

Summary:

Found by Kile, her dream of a new life is shattered by the ugly brutality of the King's order for her to return to Pekarín and the brother of her body, who will stop at nothing to make her the man his brother once was.

Book One: Dark King Rising

Book Two: Shattered Fates

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

Searching Souls

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

Searching Souls
by
Kracken

Chapter One

(Unmasked)

Blood pounded and rushed in a frightening heat all through a body torn and violated by both good and evil. The world whirled and throbbed in time to desperate heartbeats and a rising wind shook down leaves like misplaced thoughts, tumbling in the storm tossed darkness all about.

In the midst of the storm, a figure stood; an angel of golden light with hands of salvation. It denied the darkness its victim, saved a lost soul from the clutching fingers of death, standing all in amazement as the world shrunk and settled and became reality; harsh, cold, and threatening rain.

Kile Helarion Dor gripped Jhan's chin with gentle strength, callouses scraping soft flesh, as he pulled Jhan close. The glare of yellow light from the lantern that he held, illuminated, fitfully, his blue eyes and the battle ground of conflicting, and powerful, emotions on his square jawed face. Kile's fingers trembled, released Jhan's chin, and then lifted Jhan onto his feet with a strong hand under his arm.

"Jhan? It is you, isn't it?" Kile's voice was barely a whisper, a ghost-like sound that just managed to rise above the pounding rush of the river.

Jhan had been frozen, wondering if he had lost his mind at last. He hardly dared to believe that the vision of Kile before him was anything other than a cruel trick of his wounded mind. Hearing Kile's voice, and feeling his touch, woke Jhan to the reality of it like a bolt of lightning.

Throwing himself into Kile's arms with a shout of joy and relief, Jhan held Kile as tightly as he could. The darkness within Jhan and all about them seemed to draw back like a beast at bay, powerless against Kile's brightness and strength. For the first time in weeks, Jhan felt an overwhelming sense of warmth and security.

The threatening storm, the fall from the imala, and the harrowing rescue from the collapsing bridge over the raging flash flood, were forgotten as they both began to talk at once. Their voices mingled and quickly became senseless and tangled. Confused, they both stopped speaking to catch their breaths and sort out their thoughts.

Kile disengaged Jhan from around his waist deliberately and, putting a hand on Jhan's shoulder

that was almost too firm, he led Jhan a short distance away from the noise of the river. “We’ve been looking for you,” Kile said simply.

“Who? Why?” Jhan wasn’t sure where to begin with his questions.

Kile’s big hand slid from Jhan’s shoulder to close about Jhan’s tiny wrist. Kile attempted to sound easy and casual, but failed miserably, his face giving away that he was deeply troubled and feeling guilty. “This isn’t the place for explanations. Come with me and I’ll take you to where the others are waiting.”

Others? That should have made Jhan uneasy, but his heart was opening like a flower to sunlight and his mouth, stiff and thin with long suffering, was smiling foolishly. “Is it far?”

Kile swallowed hard, looking away and down, anywhere but at Jhan. “Not far,” Kile replied and his voice was rigid, as if he feared giving something away.

Kile’s imala stood patiently off to one side. Well trained, it hadn’t moved an inch during all of the excitement. It flapped ears at them curiously as Kile led Jhan over to it. Without asking Jhan’s consent or even attempting to explain further, Kile lifted Jhan up onto the saddle. Mounting behind, Kile’s arms locked around Jhan’s waist.

Kile’s solid presence and his comforting grip encouraged Jhan’s trust and Jhan could only think to ask, “How did you find me?”

“We heard you pass close by and I followed,” Kile explained as he urged the imala into the forest. He was reluctant to elaborate, explaining shortly. “We lost the road and I thought that we could get directions.”

“You didn’t know it was me?” Jhan was stunned.

“How could we?”

Jhan trembled, realizing how close he had come to not having a rescuer. Only someone’s sharp ears and an unusual turn of good luck had saved his life!

Thunder rolled, but the storm had passed by in the distance and the forest was becoming lighter as the sun began breaking from the clouds. Jhan could hear the rush of the water faintly to their right and it remained there, hidden behind a long drop from a riverbank. The sound made Jhan nervous, but the imala was surefooted in the gloom, picking its way carefully.

They broke out of the forest after only a short time, and entered a clearing where men were

standing about with their imala. A surprised shout startled Jhan and Kile's arms released him as Jaross came running up to help Jhan down from the saddle.

"Jhan! What happened to you? Why did you run away? I've been searching for you, out of my mind, for days!" Jaross' words tumbled over each other excitedly. His young face was flushed with gladness that Jhan was safe, yet shadowed by guilt as well; perhaps blaming himself for what had happened to Jhan.

Jhan felt dazed and incredulous. He stammered, attempting to come to grips with the jump in time. "It's been days? I don't- It feels like it's only been hours! After Jaryn tried to- tried to -"

Jaross' excitement turned to anger in a heartbeat, jaw working and face reflecting the memory of something that had clearly effected him deeply. "We found Jaryn outside of camp. It was obvious to everyone what he had attempted." Jaross rushed on, heedless of Jhan's distress. "How did he die, Lady Jhan? Did someone help you and then take you away? I would have killed Jaryn myself! Why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you trust me to help you?"

Jhan's mouth worked, trying to think how to reply. Memory was a dark, unclear jumble of dream and waking horror. The attempted rape by the Pekarín Captain Jaryn twisted with the memory of another soldier, a soldier of Dagara Ku Ni who had died in the same horrible manner.

Jhan's hands turned into fists as he recalled how his deadly embrace had crushed both men like over ripe fruit. Jhan couldn't imagine how such power could reside in his tiny hands and he felt distressed and sickened, wondering if that power was yet another compulsion or under his control.

Before dread and anxiety could claim Jhan completely, his hand was grabbed and Jhan was spun about to come face to face with Rehn. Rehn's lanky form bent over, plain face smiling under its thatch of sun streaked, brown hair, and caught Jhan up in an embrace. "I never thought to see you again, Little Lady!"

"Oh, Rehn!" Jhan exclaimed, conflicting emotions of joy and vexation warring with one another. "How did you get here? Why did you come looking for me? We talked about this! You told me yourself that going away was for the best!"

Rehn's smile dropped and he acquired the same guilty look that seemed to be on everyone's face. His arms fell and he took a step back, looking down at his feet as if he had just lost something.

Confused by the sudden change, Jhan became apprehensive. "What's wrong? What's this all about, Rehn?"

Looking around for the first time, Jhan noticed five Pekarín soldiers. They were standing on the outskirts of the camp and, as even more sunlight penetrated through the thick leaves of the canopy overhead, Jhan was stunned to recognize Prince Thaós standing beside them. Fierce blue eyes unreadable, Thaós was twisting the reins of his imala impatiently.

“Get it over with, Dor!” Thaós abruptly barked. “Enough of reunions!”

Obviously reluctant, Kile dismounted from his imala and pulled a folded paper from his pack. Unfolding it deliberately and smoothing it out with a great crinkling of paper, he spoke in official tones. “Prince Jhanian Nor Kevelt, by order of his Majesty King Tekhal Tal Khelav of Pekarín and King Torian El Kevelt of Karana, you will return with all speed to be handed over to the custody of Kevelt. Refusal to comply will result in summary execution, for the good of all lands.”

