bruises over his ribs, impersonal. "Nothing cracked, I think," Kile reassured him.

"No, it's stopped hurting," Jhan agreed softly.

Kile moved around to undo Jhan's shoes. Blue eyes flicked up and then held, unable to hide their wonder. They traced the curving line of Jhan's waist, and the soft roundness of his shoulders, even the delicate line of his neck.

Kile removed the shoes without looking at them and then straightened. "Let's get the rest of it off you. You look ready to collapse."

It was a ploy to see the rest of him and Jhan knew it. It was clear that Kile doubted what his eyes were telling him. Jhan felt a rush of pleasure even amid his shy embarrassment. "No," he said firmly. "I can do that."

Kile went pale and guarded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to act like a farm brat wanting to gawk at the unusual. It's just that even as you are now I can't tell!"

"Good. That makes me very happy."

Kile shook his head sharply and wadded his cloak up in his hands. "This is madness!"

"What is?"

"This charade you are playing!" Kile turned towards the door and opened it. His next words were said over his shoulder, embarrassment making him unable to face Jhan as he said, "The worst madness of all is that - that I find that I like you!"

Kile was gone before Jhan could reply. The door was a solid barrier. Jhan stood shakily and moved to lock it. When he lowered himself back onto the bed, he let out the breath that he had been holding and began removing the rest of his clothes. *'I find that I like you.'* It rolled through Jhan's mind as he climbed under the covers, groaning at aches and pains. Kile was truly an amazing man!

'You grow strong,' a dream voice soft as silk. 'Soon you will be at one with yourself, inner and outer. It will begin then...'

'What?' Jhan asked in his dream and found that he was Christine again, sitting among the ancient trees of the forest. Eyes stared out from the darkness between tree trunks, reproachful.

'Why do you hold to that form? It is not yours any longer.'

Jhan looked down at it, past middle age and beginning to sag just a little. It changed suddenly, and he was Jhan, on the verge of manhood. No! There was another change; Jhan's body, but a female Jhan. Yes! That's what he wanted! The only thing that he would accept!

'Soon, you will accept what is.'

'No!'

'Yes, soon.'

It was good to knock the dream out with a workout with Vek. As usual, Jhan stood near the training soldiers, but all had learned to respect his skill and his deadliness. It seemed a soldier could be as eccentric as he liked, if he was skilled enough to defend his right to be that way.

“Good!” That was Vek's top praise. There were grunts of envy from the recruits struggling to master their lessons with Captain Narin and Kelp.

“Let's try two moves together,” Vek suggested.

Jhan froze. He wore loose trousers and a light shirt under his padding, a great concession to Vek's constant pressure to dress appropriately while training. Now he pulled the material away from his sweating body nervously, not meeting Vek's eyes.

“If you fear it, you don't have any control over it,” Vek told him harshly. “Do as I say.”

They had tried it several times before, each time with disastrous results. One man had broken an arm and another had suffered a concussion while trying to stop Jhan from killing Vek.

Vek slipped on his red uniform jacket, leaving it unbuttoned and hanging loose to give him freedom of movement. The men ceased training, and Tevar motioned Kelp to be ready.

Jhan was still sore from the day before. Stiffness had been worked out to some degree, but

he was slower than usual. Perhaps that would help Vek if something happened again.

“Come!” Vek ordered.

Jhan thought of two moves and concentrated. He finished them smoothly and Vek defended himself without effort. Jhan could hardly believe it until he stood once more opposite the man, then he grinned, and felt a surge of relief.

“Balfor's tits, you've done it!” Vek exclaimed happily and there were sighs of relief from everyone. “I think we'll end here for today. No reason to strain good fortune!”

Jhan agreed. He went to the water trough and washed his sweating face, wondering what Margeritte would be thinking when he didn't show up for his duties. Maybe she wouldn't care. After all, he had accomplished his purpose in her eyes. He had helped her orchestrate a shrewd practical joke.

“You were moving slowly today.”

The rich voice was Tevar's. Jhan turned to look at him, remembering that once he had tried to kill this man. Tevar didn't show any anger though, only... wistfulness?

“I had a rough evening.” Jhan felt nervous, glancing behind Tevar at the men who were walking away from the practice grounds towards the barracks. There went any witnesses. What did Tevar want? De Oro had made Jhan wary.

“I've heard that you dressed as a woman and went to the court party...” Tevar paused and then rushed on, almost shy, but eyes on Jhan. “You must have been... beautiful... daring.”

There was a sudden tension. A shiver went over Jhan's body and he took a step away from Tevar. He decided to be blunt. “What do you want?”

Tevar licked dry lips and then his face begged for understanding. “They used to kill men like us.”

Jhan felt a rush of heat from head to toe. “Don't!” It was an exclamation and he stumbled further away. “Don't say anymore!”

“You are... ashamed?”

Jhan tried to collect himself. His heart was pounding. This man, in his red uniform, was making a pass at Jhan as man to man. “You don't understand!” Jhan panted out and gave Tevar a wild look. “I'm not - not like you!”

“You don't desire men?” Tevar said that in a fierce whisper of anger and disbelief.

“Yes – no, you can't understand!” Jhan clenched his fists. Control! He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “I am not a thekling. I want to be a woman. I want to have a man as a woman. I could never... I'm sorry.” A laugh escaped Jhan's lips and he was mortified at the hurt in Tevar's face. The laugh had been only hysteria, not mockery. “You are very handsome,” Jhan tried to amend. “Tevar, I'm sure that any - any man would want you, but I don't. I can't!”

Tevar sighed and he gave a little shrug. “You are young for it. You are still confused, and what happened to you in that other land clouds your mind still, perhaps. Watching you fight with Vek, and hearing you speak, you seemed much older. Forgive me.” He managed a wry smile. “I would be your friend instead then, if you will accept?”

Jhan was silent, taken aback. Tevar was impatient.

“Come now!” Tevar admonished. “Such as we are few around here and you will need someone to ask questions of, sooner or later.”