Jhan was stunned. This was the very last thing that he had expected or wanted. He couldn’t trust himself to speak; too shocked to react even when a body suddenly blocked his sight of Kile and a hand pulled Jhan close. Jhan found himself staring into Jaross’ confused, wild eyes.

Jaross searched Jhan’s face with disbelief. Jhan could see that he was waiting for Jhan to be shocked, to laugh, to mock Kile and say that it was all a mistake or a foul lie. When Jhan only stared back in growing fear, Jaross’ eyes became even wilder.

Jaross reached out with a shaking hand and began pulling violently at the laces of Jhan’s dress. When Jhan attempted to stop him, he shook Jhan and uttered a wordless growl of warning not to interfere. Finally, desperate to know the truth, Jaross took both of his hands and ripped the already rent material with one hard motion. Jhan staggered as the remnants of the dress fell to his waist, revealing his slim expanse of upper body and what he was obviously lacking.

“What monstrous...!” Jaross’s voice strangled as everything that he had felt or believed about Jhan collapsed in an instant of time. Jaross’ complete and utter expression of hate was the last thing that Jhan saw clearly before Jaross’ fist landed in his eye.

The world shattered. The pieces flew about, images scattered and senseless. Jhan felt himself dragged while voices shouted in protest. The shattered pieces of the world came together again and created a frightening picture. Jhan found himself standing precariously on the edge of a steep ravine, looking down at a torrent of water rushing over boulders several yards below his feet. The edge of a knife at Jhan’s throat seemed to be the only thing keeping him from tumbling into it.

One dress fluttered, end over end, as it fell into the ravine and landed in the water. After a slight

pause, several more dresses took the long fall. Jhan's vision blurred and then cleared in time to see a long black object hit the water, following the dresses downstream. Shocked, Jhan recognized it, raising a trembling hand to the back of his aching neck. Those trembling fingers met the shorn ends of his hair. Jaross had cut off his braid!

Jhan whimpered in pain and terror as the knife pressed deeper at his throat, but Jaross didn't show any mercy as he dragged Jhan away from the edge of the ravine and rained blows on Jhan with a fury fueled by his betrayal. With Jaross' face close to his own and the man shouting incoherently at the top of his voice, Jhan hadn't any doubt as to how the drama would end.

The sudden silence was surprising. Jhan staggered, hands covering his bruised and bloody face as Jaross made him stand on his feet, ripping the last remnants of the dress from Jhan's body. The breeze rushed in with cold fingers and Jhan shuddered, going white with humiliation and shock as he stood, naked, where everyone could see.

"I warn you, Jaross Nava!" Thaos's voice came clearly, a deadly edge to it. "You have beaten Jhanian enough to satisfy even me, but he is still Kevelt and my brother. Kill him and I will kill you and declare blood feud on your kin!"

Jaross laughed, a harsh lunatic sound that cut the air as sharply as the knife at Jhan's throat. "You call this brother? This... thing? He's a murdering traitor, by your own account, and an attacker of Nava women! Did I tell you? He groped my own sister! He beat me to a bloody pulp when I attempted to defend her honor! Shameless! Dishonorable! How can you name him brother when he will go to such... lengths... such cowardice... such perversion of his gender to save himself from just retribution?"

"Lord Jaross, you don't understand!" That was Rehn, sounding as if he were nearly weeping as he raised his anguished voice to be heard over Jaross' ranting. "Jhan- Jhanian isn't pretending to save himself! He doesn't remember being Jhanian Kevelt. He truly thinks he's a woman!"

"Doesn't remember?" Jaross repeated. Jhan felt himself shaken. His vision darkened and he almost fell, but Jaross' cruel hand held him up, determined to display him to everyone. "Look at him!" Jaross exploded, disbelieving. "Are you saying that he doesn't know that he's a man? What fool do you take me for?"

"On my honor, Lord Jaross," Kile interjected tightly. "Rehn speaks the truth. Jhanian carried on this delusion long before it was discovered who he was."

Jhan felt the knife at his neck prick and draw blood. "Do you believe that claiming he is mad will

save him from me?" Jaross snarled back, unswayed. "Jhanian has committed crimes! He attacked my sister! He betrayed his country and the house of Kevelt!"

Thaos retorted, voice scathing and impatient. "The Dark King has taken what was once my brother, a fierce warrior, and reduced him to a shaking, weeping, child! Jhanian has paid the price for his crimes against Karana and the Kevelt. Look at him, Lord Jaross! He's a freak, a madman, a plaything of our mutual enemy. If all of that doesn't satisfy your sister's honor and your wounded pride, then I should never like to cross you!"

There was a very long silence in which Jhan stood with blinded eyes, shaking from the cold, and everyone else stood rooted like statues, watching the wild tragedy unfold and unable to act.

"Gods!" Jhan heard Jaross groan and the knife lowered from Jhan's neck. "It is beyond belief! How could there be such Power to shrink and shape and change so horribly? I- You are right, Prince Thaos, I couldn't think of anything more fitting as punishment." He gestured to Rehn. "Take him! Get him out of my sight!"

Rehn quickly came forward and wrapped a cloak about Jhan, leading him away from Jaross before the man could change his mind. Kile drew his sword swiftly, stepping between Jaross and Jhan protectively, but Jaross turned away and wrapped his arms about himself as if he had been shaken to his core.

Jhan buried his face against Rehn's chest and gripped him with desperate strength as Rehn gently lowered them both to the ground. He spoke to Jhan gently, but Jhan heard only an unintelligible buzz drowned out by the throbbing pain of his beating and the white haze of shock.

The sun came out completely, dappling everything and revealing faces that had been hidden in shadows. Rehn saw Jhan's face clearly for the first time and he swore in a strangled voice at the mess Jaross had made of it. There was something else as well.

"What's happened to you, Jhan?" Rehn asked quietly. "You look as if you've seen the depths of darkness."

Jhan couldn't reply, drowning in nightmarish fear. He felt surrounded by enemies; back with the Dark King and forced to be naked and an amusement for everyone. Jhan's sense of self evaporated until he was a ball of fear, thinking that, at any moment, someone might decide to begin something cruel. Jhan clung to Rehn, tightening his grip, trying to hide like a frightened animal in the shelter of his arms.

“Get some clothes!’ Rehn demanded. And then, when no one seemed to move, “Kile? Find something that will fit Jhan!”

Jhan heard movement then. He whimpered and clung even tighter, if that were possible. A shadow blocked out the light. The sound of cloth thudding onto the ground nearby was startling. “I’m the only one thin enough.” It was Jaross who spoke, voice rough and contemptuous. “Cover him up. I don’t want to have to see his freakishness any longer!”

“Lord Jaross, I have never thought of raising my hand to a Lord in my life, until this moment!” Was that really Rehn’s voice? To hear it filled with anger and threat shook Jhan’s sense of safety. If even Rehn could be violent, where could he hope to hide?

Rehn forced Jhan away from him, hands locked on Jhan’s shoulders. Their eyes met and Rehn’s were full of pain and concern. “I have clothes for you, Jhan. They are Jaross’. You’ll have to wear them. He threw away all of your dresses, “ Rehn paused and then took a shaking breath. “Please, let go of me, Jhan! Your grip is like iron and you’re hurting me! Come, stand up and I will help you dress.”

“No!” It erupted from Jhan. That would mean exposing himself again! Jhan tightened his grip, ignoring Rehn’s cry of pain.

“Enough of this!” Jaross exploded.

Something hard hit Jhan behind the ear and he fell into a swirling red and black cloud shot with lights. Reemerging some time later, Jhan found himself lying on his back, clothed in brown pants too large and a tan, woolen shirt that hung on him in folds to his knees.

One of Jhan’s eyes refused to open, swollen shut by a large cut underneath. A cold cloth dabbed at it. Jhan turned his aching head and saw Rehn crouching beside him with a rag, face set and angry. There were bruises on his face. “I warned him,” Rehn grumbled to himself as much as to Jhan. There was a hint of anxiety to Rehn’s voice, as if he feared repercussions.

Without rising, Jhan slowly looked around. He could see that Kile and some of the soldiers had bruises as well. Jaross was sitting on a fallen tree, nursing a swelling, split bruise with a wet rag and staring at the blood on it ruefully.

“Who won?” Jhan wondered softly.

Rehn shrugged, not wanting to talk about it. His eyes were studying Jhan seriously. “Are you all right?”

“Why didn’t you stop him, Rehn? Why didn’t any of you?”

The ache of betrayal in Jhan’s voice made Rehn raise eyebrows in astonishment, offended and confused that Jhan would believe such a thing of him. He grimly set the record straight. “Jaross had a knife at your throat, Jhan. He was threatening to kill you if we interfered. We shouted at him, argued, pleaded, but he wouldn’t let go of you.”

Jhan blinked against the pounding pain in his head and refused to relent. “I saw how you treated Jaross after he let me go! He was allowed to hit me again!”

“Jaross is a lord’s son,” Rehn replied, knowing that it wouldn’t be the explanation Jhan would like or accept. “He is the blood kin of a king, Jhan. He has an army to back up anything that he wishes to do. I am only a farmer’s son. I may yet pay for laying hands on him if he wishes to pursue it. Kile is the third son of a landless duke and not equal to Jaross’ rank either. If you wish to blame someone, then turn your anger on Prince Thaos. He didn’t do or say anything except to ask that Jaross not kill you.”

Jhan closed his good eye tightly for a moment and then opened it to look at Rehn intensely. “So, you all have what you wanted. I am in men’s clothing and my hair is cut. Will you all take a shot at beating me up as you drag me back to Pekarín to be caged?”

Jhan’s voice had risen as he spoke and Jaross heard him, lowering his rag and squeezing it in one fist. His eyes were smoldering. “It is nothing less than you deserve, Prince Jhanian!”

“Leave him alone, Lord Jaross!” Thaos demanded sharply. He had been standing several yards away, speaking to some of the soldiers. He had turned abruptly and his dark face reflected back Jaross’ anger. “He is a Prince of Kevelt, what ever else he may be, and my Father, the King, has ordered his return to Pekarín, in one piece and very much alive. Do not test my resolve to carry out his commands!”

Jaross stood and tossed the rag aside. “I will not test your resolve, Your Highness, but your brother may make taking him anywhere he doesn’t wish to go, another matter entirely. I don’t know why he didn’t kill me with his Power, but he can kill all of us if he has the will.”

“Power?” The word sprang from several mouths and people went pale, including Rehn.

“You have Power, Jhan?” Rehn was frightened, rising and stepping back as if he had suddenly discovered a snake.

Kile was drawing his sword, as was Thaos, questions raining down on Jhan, demanding answers.

Jhan cried out, hands turning into fists in anguish. Everyone fell into terrified silence. Jhan swallowed hard and lines in his face, that hadn't been there before his experience with Gregory, deepened as he recalled the sacrifice the man had made for him. "I don't have Power any longer," Jhan explained. "The Sahvossa sent a man to kill me, but he decided to help me instead. He went down into my memories and found out how the Dark King had given the Power to me. He died, horribly. He was able to stop the Power, but he wasn't able live after seeing my memories."

"I thought..." Rehn stammered, began again. "You seemed different. Older. Your eyes... they're full of horrors. Do you- Do you remember -?"

"Everything," Jhan finished with a shaky nod. "He drugged me so that I could survive it. The memories are a part of me now. They aren't any less terrifying, but it is something that I can live with." Jhan couldn't help the tears rolling down his cheeks. He wondered if they would ever stop.

Thaos sheathed his sword with a harsh, angry movement. "Stop weeping like a woman!"

"I am a woman!" Jhan sobbed, but Thaos turned away in disgust, unwilling to listen.

Kile sheathed his sword as well, and strode forward, stopping a few feet from Jhan. He appeared to be uncertain as to how to begin after all that had just transpired. He directed his words to Rehn rather than Jhan as he spoke. "We need to get moving. Can he travel?"

"Jhan?" Rehn inquired softly, as if Jhan really had a choice.

Jhan pulled himself together with an effort and wiped at his tear stained face, emotions tying themselves into knots. "Is this how I'm to be treated now?" He raised his chin and looked at Kile levelly. "Am I a freak? A thing? Someone you don't speak to? Someone to be despised and ill treated? Will you allow that, Kile Helarion Dor? Will you let everyone treat me as if I weren't a person? Oh, my mistake, you're doing that already, aren't you?"

The muscles along Kile's jaw jumped as he gritted his teeth, but he still refused to look at Jhan. The bruise close to Kile's mouth might have spoken for him, but Jhan didn't know if he had acquired it defending Rehn against Jaross, Jaross against Rehn, or Jhan against Jaross' ill treatment. Each scenario carried with it different emotions. Jhan would have liked to ask, but Kile was striding away and shouting for everyone to break camp.

"I'm not going back," Jhan announced to no one in particular. He felt small and afraid, but determined despite that.

"You are," Rehn responded sympathetically, but didn't give any room for argument. "King Tekhal

needs Torian's troops. Torian has made your return contingent on his help. Kile will bring you back in any manner that he can."

Jhan felt surprisingly steady on his feet as Rehn helped him to stand. It allowed him to push away from Rehn and face him squarely. The man was so out of place among the others that it begged a question. "Thaos was sent by his father to look for me," Jhan said, trying to think clearly through the pounding pain of his head. "Kile was sent by King Tekhal. Jaross felt it his duty to find me after I disappeared. Everyone has a reason, except for you, Rehn. Why are you here?"

"The Sahvossa ordered me to come." Rehn wouldn't meet Jhan's eyes, perhaps thinking of Jhan's revelation that the Sahvossa had tried to have him killed.

"For what reason?" Jhan prompted when Rehn acted as if he didn't intend to explain any further.

"I don't know." Rehn's mouth shut tightly and went into a thin line.

Jhan shook his head, mystified. Why send Rehn when the Sahvossa had already planned to have Gregory kill him? It didn't make any sense.

"We have to get going," Rehn said, disrupting Jhan's thoughts. "You don't have any choice, Jhan."

Jhan pulled at his ill fitting clothes forlornly, feeling tears well up again. He fought them, unsuccessfully. "We'll see about that."

They didn't take the road back to Pekarín immediately. Kile decided, instead, to travel to Khor to buy supplies and replace two lame pack animals before the long trek home. Jhan rode the short trip behind Rehn on his imala with his face hidden against Rehn's back, trying to deal with the pain of his injuries and the stress of what his life had suddenly become.