Jhan found a smile, relieved, but only a small bit. “Of course we can be friends,” he stressed the word, *friends*.

Tevar nodded, understanding. “As your friend, and maybe teacher, I will give you my first advice. Stay with your training and make friends among the soldiers. Such a thing as being a thekling, is forgotten when one can best a few men in a fight, and claim friends among others who can do the same!”

“I don't like violence,” Jhan replied, “but I know you're right.”

Tevar gave Jhan a wink as he turned away. “A little more training and people at parties won't be beating you up, eh?”

Tevar strode away before a startled Jhan could reply. It was quickly lost to wonder. Tevar was a thekling! Jhan waited for the rush of revulsion. As Christine, he had been disgusted by even the mention of homosexuality. When nothing was forthcoming, Jhan realized that he couldn't be disgusted by something that he was more and more becoming used to as Jhan. He was considered homosexual, even though he wouldn't dream of acting on the emotions he felt for Kile. Those emotions were the same as Tevar's maybe, but Tevar didn't have the comfortable excuse of being in the wrong body!

Bemused, Jhan left the trough and headed back for the fortress. On his way, he started to pass the healer's hall, where the sick and injured were treated. He caught sight of Evian dumping a bowl of some substance out of the door before retreating back inside. Something made Jhan turn his steps and

enter after him.

Inside, there were hardwood floors and lines of empty cots. Evian had settled once more at a desk, neatly wrapping newly cleaned metal instruments into a sterile towel. The light from nearby windows struck his face and the lines of cheek and jaw reminded Jhan sharply of something that made him stand still. There was a dark memory dancing just on the edge of comprehension.

“Is something wrong?”

The voice brought Jhan back and the darkness faded like mist. He remembered that he was angry with this man. Why had he come here? He started to turn away, but Evian rose and came after him. “I told the king everything that I saw in you.”

Jhan halted and folded his arms tightly over his chest. “What did he say?”

“You are still alive,” Evian replied pointedly. “He chose to be horrified and pitying, not seeing what I saw; that you might be dangerous, that there are things in you that we haven't touched yet. He told me to leave you alone. He thinks that you don't have any useful information and that you are mad beyond repair. He believes that he couldn't rely on anything that you told him, even if you did remember.”

Jhan turned back towards Evian, angry. “Would you rather I was dead?”

“No,” Evian sighed. “Jhan, I did what I had to do! I am a soldier! My country and king will always come first. I'm sorry that it forced me to be intrusive -”

“Is that what you call it?” Jhan spat it out. “You touched me when I didn't wish to be touched! Sorry doesn't make it all better!”

“Enough!” Evian shouted back. “Life isn't easy here, milady! We sometimes must do harsh things.”

Jhan fell silent, still not forgiving. Why had he come there? Why face this man? Was it because Evian was the only human who knew what Jhan really was? The only one who could truly understand?

Jhan sat on the end of a cot and Evian nodded as if he had expected this. Pulling his chair away from the desk, he sat before Jhan, as if he had seen through Jhan's front all along. Jhan began speaking and, before he knew it, he had told Evian everything; the dance, De Oro, Margeritte, his feelings for Kile, and his fears. They tumbled out like stray sheep, rambling words that hardly made sense to Jhan, but seemed make perfect sense to Evian.

“You are too hard on Margeritte,” Evian commented after Jhan had finished speaking. “She is just a silly woman. I’m sure that she never meant to be unkind to you. Her only fault is that she likes a good game and, like most noblewomen, she was reared with so many servants they have become like the furniture to her. De Oro now... he has a lot of power. If he takes time to threaten a young man, he must be nervous. I think that I will try to find out why. I can’t understand why he should feel that you have any sway over the king or the council. You are a no one!”

“What about Kile?”

“Kile...” Evian shook his head. “He may have fallen to liking you, but you must give up any hope of -”

“I wouldn’t even if he did.” Jhan replied quickly and stood. He felt as if a weight had lifted from him. “I must seem foolish, shouting at you, hating you, and then asking you to listen while I rant.”

Evian shrugged. “Soldiers do it all of the time. They are very proud and they don’t easily admit to having problems. They usually beat about the bush in the same manner as you have just done. Just the other day, my help was sought and I listened while you were called every name imaginable.”

Jhan’s eyebrows went up. “By who?”

“I don’t give out names, however I will say that at the end of his tirade, he demanded to know what sickness caused him to like you!”

Jhan frowned and then broke into a grin, comprehending, but Evian was the one shaking his head and frowning now. “I would never have believed such a thing could happen in a land as intolerant of such creatures as you,” he mused, but he gave Jhan a warning too. “Please remember, the few who tolerate you are an exception, and that there are others who will never like you and would hurt you if they could.”

Jhan sobered, but his spirits refused to be dampened completely. “I know. As long as I’m like this, I will always have trouble. I can’t imagine a lifetime of being caught between woman and man, but I will not change.”

Evian was not convinced. “Change sometimes comes all at once and most often when we believe we can never change.”

Jhan shrugged that off, stubborn, but left Evian feeling stronger and somewhat forgiving of the man. After all, he had allowed Jhan to unload his problems and he now had a clear head for what he had to do next; the visit to the queen.

Jhan returned to his room, running over in his head what he would say when he faced her. Should he play up his madness to prey on her superstition, or should he simply be himself and refuse to be called mad? His temper opted for the later, but common sense, and the fear of being left homeless and jobless, begged him not to take the chance.

The door to Jhan's room was slightly open. It was a polite warning that someone was inside. Jhan hoped it was Rehn. He needed the man's solid good sense, even though Jhan knew that he wouldn't approve of what he intended to do.

It wasn't Rehn. The king sat casually in a chair, a softly cushioned relaxing chair that had replaced the rickety one of before. "You've changed things."

Jhan nodded as he closed the door behind him. His room was now softly carpeted in white furs, the walls painted a soft green, and the old furniture replaced with gleaming new wood ones. It was as cozy as anyone could wish.