"I will leave you after Khor, your Highness," Jaross announced to Thaós suddenly, as if he had been thinking it over for some time. "I need to return to Petrath and defend my country."

"Petrath has already fallen, foolish boy!" Thaós was brutal with the truth. "Did you think Karana would fall and soft bellied Petrath stand against an army? The ruling house fled to the islands and your father fights bush battles like a child worrying a beast. The battle has moved on! The final fight will be in Pekarín."

Silence and a weighing of options. Finally, Jaross responded grimly. "I will return with you, then. I

will meet this Dark King on the field of battle, not skulk and play with his captains.”

“Jhanian was second to the general of the Dark King’s army for some time.” Thaos’ voice was full of violent emotions barely restrained. “He betrayed us until he realized that Karana would not be spared as he had been promised. His knowledge was invaluable to us until he was captured.” A pause. “If he could remember...”

“He doesn’t.” That was Kile, sure in his knowledge. “Jhanian will only be of use to you if you have embroidery stitches to pull out.”

“It could be a ruse, “ Jaross interjected, sounding suspicious. “Jhanian could have been gathering intelligence the entire time that he lived in Pekarín, this foolishness of being a woman his distraction.”

Rehn’s back trembled against Jhan’s cheek, intimidated, but willing to contradict those above his station for Jhan’s sake. “My Lords, your Highness, I spent a long time taking care of Jhan after he appeared in Pekarín. He was not acting, I assure you! I fed him, cleaned him, and kept him from harming himself in his madness. The man you described to me as your brother, Prince Thaos, did not seem the kind of man who would hide in a corner drooling, soiling himself, and screaming as he tried to claw himself a hole to hide in. No man could pretend so well.”

Each word struck Jhan like a blow and he bowed beneath their weight. No one had a reply to Rehn’s words and Jhan was glad. He couldn’t have born any more arguments and accusations.

After a few hours, the forest fell away to be replaced by scrub trees and a marshy, flat land. The road wound through it, filled with people of every sort in carts, on foot, and on imala back. They were all heading towards the city up ahead, emptying the countryside to gather together for defense.

Khor was a very large city of brown brick and whitewashed wood. A high wall and a thick gate guarded the entrance and a contingent of guards watched the people pouring in warily. Jhan’s nose wrinkled in disgust at the smell that came drifting through the gate. It was the mingled scent of too many people and too many animals in one place.

Chaos reigned as everyone bottle necked at the gate, trying to get in, and the gathering gloom of twilight made everything that much more difficult. The imala honked and reacted nervously at the deafening noise and the press of people. Fearing that someone might get trampled, Kile ordered everyone to loosen up and ride in one at a time.

Rehn’s imala went through the gate last. Once through, he discovered that the press of people there was even worse. Rehn had his hands full trying to keep the imala from rearing and lashing out in a

panic. It was a perfect opportunity and Jhan didn't let it go by. He slipped off the back of the imala in one smooth motion and ducked into the crowd.

Jhan heard Rehn's shout of surprise, but he ignored the urge to turn and look. Keeping his face hidden, he ducked down a side ally and began running. Each step sent a jolt of pain through Jhan's head and his fear of getting caught made his heart hammer in his small chest.

He must have looked startling, Jhan thought, with his eye swollen shut and his cut cheek an open red slash; a monster appearing out of the gloom as if to attack. Fortunately, there wasn't anyone to see. The ally was deserted... or so Jhan thought.

"Hey now!" A hand snagged Jhan and he was brought up short. A very tall man unfolded from the darkness from where he'd been leaning against a building. Lamplight picked out his thatch of blonde hair, small squinting eyes, and a drooping mustache. It was all Jhan noticed before he broke free with a twist and turned to run. Another man stepped from the darkness and blocked his way, smiling and arms outstretched. He was short and stocky, his eyes like shadowed pits under his unruly, black hair.

"Don't touch me!" Jhan warned as loudly as he could, hoping someone from the row upon row of houses along the narrow ally would hear and come to rescue him.

"A little girl!" the first man sighed in disappointed. "And an ugly one at that! Let her go, Balfir. Tell your mama that pants are for boys, sweeting, and that she shouldn't hit you so hard!"

"And that her girl will come back a woman if she keeps allowing her to wander ally ways!" Balfir interjected with a shake of his shaggy head. "Back to your post, Temir! One of those country girls is bound to come bumbling this way soon! I saw them pouring through the gate by the cart load, not a clue as to where they would lay their head tonight!"

"On my pillow, I hope, Balfir!"

Their laughter echoed down the narrow ally way as Jhan ran from them.

Jhan slowed down only when he reached another ally and a patch of darkness to hide in. Crouching low and panting wearily, he waited for his fearful shaking to stop and for the courage to continue.

Jhan touched trembling hands to his swollen face and his shorn hair. Even as badly bruised as he was, and dressed as a man, those men had thought that he was a woman! At any other time, Jhan would have been relieved and overjoyed. Alone in the back ally maze of a large city, Jhan could only find it a frightening liability.

The thud of boots walking on cobblestones took Jhan unaware. Cringing, Jhan ducked further back into his patch of darkness. When Bheni walked past him, hand on her sword hilt and keen eyes carefully watching the way ahead, Jhan was stunned. He watched her take several more steps past him before he could shake his shock and react. “Bheni!”

Bheni spun, sword half drawn menacingly. She squinted into the darkness. As tall as any man and as polished as mahogany, Bheni had a deadly air about her and a level look in her eyes that shouted a warning against daring to accost her. As Jhan stepped into the light streaming out of a window, he realized that deadly look was aimed at him. Bheni didn’t recognize him!

“It’s me, Bheni, Jhan... Jhan of Pekarín.”

Bheni was stunned. She stepped closer, as if trying to see under some disguise. At last, she recognized Jhan. Her reaction was swift and not at all what Jhan had expected. Bheni drew her sword completely and placed it between them, face twisted in fury. “Jhanian Kevelt.”

Jhan had raised hands as if to welcome Bheni gladly. He let them drop and knotted them together in anguish. “Duke Yhenni told you, didn’t he?”

Bheni nodded sharply, chin set and mouth compressing into a thin line. “He told us all about you and then he let us go. No one wanted to stay after that. No one cared what he meant to do to you.”

Bheni looked Jhan up and down, continuing in a harsh, accusing voice. “At least you have put off your disguise. Did you lie to us and wear a dress to escape to your Dark King? I suppose that we were perfect for your subterfuge. Who would have thought to find Jhanian Kevelt, the traitor of Karana, hiding among women dressed as a woman!”

“I didn’t lie to you, Bheni,” Jhan spoke softly, tears beginning to roll hotly down his cheeks. “I am not Jhanian Kevelt.”

“So you said long ago,” Bheni reminded him. “and I believed it like a fool! I have become wiser since then.”

“I didn’t lie,” Jhan repeated just as quietly, voice choked with anguish.

“Did Duke Yhenni lie, then?” Bheni was mocking and skeptical.