"You've been with Vek," another bland statement as the king noted Jhan's state of dress

"Yes," Jhan replied patiently, staying reserved and standing still by the door.

The king sighed and sank into the chair like a little boy. "Be seated." He motioned to the other chair in the room and Jhan slowly sat, eyes wary and hands knotted in his lap.

"It doesn't do any good to talk with you," the king began. "I have warned you repeatedly, but you insist on making scenes that cannot be ignored. Lords speak of you to me and some are demanding action be taken."

"De Oro?"

The king sat up, scowling. "How did you know that?"

"He, and some of his friends, beat me up in your garden the other day, not badly, but they warned that it could get much worse if I didn't stay away from you."

Tekhal nodded briskly. "He probably fears the scandal."

"I don't think so. I think that he was talking politics. He said something about a game being in play and his wish that I stay out of it."

A tightening of the jaw was all the reaction Tekhal allowed, but Jhan could see his eyes shift inward with his thoughts. Did he mean betrayal, or was it just playing politics on De Oro's part? It was awhile before Tekhal's thoughts came back into the room.

"I'm glad that you told me this," he said. "Another might fear for his life and not say anything."

"I'm not afraid of him. He's an amateur," Jhan replied coolly. "Is he the only one who's complained about me?"

"No," Tekhal said in a clipped tone. "You know he's not. You challenged me the other day, Jhan, and many saw how I responded. I can't have them thinking that you are above the law, or our customs, even though you are mad. A commoner cannot speak so to a king and queen without penalty of death."

Jhan didn't flinch. He was growing used to their customs and he was just realizing how lenient and kind Tekhal had been towards him. He had refused to enact any punishment time and time again.

"I can't change," Jhan replied. "I can't let you, or any of your lords, be my master. I am not a slave, or an animal, that you can own and control. I would rather die than to allow it."

Tekhal cut Jhan off with a raised hand. "I have found a way to give your tongue the freedom that it deserves. I've thought long on this matter and I've realized that killing you would be a crime in itself. You are something new in my land, a strange free-thinking individual with high ideals. I've decided to put about the story that the crown believes you to be of noble blood. It will come to the council's attention, and you will go before it to receive an elevation in status, with my full approval. Once elevated, you will be able to come into my presence freely and speak as you wish, even to a noble."

Jhan's mouth fell open and he was dazed. "You can just do that? Why would you want to?"

"Jhan, you don't remember who you are, yet you carry yourself with the freedom of a prince," Tekhal observed. "I've decided that you cannot have been born of common stock."

Jhan began to laugh. "I didn't think that you had such a sense of humor! Am I just supposed to go along with this?"

"Jhan!" the king was more confused than indignant. "Aren't you even a little overwhelmed? I've just made you a noble! You now have the freedoms that you've been demanding of me! You still must show me respect, but everyone else is your equal! Be as insane as you wish now, such things are overlooked in those of noble birth!"

Jhan stood stiffly, laughter gone. He approached the king in three steps and stood before him.

“Mad Jhan, hmm? Mad Jhan the noble! Am I to live my life being humored now?”

“Better than mad Jhan who should be put from his misery,” Tekhal replied, measuring each word.

“Why are you bothering?”

There was silence. They faced off. Wills clashed. Tekhal finally replied reluctantly, “I am surrounded by people who smile and defer to me, while secretly stabbing me in the back! No one tells me what they really think, not even my wife! I think that I would like one person in my kingdom who speaks his mind.”

Jhan took a deep breath. Was this what De Oro was afraid of, Jhan's sudden influence on the king? Had Tekhal spoken of it to anyone else?

“First you threaten me because of my insolence, and now you say that you like it,” Jhan complained. “You seemed like such a simple man, but I don't understand you at all!”

“I don't ask you to understand. Accept it.”

“I don't think that I want to be a noble...”

“You want to be a lady, then?”

“Neither.”

The king looked as if he would tear his hair out in frustration. “Jhan, you are truly mad if you don't accept this!”

“I personally don't think that you can get away with it,” Jhan told him. “If you have a council, you can't have complete say in everything.” He had a chilling thought. “You won't make me move to Upper Pekarín, will you? This is my home. I want to keep it.”

Tekhal was amazed. “Jhan, don't you have any ambition?”

“I do,” Jhan admitted, “but you can't give me the things that I want.”

That made Tekhal uncomfortable. He rose to leave. “Court is held at noon each day. Those of noble birth must attend. I will confirm your station tomorrow and De Oro and his lot can chew manure after that!”

Jhan raised an eyebrow, suspicion confirmed. “Is that your real motive for doing this? Am I some sort of decoy for De Oro to attack while you stand ready to trip the trap?”

Tekhal froze, eyes narrowing. "I am king, Jhan. They threaten me."

Jhan shrugged, not even angry, and that surprised him. He was growing used to court, he supposed. "In the future don't lie to me, Your Majesty. You aren't any good at it. If you wanted me to be a decoy, you should have just asked. I myself would like nothing better than to see De Oro get into trouble for what he did to me!"

"I wasn't lying, Jhan," Tekhal replied. "My reasons are valid, but, if it draws the wolves out of hiding, so much the better!"

"Is it better if I get hurt in the process?"

Tekhal did not reply, but his discomfort increased. "I will have someone send down proper dress for court. Remember, no one but I can tell you what to do. You are a noble now."

"So you say," Jhan replied through gritted teeth as he let the man out, closing the door quickly behind, and cursing lightly under his breath. "But, I've never heard of anyone putting court dress on a rabbit before they cook it!"

"He wants to make me a noble."

Jhan had repeated himself twice now and Rehn was still looking stunned despite his obvious hangover. He was sitting in his room in the one chair, hands lax in his lap and face blank, eyes red and glassy. Jhan was pacing a little before him and pulling at the high collar of the blue gown he had changed into.

Rehn seemed to come to himself all at once and then he stood uncertainly, bowing a little. "I shouldn't sit in your presence then, milord."

He was dead serious. Jhan was furious. "Stop it! I'm not a noble, Rehn!"

"Lord Jhan, if the king thinks that you are a noble then you most certainly are one. I must show you the respect due your position."

Jhan turned on him, hands balled into fists. "I told you to stop it! Don't you dare treat me like this anymore or I'll - I'll, I don't know what I'll do, but it won't be pretty!"

"All right," Rehn said as held up placating hands and sat once more, "but I can't understand why you aren't happy about this. It's what you wanted, isn't it, a high station?"

Jhan stopped pacing and faced him, crossing his arms over his chest. "I wanted a job that I could love and that was equal to my capabilities! This is everything that I hate! I don't like your nobility! I don't want to be one of the ones who commands and must be obeyed! It's against everything that I believe in!"

Rehn was patient. "Even the miller's apprentice must obey his master, Jhan. In any position, there is servant and master."

"If the master tells the servant to do something, and the servant doesn't like it, he can quit, Rehn! If someone disobeys a lord or a lady, he can be killed! That's the difference!"

Rehn looked down at his hands. "There isn't anything that you can do, short of leaving the fortress, Jhan. The king has named you noble, though I can't understand why, and noble you are."

Jhan strode to the window and scowled out at the sunshine. "He has his reasons, Rehn. He gave me some story about wanting my friendship, but the truth is that I'm the bait in a trap that he's setting. Once that trap is sprung, I may find myself out of a title!"

Rehn shook his head. "You went from being a wild man to a noble in a matter of months! The lords will demand answers, I'm sure."

"Let Tekhal make up the answers. I won't lie."

Rehn suddenly laughed. "I suppose that you want to be called *lady* as well?"

Jhan flushed and turned to Rehn. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's wrong, milady Jhan."

"Stop it!"

"I don't think that you realize what your new position entitles you to, or I'm sure that you would be a lot more agreeable."

"I'm not interested in having things, Rehn."

"You will probably be considered as a royal ward of the crown," Rehn pointed out. "That entitles you to a large suite of apartments, servants, pages, imala, and clothing. People will have to invite you to all social functions. No one can insult you, no matter how strangely you act."

"None of that matters Rehn, or almost none of it." Jhan suddenly smiled. "You know, the king wants to use me, but I may be the one who uses him. I think that I'm going to make it very uncomfortable for him. I want to prove to him, for the last time, that he can't control me!"

Jhan had his hair braided with gold ribbon in one long tail over one shoulder. He wore a shimmering white dress with a gauzy gold over skirt and a golden belt set with small bells. It wasn't what the king had sent for him to wear, of course.

Jhan stood quietly with the servant who had brought him to the council hall, surrounded by lords who gave him outraged looks, but saying nothing in the presence of the king.

Tekhal sat on a silver throne cushioned in white, a canopy of sky blue shading him from the sun that slanted through high windows. Light pooled everywhere like molten gold on the hardwood floor. There wasn't any other piece of furniture under the arching roof and people shifted from foot to foot to relieve sore feet.

The king was reading over several long missives. He signed two and handed the rest back, rejected. There were mutters among the lords and one relieved sigh that was audible. These small noises fell silent when Tekhal noticed the people about him and gave them a royal nod that things were to begin now.

"The first order of business is to confirm the station of a young man who has been long in our care."

Tekhal motioned and Jhan stepped towards the throne, bells tinkling and head held high in nervousness. When he was several paces away, Tekhal made another motion and Jhan understood that he was to turn to face the lords.

"After long deliberation," Tekhal announced, "it is the opinion of my royal physician, and myself, that Jhan of unknown parentage, is, without a doubt, of noble blood. His madness is clear for all to see, and his true story may never be heard, but I can attribute his bearing and manners to only one source. We declare that Jhan is a lord. All efforts will be undertaken to seek out each kingdom in search of his noble father. Until that time, he is a ward of the crown, and he will be accorded the respect that all of the lords of my kingdom enjoy.

Tekhal shifted weight on the throne, ready to lob the next verbal bomb into the stunned crowd. "Because Lord Jhan's madness leads him to believe he is... a woman. He will be called, 'Lady', in his hearing and given all respect due a woman of the court. With such gentle handling of his madness, he may come to his senses one day."

De Oro stepped forward, dark skin gleaming like polished amber and brown eyes level and piercing Jhan's. "I must protest, Your Majesty. This creature is a thekling, and, Lord or Lady, he is fit only to be shunned and cast out from our lands. It is gallant of you to seek to be gentle with his madness, but all can see that it has made of him a freak. Can you ask the people to honor and abase themselves before such as that?"

"Your arguments are valid, Count De Oro," Tekhal replied smoothly. "But please listen to mine as well. Jhan has a high level of learning. One only sees that in nobility. He bows to no man and he demands things only accorded to nobility. I could ignore all of that and do as you suggest, but what shall I say when his people come to take him back? Forgive me that I treated your mad lord as lower than a servant and cast him out? That might cause a war, Count De Oro! I cannot take the chance."

Jhan listened to argument after argument. It was like a fine sword match, parry and thrust. The king remained calm while his lords became angry and frustrated. After an hour, Jhan had heard enough.

"Stop this!" Jhan backed away until he was facing king and lords. "I don't care whether I'm made a Lady or not! I don't want it! Stop arguing and let me make the decision!" He turned to the king and saw anger rise above that calm exterior. "If you go through with this you're the one who's mad! Do you really think that any of them will treat me any differently because you decide to give me a title? All I want is to be left alone to live my life! I don't want you to make a spectacle of me!"

There was stunned silence and then a shuffling of feet. A grizzled lord grunted and then stepped forward. "We now see the source of your conclusions, Your Majesty. He does indeed have the manners of nobility. Forgive our doubt."

Jhan made a disgusted noise and walked out. The red-headed servant, who had brought him, hesitated and then followed. Once outside the hall, Jhan whirled on him. "Go away!"