Jhan hugged himself. Night was falling completely now and a brisk breeze was whistling through the ally. “If he told you that Jhanian Kevelt was his right hand man and that he was in league with the Dark King, yes, I suppose that he did, yet if he told you that I was that man and that I did those things,

he is lying. This body is Prince Jhanian Kevelt. The person inside is not.”

Time ticked by slowly as Bheni stared at Jhan, considering his words; a judge without a jury. At last, Bheni put a hand to her head in confusion, unable to make a decision. “What happened to Lord Jaross?”

Jhan swallowed hard, reluctant to reveal to Bheni the rest of the story, but knowing he must. “Jaross found out as well. He’s the one who marked up my face. I- I ran away from him and some men who were trying to take me back to Pekarín.”

“For punishment?”

“No. “ Jhan begged for understanding. “I’m just a pawn, Bheni. A bargaining chip to be handed over. I told you once that they wanted me for who I am, not for anything that I’ve done. That was true.”

“Where are you running to?” Bheni’s voice was flat of meaning, yet Jhan could tell by her eyes that the question was pivotal.

“I don’t know,” Jhan admitted. “I’m just running scared. I won’t be taken back to Pekarín and wait for Dagara Ku Ni to show up and reclaim me. I won’t be his toy ever again.”

Bheni stared into Jhan’s good eye as he said this and the horror that she saw there made Bheni begin to believe him. She bit her lower lip and then released it, making a decision at last, but still uncertain. “Your hair. Someone cut it?”

“Jaross. He threw away all of my dresses as well.” Jhan twisted hands into the men’s clothing that he wore. “I never wanted to wear these. I was always afraid that, if I did, I would forget who I used to be. Silly, really. Nothing can change me. Not beatings, torture, clothes, or hair. I am a woman, no matter what happens.”

Jhan was still weeping. Bheni reached out a cold hand and wiped at the tears on Jhan’s cheek, shaking her head self-deprecatingly. “When the Duke told me about you, I was furious,” Bheni explained. “I believed everything that he said. It was all too easy to think that you had lied and betrayed my trust. Look at you! So small. A child. A crying child! You are not Jhanian Kevelt. You are not the terrible man the Duke described. You are not a man at all! I can see it clearly!”

Jhan dared to be hopeful. “If you believe that, Bheni, then let me travel with you again! Take me to the islands and let me hide and find some sort of peace! Don’t let them take me back!”

Bheni became distressed, shaking her head and sheathing her sword with one, sudden movement.

“I am sorry, Jhan, but you cannot ride with us any longer. The women have decided to stay here. They discovered a cousin living here and they have settled into her house. Their journey is at an end.”

It was as if Jhan had been cut with a thousand razors. The long days of companionship on the trails, the warm moments, the laughter, and the feeling of being a woman among women, was dashed and destroyed for ever. They hated him, Jhan was certain, thinking that he had betrayed and lied to them all.

Still, Jhan wasn't willing to give up all hope. “What about you and Lhiddi?” He pressed desperately. “I could go with you.”

Bheni became even more distressed. “Lhiddi took very ill, Jhan. I must remain here and send to our kin in the islands to come and help me with her. I- I do not think that she will live to see her home again.”

Jhan turned, hands raised to his face in grief for Lhiddi, but also in fear of the darkness and the dangers of the city all around him. Somehow, Jhan knew, he had to find the courage to face it and the long journey alone. “Try to explain to the women about me,” Jhan said in a faint, lost voice as he began to walk away. “Tell Lhiddi -”

Bheni caught Jhan's wrist and stopped him. She dug into her pockets hurriedly and brought out a small purse of coins. Pressing it into Jhan's hand, she said regretfully, “There is not much there. Along with your other money, it should keep you-”

“I had my money in the packs of my baku,” Jhan replied with a weary, confused frown. “Jaross and I found the baku, but my money wasn't in the packs, Bheni.”

“No? But, I -” Bheni scowled and swore. “Gruna must have gone through your packs and taken it out when I was not looking! She did not agree with letting your animals loose, but I wanted...” Bheni looked guilty. “I felt betrayed. I wanted all of your things gone; anything that reminded me of you.”

So, she hadn't left them for the reasons that Jaross had suspected, Jhan realized with a chill. “You saved our lives,” Jhan explained. “We would have died without the baku.”

That seemed to relieve some of Bheni's guilt, but she was still angry at Gruna. “That woman owes you, Jhan. Go to the stable down this ally and to the left at the next turn. Take one of the women's baku and a saddle harness.” She pressed Jhan's hands in hers. “God have you in his keeping, Jhan. Ride safe and ask for my kin when you reach Alatha. They will treat you well. Perhaps we will meet again, soon.”

It was Bheni who turned and walked away now, face hidden in darkness and long legs striding away as if she didn't want Jhan to see her sadness. Jhan also suspected that Bheni was still confused and uncertain about his true identity, and that she wanted to be gone and done with him before she could doubt and reconsider her actions.

Without Bheni's large and comforting presence, Jhan felt suddenly alone, small, and impotent. Looking up and down the alley fearfully, Jhan hid the bag of coins among his clothes and then began walking quickly to where Bheni had said the stable lay.

When Jhan reached the stables safely, he didn't find anyone to confront him or ask him his business there. Searching freely among the beasts in their stalls, Jhan recognized one of the women's baku, black and white with a small notch in each ear. Jhan spoke to it softly and it recognized him, allowing Jhan to put a saddle on it and buckle on the harness without complaint.

Jhan was becoming anxious. He knew that he was taking too long, imagining Kile fanning out his men to search for him throughout the city, yet Jhan knew that he couldn't start out without supplies. Nerves tightened, imagining a Pekarín soldier at every turn, Jhan led the baku from the stable and found a man, who was just closing shop, to sell him those supplies.

Jhan purchased a weeks worth of dried food and feed for himself and the baku and even managed to get some directions to the coast out of the shopkeeper. Having accomplished the task so easily, Jhan nearly felt a sudden surge of confidence. He quelled it at once, thinking of the real difficulties that lay ahead and his dangerous lack of skill.

After packing carefully, Jhan rode his baku towards the far end of Khor, keeping as much as he dared to the twisting back alleyways. He managed to reach the city wall unmolested and the gate that led into the swamps. The shopkeeper had advised Jhan not to go that way, citing a list of people that he had known who had become lost and died on that road. Jhan could only hope that Kile wouldn't think him foolish enough to go that way, and decide to guard the safer, second road out of Khor.

Jhan found two guards at the gate and no Pekaríns. Stifling a sigh of relief, Jhan suffered the critical, disbelieving looks the two men gave him. "Deep pools of mud out there, lad!" One of the guards warned Jhan. "Hope you know the way well!"

The shopkeeper had warned Jhan about them as well, describing shifting sands and boggy ground that made even well worn roads impermanent. Still, Jhan felt that the risk was worth it to erase his tracks and throw off his pursuers. He passed the guards with only a nod to acknowledge their concern.

There was a moon. Jhan was glad of that as darkness enveloped him and his baku as they left the lights of Khor behind, but his gladness soon evaporated. The marshy, flat swamp, dotted with short bladed grass and stunted trees, swallowed the trail after only a half mile. Jhan was left panicking and lost.

The baku was wise, picking its way along with its nose as it followed the scent of other travelers. Jhan stifled his fear with an effort and let loose the reins, not having any other option but to let the baku chose the way.

The beast settled into a slow walk that rocked Jhan like a cradle. After the long, torturous day, it was impossible to fight against the soothing rhythm of it. Jhan's eye closed at last and, despite his fear, he dozed in the saddle.

Jhan awoke with a start to find that it was early morning, the sun just beginning to cut through a marshy mist that hung about the flat landscape like cotton. An imala was walking ahead of him. Riding it and leading Jhan's baku by a lead, was Jaross.

"Awake at last, my Lady?" Jaross said *'my lady'* in mocking tones. "Lord Kile thought that you would hide in the city, but I seem to know you better than he does. I know how single minded and daring you can be when you wish to do something. I knew that you would head straight into the swamps without an ounce of fear or good sense."

Jhan jumped from the back of his baku and began to run. Jaross was off of his imala and overtaking Jhan in a heartbeat. His fingers tangled into the back of Jhan's hair and his hand closed tightly on Jhan's arm, cruelly bringing Jhan to a halt.

"Where did you get the baku and the supplies? Are you a thief as well, Jhanian Kevelt?" Jaross demanded angrily.

"I met Bheni in Khor and she gave them to me!" Jhan continued to struggle, but Jaross was too strong. "Let me go! There's no reason for you to help Kile return me to Pekarín and you've already had your turn beating me up!"

"I have good reason to see you returned to Pekarín!" Jaross ground out through gritted teeth. "It's

what you fear the most! Molesting my sister carries a heavy price, Kevelt, and I want to see you pay and pay again for that crime!”

“That’s just an excuse!” Jhan lashed back at him in anger and despair. “We both know why you’re so angry!”

“Do we?” Jaross pulled painfully on Jhan’s hair, eyes warning Jhan that he was about to explode into violence.

Jhan was beyond caring. “I’m sorry that you fell in love with me! That’s really what this is all about, isn’t it?” Jhan demanded. “That I broke your heart? That you think that I lied to you so that you could make a fool out of yourself? How many times did I tell you that I didn’t have any interest in you? How many times, Jaross? You have only yourself to blame!”

“Myself?” Jhan ducked the blow to his face and it clipped his ear, making his head ring. Jaross was red with fury, eyes wide and bloodshot from a night searching the road for Jhan. “Myself?” Jaross repeated, as if he could hardly believe that Jhan would dare say such a thing.

“Jhanian Kevelt attacked your sister and betrayed his people,” Jhan continued, daring even more. “Jhanian paid with his life and his mind. I am Jhan. A completely different person with a completely different mind! Look at me! The Dark King tore this body apart, piece by piece, and put it back together to look as much like a woman as possible. Are you embarrassed and ashamed that you mistook me for one? Ask Kile Helarion Dor how easy it is to make that mistake! He made it himself! I look like a woman and I am a woman, inside.”

“So you believe,” Jaross hissed in revulsion. “Let me remind you of your true sex, then.” Without warning, Jaross jammed his knee into Jhan’s groin.

The pain was incredible. Jhan couldn’t even scream, retching and trying to survive the waves of pain that tore through him. When Jaross abruptly let him go, Jhan fell, sprawling in the soft dirt.

“You will get up and get on your baku,” Jaross ordered, relentless in his anger. He stepped away from Jhan, brushing his hands together as if to shake off dirt there or Jhan’s taint. “I expect you never to look at or speak to me again. If you do, I may forget my honor and slay you for your crimes. You *are* Jhanian Kevelt, whatever mind you claim, and you *are* going back to Pekarín. You will not escape that fact in this fantasy of yours.”

“Tsk! Tsk!” A strange voice interrupted suddenly. “It’s a lord beating up on his poor servant!”

Four men sauntered out of the marshy brush and the white morning fog, swords drawn. They were

a rag tag crew with various modes of dress and wary, sullen looks. Their leader was the exception. He was dressed finer than the rest. Broad shouldered and red haired, he had freckles sprayed across his snub-nosed face. He was smiling like a cat sizing up a mouse.

“Lord Jaross Ke Nava!” A dark haired man with a scar over one lip, exclaimed. “I know his face, Bherel!”

The leader nodded and gave Jaross a small bow. The swords never wavered, though, and they were still cautious in their approach. “Lord Nava! We are honored by your presence! Still, we don’t take it well when even a lord beats a child. I regret that I will have to stop you.”

“He is not a child!” Jaross snarled back and drew his own sword. “He is a -”

“Still, low blows hardly seem honorable, especially for a Lord of the Nava,” the leader cut in. “I didn’t hear the argument, but I can’t believe any incompetence on the part of your servant merits -”

“Get on with it, Bherel!” the dark haired man growled.

Bherel scowled. “You simply don’t have any flare for the dramatic! I was coming to it!” The man shrugged and smiled again. “In the name of King Dagara Ku Ni, I’m afraid I’m going to have to make you our prisoner. We were fishing for informants today, trying to capture at least a courier on their way to Jujido. You are a much larger and more desirable fish, Lord Nava.”

“You may attempt it,” was Jaross’ tight lipped reply.

“We may,” Bherel agreed. “And we will. It is four to one and we are all veterans, Nava. Don’t make us kill you. That wouldn’t please me at all.”

“I hardly care what pleases you.”

“As you will,” Bherel sighed and motioned with his sword for his men to advance. He paused only long enough to call out to Jhan. “Servant! You may go. I don’t have any need for you!”

Jhan sat up with a groan, but the pain had receded enough for him to breathe and to attempt to get onto his feet. Jhan staggered, caught his balance, and stood shivering as the glitter of morning light on swords flashed in his eyes. Metal clashed against metal as the battle began.

It was immediately apparent that Jaross was outmatched. The four men easily reached into his guard and pricked him over and over again while they laughed at the sport. At any moment they would tire of it and close in to disarm him.

Watching dazedly, Jhan could only think of grabbing a baku and riding away. His hand touched the

unlovely mess Jaross had made of his face and thought that Jaross was only getting everything his arrogance deserved!

Jaross cried out and faltered as a sword licked under his guard and sliced open his arm. He looked panicked and desperate as his eyes searched past his enemy and settled on Jhan. Those eyes begged, though Jhan didn't know what for. Jaross wasn't aware of Jhan's skill and there was little doubt how Jhan felt about him at that moment. Still, those eyes continued to beg, maybe urging Jhan to ride for help. Jhan knew that any help would come far too late.

What could he do anyway? Jhan thought Use his deadly skill and kill again? Sickness gripped Jhan along with the pain and he clenched his jaw as if he feared to vomit. He remembered all too well the bandits outside of Rhenwall and Duke Yhenii's surprised look before he died. Jhan had sworn never to kill again. The price had been too high and the scars too deep.

"Hamstring him!" One of the men suggested, growing weary of the game. "Make him crawl!"

"I'd like to see a Lord of the Nava crawl!" another man agreed. "He'll still be able to talk and maybe hold for a ransom. Can we, Bherel?"

"Yes," Bherel agreed with a long suffering sigh. "I suppose you deserve some fun after all your hard work, but make certain not to bleed him too much!"

"I know how!" the first man growled back. "I practiced enough on our little Jhanian Kevelt enough times!"