The boy, he couldn't have been more than fifteen, bowed respectfully. "I am your servant, appointed by the king, milady."

Jhan scowled. "I live in a place that only has one room, child. I don't need a servant. Thank his Majesty, anyway."

"You have been appointed apartments worthy of your station, Lady Jhan."

"I don't want them!"

The boy stood, stunned, and Jhan made his escape, walking briskly out of upper Pekarín.

“This is insane!” he muttered to himself. “Why is he doing this to me?” Back at his rooms, Jhan slammed and locked the door. “I am not going to play his game!”

Chapter Twelve

(Lord Jhan)

Jhan stayed in his room for several days and did nothing. No one sought him out except the page. He knocked politely on Jhan's door each afternoon to take him to council. Each time, he was told to go away.

How long could he keep this up? Jhan wondered. He felt the urge to pack his things and leave Pekarín altogether, find a town that didn't know his sex, and live there as quietly as he could. At that moment, it seemed far more attractive than being the focus of the circus that Tekhal had begun. How could the man make him a noble? Could even the wish to unearth a conspiracy drive him to elevate someone like him, or did he really believe Jhan was a lord?

On Jhan's fourth day of solitude, Jhan couldn't stand the inactivity any longer. He left his room to join Vek on the practice field. The sun felt good even though there was a sharp chill to the air. The unseasonable warmth was fast fading and winter was on its way.

"You make every move a dance," Vek observed as Jhan landed lightly on his feet and turned to face him after a difficult move. "You are too small to train with steel weapons, but as long as you face unarmed men you will be deadly."

They were surrounded by men struggling through exercises with Kelp as their trainer. The smell of sweat was heavy on the air and Jhan wiped his own brow of it before he replied in a firm tone, "I never intend to find that out. I am not a warrior and I will never hurt anyone! The only reason that I'm training with you is to stop myself from hurting anyone!"

"You are a Lord." Vek had refused to call Jhan Lady and had refused to leave off the title even when Jhan had shouted at him angrily when he used it. Vek did not offer servility along with it though. He was the same rough teacher. "A Lord leads men into battle."

Jhan walked away from him angrily, pulling off his practice padding and flinging it aside. "This is going to stop!" he shouted. "I am going to tell the king to take back his stupid title!"

"Certainly he should if you cannot take the responsibility that comes with it!" Vek shouted after him, but Jhan didn't care. He didn't want the responsibility.

Jhan washed off in the trough and then headed back for the fortress, simmering. First, he would change from the loose trousers and the overlarge shirt he wore and then he would see the king and tell him that he could stuff his title!

A movement caught Jhan's eye. Rehn was disappearing into the forest to visit the Sahvossa. The man had avoided Jhan, uncomfortable with Jhan's new status, and Jhan was eager to lay that uneasiness to rest. Jhan put his anger aside and hurried after him. He caught up quickly, his soft soled ankle boots not making any sound. Rehn turned, startled, as Jhan seemingly appeared at his elbow.

“You nearly frightened a year off of me!” Rehn exclaimed as he caught his breath, then remembered and bowed awkwardly.

Jhan grabbed him by the elbow, face fierce. “Rehn, you're hurting me when you do that! I'm not a lord, whatever the king says! I'm even going to him later and demand that he take the title back! It's madness!”

Rehn was amazed. “But it's what you want! They'll have to accept you now! No one can harm you except the king! You told me that you wanted better things! How much better can a person have?”

“You don't understand, Rehn! Everyone is being forced to treat me civilly! When I walked to the practice sand, everyone bowed and greeted me, but I saw what they were thinking on their faces! They still hated me, hated me more because of what they were being forced to do! I don't want people pretending to accept and like me!”

Jhan tried to steady his nerve and added. “I've been thinking... thinking of going away.”

Rehn's reply was surprising and painful. “Jhan, I would miss you, but perhaps that is what you need to do. A place far from here where no one would know you were a man. In Pekarín, you make too many things difficult. The king, Margeritte, Kile; I think...” Rehn's face screwed up, his simple mind trying to be tactful.

“You think they'd be better off without me here to embarrass them?” Jhan finished for him.

Rehn nodded. Jhan felt as if a sliver of ice were slipping through his heart. It was hard to breathe around the pain.

“I don't want to hurt anyone.”

“Of course you don't!” Rehn was outraged. “You're a woman stuck in a man's body. That isn't your fault!”

Jhan was warmed by his sudden show of support. “I'll think about what I'm going to do. I'll need money... a plan.”

Rehn nodded and then his eyes swept the forest as if afraid of meeting Jhan's eyes and showing emotion. "Did you want to see the Sahvossa with me?"

"No." Jhan took a step back the way they had come. "I know that you think highly of them, but they're very strange to me."

Rehn understood easily. Perhaps that was the usual reaction from the people in the fortress. Jhan caught a brief look of loneliness on Rehn's face and Jhan wondered how much Rehn's empathy and understanding for Jhan stemmed from his particular singularity. He too was different; the only man who could speak with alien creatures.

"I'll see you later, then."

"Yes, later," Jhan replied and gave a small smile as he turned back for the fortress.

The forest was beautiful and inviting. Jhan skirted the edge of it, slipping in and out of the trees, purposely taking a long way around the fortress. It was quiet and serene, the sun cutting through the chill air and making small patches of mist among the ferns.

Men on imala appeared so suddenly that it was almost supernatural. Jhan slipped behind a tree and watched them undetected as they headed for the fortress, bright armor glinting and spears as thick as cattails in a pond.

Two men rode ahead. Jhan shivered nervously, though he couldn't understand why. He didn't know them, yet, he felt a sense of déjà vu.

One man was old. He wore black from head to toe. His armor was painted black in such a crude manner that it was flaking. It seemed a violent act of a man mourning and his face did reflect some deep anguish; lines cut deep and hair more gray than dark. The younger man beside him was dressed in forest greens and browns, but his face was fierce looking and his eyes, a deep cornflower blue, seemed to look inward at unpleasant memories. His hair was black, black as a raven's wing and he was the more imposing of the two, but it was the old man's face that, more than anything else, seemed to capture all of Jhan's attention.

The imala were loud and armor rattled amid the creaking of saddle leather and the crackling of forest loam. Jhan shouldn't have heard it because of that; a twig snapping behind him, audible as a rifle shot.

Jhan turned almost absently to look, thinking that it was a stray from the column. Instead, he saw a man duck behind a tree, a man Jhan didn't know. Rough looking and intent, dark eyes watched

Jhan from under a low cap. In one hand he held a knife!

Jhan was from a civilized culture. It took long moments of thinking about that brief glimpse of sun on sharp metal before it came to him that maybe that man meant to use that knife on him! Perhaps only the sudden appearance of the column had kept him from pouncing on Jhan immediately!

Jhan's heart thudded, skipped a beat, and then began racing. He stumbled over a tree root, scrambling to get out of some thorny underbrush. The two men at the front of the column spotted Jhan's awkward approach. They motioned the column forward and fell out, waiting for Jhan.

"Milady," the younger man greeted her, "Have you lost your way? Where is your escort? Where are your maids?"

His voice was hollow and weary, a harsh attempt at being patient and polite.

Jhan looked behind him anxiously. "There was a man back there with - with a knife!"

Both younger and older men drew swords with such a clatter and flash that Jhan flinched. The younger man rode past Jhan into the forest, looking about. Two other men, seeing his alarm, joined him. Together they searched the forest in many directions.

"There was nothing. He must have fled," the younger man reported when he had returned. "It must have been a robber. You shouldn't walk alone, milady! Come with us and we will see you escorted safely to the fortress."

"Why are you dressed so immodestly?" the older man spoke up for the first time. His voice was like gravel, dredged from deep within.

He was speaking of Jhan's pants and shirt. Jhan pulled the shirt down as if ashamed, but he was really just nervous from the several sets of male eyes that stared eagerly at a woman's legs; something their culture thought was scandalous.

"I was doing something dirty," Jhan replied stiffly, "and I thought this was more practical. I didn't expect to run into any men out here."

The older man tossed Jhan his cape. "Please, robe yourself, child. You invite lewdness with such a display. Don't you have a mother to teach you better?"

"No," Jhan replied evenly, annoyed at his manner, but donning the cape anyway. He secured it at his throat and settled the folds about him. It was rich cloth and warm.

"What is it, Father?"

Jhan looked up and saw that the old man had gone white, staring at Jhan as if a corpse had sprung from the ground. His mouth worked, unable to utter a sound. The younger man, presumably his son, touched his arm in concern.

“Who are you?” Those words seemed to come from a cavern. The old man's eyes were wide, blue as open skies and looking at Jhan as if seeing visions. “Tell me.”

The younger man was clearly concerned. He signaled the two men to come closer, maybe expecting the old man to either have a fit or collapse. “I fear the journey has been too much for him,” he said to his companions, “We need to get him to the fortress quickly. Roald, ride ahead and give them warning of our arrival.”

One man detached himself and galloped out of the forest. The other came up on the old man's side, opposite the son, and reached out to take hold of the old man's arm to steady him.

“Tell me your name,” the old man asked Jhan as he pulled his arm away irritably. “You look-” He shook his head, realizing suddenly that he might be frightening Jhan. Jhan was more than a little apprehensive. First a man with a knife and now this! What was going on?

The old man took a shuddering breath to reclaim his composure and rubbed at his brow as if it pained him. “Forgive me, milady. It's only that you look like kin to my family. It would please me to have family here in this strange land.”

The younger man studied Jhan's appearance as well and then blinked, struck perhaps by the same thing his father had. In the next moment, he was shaking his head, annoyed and impatient. “Not again, Father! When will you stop? That is a woman, younger than my brother by years! When will your mind clear of this urge to seek him in every face that passes us by?”

“*You will not know him*, he told us,” the old man replied in a voice full of anguish.

“He also said that your son is dead, broken on the wheel! I don't wish to cause you pain, but I don't think that he lied!”

“He lied so many times, playing with us, causing us pain!” The old man shook his head, squeezing tears from his eyes that he wiped away with gloved fingers. “But you are right. This is a maiden, an immodest maiden.”

The column halted. Riders came from the fortress in the red uniforms of Pekarín's guards. Kile was with them, the guard with the highest rank, and he came forward to face the old man and his son.

“I am Kile Helarion Dor, son of Duke Dor, and I challenge you in the name of King Tekhal of all this land! Speak your errand, be it war or peace.”

It sounded like a ritualist greeting. Jhan felt very small, suddenly unimportant. The men on the imala were larger than life, great lords at the head of an army. The old man wrenched his eyes from Jhan and skewered Kile with a glare.

“I’m certain your king knew of my coming for many days, Young Dor!” the old man said angrily. “Why hasn’t he come to challenge us sooner?”

“The king is in council and he sends his apologies,” Kile replied, unruffled. “You moved swifter than he anticipated or he would have been here in my place to greet you.”

“You know who I am?”

“You are King Torian Kevelt of Karana, Your Majesty.”

“Yet I do not merit personal greetings. We will speak of this insult, your king and I.”

Kile was flushed then and at a loss, not knowing how to respond to this old eagle. “I and my men will escort you to Upper Pekarín and to the king at once, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, at once,” the old man agreed wearily. “What I have to tell him is important.”

“Wait a moment.” The younger man motioned to Jhan, while facing Kile. “This woman reported seeing a man stalking her with a knife. We found no one, but he may still be lurking about. You should search the area with a patrol, Lord Kile.”

Kile swiveled in his saddle and saw Jhan. His expression changed from looking deferential to looking irritated in a heartbeat.

Jhan pointed behind him to a tree a few yards distant. “He was over there. I think he might have tried to hurt me if uh... King Torian hadn’t shown up.”