The feeling was indescribable. To say that it was like ice cold fire snapping along every nerve with shock, pain, and darkest memory only touched the surface. Jhan went white and sobbed like a wounded animal. He had thought that Gregory had helped him deal with his horrible memories, but this... to come face to face with the men who had helped make them...

Jhan slowly limped forward, drawn like a moth to a flame, to the knot of battling men before him. Jhan couldn't think. He didn't know what he intended to do. Something was taking control, but it didn't have the familiar feel of the Dark King. This was a far different compulsion.

Bherel turned, hearing Jhan's sob. He looked Jhan slowly up and down, sizing him up, and then rejecting him as a serious threat. He lifted his sword, pointing towards the city. "I told you to go! You may wish to see your lord punished for harming you, but I don't like spectators."

Jhan kept walking. Bherel blinked at him, confused. "What are you? Boy or girl? Stay then, if you must, but I warn you, we may try and find out your gender later on in a manner you might not find so

pleasant.”

The words slid over Jhan, the compulsion a shield with a single minded intent that wouldn't allow terror to thwart it. Instead, it took complete control and Jhan attacked without preparation or warning.

Bherel was a veteran and very quick. He realized his danger in an instant, bringing his sword around like lightning. Jhan was just as quick. Flipping over backwards, Jhan felt the wind of the sword's passing as it sliced the air very close. Using his momentum, Jhan kicked out in a move that would have decapitated Bherel. Bherel saw that coming as well and lunged away, just in time. They parted, panting, Jhan coming back up on his feet again and sinking into a crouch.

“You know Hurane!” Bherel was impressed. “That is a fighting style of the desert nomads! How did you learn it?”

“Dagara Ku Ni taught me,” Jhan heard himself reply, but it sounded like someone else and he felt very detached from it.

Realization dawned all at once. “Jhanian Kevelt?” Bherel exclaimed and his feral grin went even wider. “Well, well, Little Princeling! How the mighty have fallen! One day, right hand man of the General, the next, ragged servant of a Nava! I heard a great deal of the play my fellow soldiers had with you. Their revenge on you was very sweet. You shouldn't have treated them so badly. Soldiers have long memories.”

Jhan faltered and felt himself shriveling inside, the edges of his vision pulsing with clawed shadows. He wanted to crouch down and try and hide, but the compulsion wouldn't allow it. It forced Jhan forward and he hadn't any choice but to fight again.

Bherel could see Jhan's fear. It made him bold and he snickered as he sheathed his sword into the soft earth. Waving his free hands, Bherel urged Jhan to fight. “Come, Kevelt! I know Hurane as well and I know I've killed far more men than you have. Come and dance with me.”

Jaross was tiring and the other three men were advancing on him, not concerned about Bherel and Jhan. They were confident that their leader could handle a lowly servant. Jhan took note of it and a plan formed in his mind with the swiftness of instinct. Long, cruel days spent being trained by the Dark King were all there at Jhan's fingertips. He had only to slip into the memory of it and allow the marshy land to become the fortress of the Dark King, these men just more practice to hone his ability.

Jhan stepped sideways twice. Bherel frowned and shifted with him. As Bherel moved, off balance, Jhan jumped forward without any warning; flipping into the air. Bherel avoided him and laughed,

thinking himself easily Jhan's equal. His laugh died as Jhan's foot caught the man in the neck. There was an audible 'snap!' and the man collapsed, plainly dead.

Without pausing, Jhan landed on his feet near Bherel's sword. Lifting the blade out of the earth, Jhan flung it aside as he ran and flipped again. The sword impaled a second man straight into his heart. As he fell and Jhan was still flipping in the air, his foot kicked out and caught a third man in the back of the neck, breaking it and sending the man's corpse stumbling into the last man. He realized his danger and whirled with his sword to defend himself. Jhan twisted to avoid him and Jaross took that opportunity to stab the man in his distraction, slaying him in a messy shower of blood.

Jhan landed lightly on his feet and then stood looking down at the dead, breathing hard and empty of all thoughts. The dream had played itself out and tossed Jhan back into harsh reality. Emotions, horror, guilt, disgust, and hate for himself and his ability, drowned out all else around him and it was some time before Jhan slowly surfaced from them and became aware of someone calling his name.

Jaross was standing a few feet away, wary of approaching. "Jhan!" he called yet again. "It's done. Over. They're all dead! "

Jhan looked up at Jaross, his one eye filled with something that made Jaross stammer and go pale. "It's never over," Jhan replied softly as he sat down heavily in the dirt, staring at Bherel again.

Jaross hesitantly stepped forward, sword still in his hand. He was trembling with reaction from the battle, but mostly in fear of Jhan. His voice was rough, uncertain. "You're sitting in blood! Please, come away, Jhan!"

Jhan was unable to move. The compulsion was gone, but his horror had a firm grip and the throbbing pain in his head was washing over him once more, stronger than before. It made the gory scene before him skitter and flash like sunlight on water, lancing into his memory and never to be forgotten.

Jaross was having a moment of clarity as he stared at Bherel's crushed throat and broken neck. His face reflected the bewilderment of someone who had thought that he understood the world and then discovered that he didn't. "You allowed me to hit you and threaten you," Jaross realized suddenly. "You suffered without raising a hand! Why? Why didn't you defend yourself if you have such ability?"

"I can only kill," Jhan replied distantly and clasped his bloody hands together until his fingernails drew more blood, his own. Jhan closed his good eye, mind beginning to work again; remembering how he had promised never to use his abilities again. He hadn't broken faith, Jhan told himself firmly, the

compulsion had forced him to kill. Deep down, a small part of Jhan dared to wonder at that. It sent a ripple of anxiety through Jhan and it began to grow.

“We need to leave.” Jaross cautiously put a hand under Jhan’s arm, lifting him up. When Jhan didn’t protest, Jaross led him away from the corpses and put him on his baku. Like a statue, Jhan sat, allowing Jaross to get on his imala and lead Jhan back towards the city.

Khor wasn’t far. They entered through the gate and wound their way through the crowded city. The throngs of milling people recoiled and looked frightened when they noticed that the two had blood all over them. A few tried to hand up food along with thanks, thinking that they were soldiers fresh from the border and a battle.

Jaross gently refused both as he led the way to a low slung inn tucked under the skirts of an overhanging building. Jaross flipped a coin to a small boy playing outside. “Run inside, boy, and tell Lord Dor that I want him!”

The boy darted into the inn. After several, long moments, he returned with Kile and the rest of the company, grumbling and throwing on coats against the chill of the morning air. Kile started when he saw Jhan sitting on his baku, covered in blood and looking as if he were lost in a dream or a nightmare.

“Seems you were right, Lord Jaross. Jhan did run into the swamp.” Kile was attempting to sound calm and controlled, but failed, his voice revealing his distress. “Have you- Did you- Why is there so much blood? Did you wound Jhan capturing him?”

Jaross shook his head sharply, scowling at the accusation. “We were attacked by spies of Dagara Ku Ni,” Jaross replied. “Jhan... He saved my life. He killed them with a kind of fighting skill that I’ve never seen before.” When Jaross saw Kile exchange knowing looks with Prince Thaos and a pale, concerned Rehn going even paler, Jaross exploded. “You already knew about this?”

“Yes,” Kile admitted. “I didn’t think Jhan had the courage to use it though.”