“Lord Jhan,” Kile stressed the word *lord*, “is a ward of the king; a man who is unfortunately mad. He imagines that he is a woman. I’m sorry if he distressed you with his fantasies.”

There was dead silence. Jhan felt a hot flush of embarrassment and the sting of tears in his eyes. How dare Kile- but of course, Kile was angry that Jhan was there. This was a delicate moment. Not a place for a madman! Still, this was the worst way to handle the situation. Kile was thinking in anger instead of diplomatically. Instead of passing off Jhan as an unfortunate woman attacked by a robber, he was lashing out, instead, and bringing Jhan into sharp relief.

“Your name is Jhan?” The old man had gone pale again, his eyes seeming to note every inch of Jhan's face. “Or is it Jhanian?”

“It’s just Jhan.” Kile was realizing his mistake. “He doesn't remember any more than that. The king took pity on him... truly it is of no importance. If you would please follow me, we'll proceed to the king. I'll have a man take Jhan back to General Vek, if it concerns you, and have him questioned about the robber.”

They weren't listening. “He's too young, Father!” the younger man argued. “Jhanian was a man grown! This is someone barely out of boyhood! Jhanian had long hair, but never as long as that! It cannot be -”

“You will not know him,” the old man repeated grimly. He dismounted heavily, as if the earth pulled at the bottoms of his boots, and he tossed the reins of his imala to his son. “I will know my own son! No matter how much that bastard changed him with Power... I will know him!”

Jhan felt frozen on the spot, something of comprehension beginning to take root. The old man reached out a shaking hand and moved the hair away from Jhan's neck. A gloved finger touched something there. A scar Jhan had never noticed.

“A hunting bird tore you there with its beak, when you were nine,” King Torian explained. “You begged to handle the bird and I let you. You were always brave. You didn't even cry.”

Tears streamed down the old man's face in a sudden river and the crags of pain shivered and shook as he let out a hoarse sob. “What has he done? What has he done to you my son?”

Jhan was taken into a fierce embrace, tears from the man splattering him as he was engulfed in the smell of days on the trail and wood smoke from campfires.

Something happened. Jhan felt a violent surge from deep within his mind; trapped memory released like a catapult full of daggers coming straight at him!

The old man was gone. Someone cold and very strong held him, squeezing tighter and tighter while whispering obscene endearments into his ear. “Kill him, Moon Flower.” The voice was singsong, deep, yet made Jhan think of a predator. “You are my beautiful little trap. It’s time for the trap to spring. Kill your father. Kill your father, Jhanian Kevelt!”

His vision cleared like water thrown into his eyes and Jhan felt cold grip him and something pull him into its dark control. As if his hands were not his own, he reached for the blade at the old man's side while the voice ordered, *kill him*.

Jhan felt a blow from behind. He was thrown forward by the force, shaken loose from the compulsion by a sudden, spreading pain that started low on his back and quickly ignited nerves like floodwater through a river course.

It sounded as if someone was pounding a drum. Through a red haze, Jhan saw the old man pull back from him with a start, mouth working on a silent shout as he looked at the hands that had been pressed to Jhan's back. They were covered in blood!

The drum drowned out every noise and Jhan found himself in the center of a churning circle of imala, nostrils flared and eyes wild; their riders drawing glittering weapons and brandishing spears. It was all eerily silent, as if he had been suddenly cast into an old movie, jerky, silent, and unreal.

The earth seemed to yawn, pulling Jhan towards it, but hands cushioned his fall and kept him from being swallowed whole. A collage of faces danced within sight. All of them had expressions of worry and all were unfamiliar.

The drum was the sound of his heart, Jhan realized at last. It was struggling with shock. What had happened? Why wouldn't someone tell him what had happened? Make the sound stop! He couldn't hear!

Kile! The man swirled into Jhan's vision. He looked anxious and afraid for him. He pulled Jhan away from the old man who was holding him, weeping over him; the man who was supposed to be his father. "The bandit... he threw a knife," Kile explained with the utter calm of a soldier. "It hit you in the lower back. I don't think it punctured a lung. Can you hear me, Jhan?"

Jhan managed a nod that caused his eyes to roll and not focus. He squinted, trying to see Kile's face. "I'm sorry," Was that his voice, raspy and so far away?

Kile was lifting him off of the ground, carrying him like a child. "Sorry for what?" he asked distractedly, concentrating on slipping through the imala without getting crushed.

They had momentary solitude by a tree. Jhan was staring at the fall of Kile's hair, how it seemed a curtain of gold. "Getting in the way again," Jhan managed to continue. "I'm always in the wrong place."

Kile was frowning, agitated. "Jhan, just be quiet. You didn't do anything to be sorry for."

"Am I going to die?" Jhan wondered.

Kile looked afraid and his grip on Jhan tightened as he replied emphatically, "No!"

Jhan felt that he was being lied to. How bad was he hurt, really? Maybe he was going to die and Kile wasn't telling him? Maybe he would never get a chance to tell Kile how he really felt about him.

“The assassin is nowhere to be found. My men will continue to search,” said the king that thought he was Jhan’s father. “How is my son? He needs to be taken to a healer at once!”

Kile agreed with a nod, not replying anything. Jhan felt pain spread with sharp fingers along his back as Kile began walking with him still in his arms. They passed King Torian's men who were milling without direction.

Jhan tried to speak, coughed, and tasted blood.

“Don't try and speak,” Kile replied. “Evian will come and -”

“I have to tell you something,” Jhan managed to say with difficulty. “I wanted to kill that man.”

“You wanted to kill the assassin?”

“No.” Jhan struggled to stay conscious. He could hear the hammer of his own heart laboring in his narrow chest. “I wanted to kill King Torian. Promise to keep him away from me?”

Kile’s blue eyes looked into his with dawning comprehension. “He *is* your father, then? That dark king trained you to kill him, didn’t he?”

“Yes. Keep him away. Promise, Kile.”

“I swear,” Kile replied in a shaky voice.

Kile was clearly horrified. Jhan wondered if whatever had been between them was irrevocably lost now. He didn’t want to die hated by Kile. He felt himself blacking out, maybe dying permanently this time.

“Kile?”

Kile said something about keeping quiet again, but Jhan ignored him. If he was dying, he wasn’t going to leave the words unsaid. He wasn’t going to die again with regrets.

Jhan struggled to get enough air, saying the words with a great effort, “Kile, I love you.”

Jhan saw Kile’s eyes widen in shock and then the darkness claimed him and everything else.

Jhan felt as if he were floating on his back, drifting slowly down a gentle stream without the discomfort of getting wet. He was in total darkness, which made the two bodiless voices arguing in the ether above him disconcerting.

'We were successful in blocking her surge of Power this time. We cannot attempt it again.'

'No. It will be many cycles of the moon before we recover.'

'She would have killed them all if we had not. It was worth the price.'

'A price we cannot pay again. Only the gods know when it will happen again, but next time, she must control it or we will all perish.'

The voices were like a thick cord that thinned to the breadth of a thread and then faded out altogether. Jhan hadn't the strength to wonder about them, but it was comforting to hear someone, however insubstantial, think he was going to survive. His last thought, before oblivion, was that only the Sahvossa called him 'she'.

There were nightmares and horrible memories brought on by pain and fever. Jhan suffered and reached out for comfort. A voice spoke to him, reassuring, coaxing, holding his hand and touching his face now and again. Rehn, Jhan thought and with that thought he found his way back to consciousness again.

He wasn't in his room. This was the hospital barracks of the soldiers. It was neat and pristine; the sun was coming through high windows and picking out the dancing dust motes in the air. It was warm. The windows were closed and fireplaces, placed intermittently along the walls, blazed cheerfully.

Jhan felt stiff and his eyes were sticky with sleep. His tongue licked fever cracked lips. Someone noticed. He was propped up on pillows and a glass of water was put to his mouth. He drank automatically.

It was Evian, calm bedside manner making him almost invisible. Jhan stared at him for a full minute before he could weakly push the cup aside and force words from his tongue. "What happened?"

Evian raised grimaced and said, "You were stabbed by an assassin. He hasn't been found.

You've been in and out of a fever for nearly a week. In that time, Kile, Rehn, a prince called Thaos, a king called Torian, and our own king have been hovering over you and getting in my way! Now that you're awake, of course, there will be only one man ready to see you: Rehn. Kile has been sent to scour the countryside for your assassin, the king is busy in council discussing war, and the foreign king and prince are not permitted to see you."

"What war?" Jhan's mind grasped that one thing.

"King Torian's land was taken over by a warlord who uses Power," Evian explained, "This warlord is advancing into our lands. King Torian came to warn us." Evian saw Jhan go pale. "The warlord is your dark king, isn't he? I've also heard that Torian is your father."

The oblivion of fever was better than this sharp reality. "Yes. Yes to both questions," Jhan replied softly. He gave Evian a bitter look. "Stop treating me as Jhanian, the man. You know that I don't really know this Torian. There won't be any joyful father/son reunion. He was Jhanian's father, not mine. I don't want to see him. I was given a compulsion to kill him. I would have tried to kill him if I hadn't been knifed!"

Evian looked as sick as Jhan felt. "I knew that there were other compulsions within you, but this..."

"Tell him why I can't see him. Make him understand."

Evian paced and Jhan didn't watch, turning his face away and feeling very frightened. He'd been knifed! It churned in his head along with the fact that his torturer, the dark king, was coming towards him bent on conquest. Jhan felt an irrational urge to flee, to run as far away as he could.

"You can't run from this," Evian said suddenly, accurately reading his thoughts. Jhan glared, but Evian plowed on, regardless. "The father of Jhanian is a king. That makes you Prince Jhan. Whether you ever wish to see your royal father or not, you are of royal blood. A man attempted to murder you when you were on the verge of meeting your father. This dark warlord is advancing into our territory. I believe that these things are connected."

Jhan shook his head and rubbed at his forehead, feeling lost. "No one knew Torian was my father! I didn't know! How can you say that they're connected? Besides, if I have a compulsion to murder my family, I don't think that bastard torturer would hire a man to knife me before I could do it!"

"There may be several plots hatching in Pekarín."

"Stop it! You sound like a cheap spy novel!"

“A cheap what?”

Jhan exclaimed, “I’m not a prince! I’m not really Jhanian! I don’t intend to pretend that I know Torian or his other son. In fact, I will pack my things and leave Pekarín altogether to avoid them! I don’t want to kill them! As for that man, that assassin, or whatever he was, I hope that Kile finds him! Tekhal will question him and find out what he was up to. As for the dark king, I want to get away from him.”

“You can’t run away,” Evian stressed.

“Why can’t I? He scares me shitless! Just the thought of him coming anywhere near this place terrifies me!”

Evian twisted the empty cup around and around in his hands, looking into its emptiness. “The king won’t allow you to leave, Jhan.”

Jhan felt as if he had been struck. He scowled and sank deep into the coverlet. “When have I cared about his commands?”

Evian shrugged. “The point is moot. You won’t be able to get out of that bed without help for a few days. In that time, we may have an entirely different situation.”

“He can’t keep me here.”

Jhan was persistent but Evian wasn’t going to argue. He went to put the cup away and Jhan was left alone to think. Nothing had an easy solution. What was he going to do if that dark king was coming to Pekarín? What did Tekhal intend to do against a man with that kind of power? Why would Tekhal stop Jhan from leaving Pekarín, especially when he was threatening a visiting king and his son? Why would someone try to stab him, risking their life by attempting it in the presence of an entire army?

Jhan hadn’t any answers and he was still too weak to try and work them out for long. He began drifting off to sleep again and was almost over the edge of unconsciousness when he remembered what he had said to Kile. He had told Kile that he loved him!

End book one

Coming in a few weeks:

Book Two: Shattered Fates

Other books by Kracken

Tapping Darkness, Book One of the Ajay Kavanagh detective series