“Jhanian showed great courage.” Jaross was reluctant to admit that, still not willing to give up his hated image of Jhanian Kevelt, but finding it hard to understand it in light of what had transpired.

“Courage?” That was Thaos, gesturing at Jhan who looked ready to collapse out of his saddle. “Where was this courage when he allowed you to abuse him? I think it more likely that this was yet another killing compulsion in my brother, aimed, perhaps unintentionally, at the Dark King’s own soldiers. I think Dagara Ku Ni must have used Jhanian as an executioner one too many times.”

Jaross hadn’t considered that explanation. His attitude changed abruptly. Confusion crystallized

into anger and disgust in an instant. “Yes, that would explain it. I couldn’t understand why Jhan would risk his life to help me.”

“Tie him and let’s get out of here,” Thaos ordered impatiently. “I don’t like this place. There are too many people in a panic.”

“You don’t need to tie him, Your Highness!” Rehn protested as he stepped protectively close to Jhan. “I’ll watch him!”

“As well as you did before?” Thaos mocked. “Tie him!” he ordered again.

“No!” Rehn fended off the soldier who stepped forward to do it. “Please reconsider, Your Highness!”

“I’ll watch Jhan,” Kile interjected calmly as he took the lead of Jhan’s baku. “He won’t escape me.”

“See that he doesn’t!” Thaos warned angrily. “I don’t want his hands at my throat!” He glared at Rehn. “As for you, Tarwallen, your insolence grows tiresome!”

Jhan listened to their exchange, impassive. He couldn’t summon the strength to care what they did to him as the faces of the dead in his mind blocked out the faces of the living, forcing Jhan to confront a terrible fact. Even as far as Khor, the Dark King had managed to reach him. Alatha wouldn’t be any different. It no longer mattered where he went.

Imala and baku were brought from a stable and everyone mounted their beasts. Kile tied Jhan’s baku very close to his own beast and hooked a hand in Jhan’s belt to be extra certain. They rode that way through the city gate and took the road back to Pekarín.

CHAPTER TWO

(Exorcisms)

They stopped when the sun reached its zenith and they had entered the forest once more. Kile kept a tight hold on Jhan and released him only when they were both standing on the ground and Jhan’s baku had been led away. Only then would Kile relax his vigilance enough to go and sit with the others,

confident that Jhan wouldn't dare to try and run away when he was surrounded by soldiers.

Jhan remained standing, staring at nothing, escaping the last thing on his mind. When Rehn approached him with some dried provisions, the man stopped short, seeing Jhan's blank look. Rehn thought that he knew the cause of it.

"How many men did Jhan kill, Lord Jaross?" Rehn asked loudly.

"Three," Jaross responded reluctantly, perhaps embarrassed now by the entire episode. "I killed a fourth. They were all armed, but Jhan killed them using only his hands."

The Pekarín soldiers were impressed. Jhan heard them talking, trying to understand how someone so small could have killed anyone. Their words skipped across Jhan's consciousness and his anxiety began to return.

"You need to eat." Rehn tried to press some food into Jhan's hand. It fell to the ground as Jhan slackly let his fingers open. "I know you feel guilty for killing those men," Rehn said softly. "Nothing I can say will change that. I know how stubborn you can be about blaming others. It must be doubly strong when blaming yourself."

That shook Jhan out of his thoughts. He blinked and touched a hand to his swollen eye. "That isn't even the half of it," he responded at last.

Rehn was more perceptive than Jhan gave him credit for. "They were the Dark King's men. They frightened you. You attacked them, not because you wanted to save Jaross -"

"But, I did," Jhan corrected him. It was a lie. His head began to pound as it all came rushing back. The fight. The blood. Jaross. Jhan shook his head, wincing as the pain increased. "I- Something about those men. I was drawn to them. I couldn't help it. I remembered how I had killed the Dark King's men. I let myself do it again. There was a compulsion..."

Rehn was more honest. "I know you, Jhan! I've held you while you screamed in horror at the memory of those men. You thought that you had left them far behind. When they surprised you in the swamp-."

"Stop!" Jhan put both hands to his pounding head.

"You weren't forced to kill them by a compulsion." Rehn was unrelenting, knowing Jhan had to face the truth. "You *wanted* to kill them because -"

"Because I knew, when I saw them, that I was never going to be free!" Jhan finished, choking.

“They-They were remembering me... laughing about it!” Jhan closed his good eye, but it didn’t block out the memory or the belief that his reasons for murder hadn’t been courageous or good. Instead, Jhan knew, that he had acted out of the basest of reasons, hate and revenge being the chief among them.

Guilt overwhelmed Jhan and left him weak. He sat down on the ground heavily, staring down at his bloody hands. Rehn wasn’t blaming him for killing those men. The others thought it remarkable prowess. Jhan was alone in condemning himself, but he more than made up for the lack of accusers. He would never forgive or forget, horrified at the knowledge that he had such dark emotions within himself. Jhan began to wonder how he could live knowing it.

Clothes fell into Jhan’s lap. Kile was standing over him, face unreadable. “I bought these off of a servant boy at the inn. They should fit better than Lord Jaross’ clothes.” He paused and then, tightly, “Change into them. You’re all covered in blood.”

Jhan almost refused, wanting to wear the blood like a mark to warn others what his small body was capable of. Rehn wasn’t going to allow that self indulgence. He held his cloak up with one hand to give them privacy and began pulling at Jhan’s shirt with the other. It was so awkward that Jhan found himself helping, despite his resolve not to. When the clothes were on the ground, stinking and black with blood, he shuddered at his own madness in wanting to keep wearing them.

Jhan’s new clothes were hardly that. Smelling of sweat and riding beasts, the tan shirt and pants were also worn thin at knees and elbows. “Small,” Rehn commented. “But they’re leather and they should stretch some as you wear them.”

Rehn draped the cloak over one shoulder and bent to wet a rag from a skin of water. Wiping patiently, he soon had Jhan clean. Picking the bloody clothes up gingerly, he went to throw them away, leaving Jhan standing alone.

Jhan pulled at his tight clothes, hating them. After so long hiding his body, he felt almost naked and couldn’t help crossing his arms over his chest and hunching a little to cover as much as he could. Jhan looked about for Rehn, wanting to ask for the cloak Rehn had taken with him. He discovered, with a cold chill, that everyone was staring at him.

Jaross, Thaos, and Kile had been standing closest with a map between them, discussing the route they would take. All three were now turned to look at Jhan. Jaross was coloring and blinking like an owl. Thaos growled in disgust. Kile... his eyes were wide and shocked, as if Jhan were indeed naked. The other soldiers had varying looks of surprise. One pointed and laughed. The laugh shook Jhan more than anything else.

Rehn didn't give Jhan long to speculate about their reactions. He appeared at Jhan's elbow, gave Jhan a pressed cake of meat, and then stood over Jhan until he ate it.

The food settled uneasily in Jhan's shrunken stomach, distracting him from his more turbulent thoughts and leading him to wonder how long he had gone without food. Days? Jhan's hunger wasn't any indication. Sickened by death and humiliation, Jhan had been unaware of any hunger pains. He thought that he should ask for more food, but the throbbing pain in his head turned the meat in his stomach sour and threatened to send it back out precipitously.

When it was time to ride again, Rehn helped Jhan onto his baku and rode beside him as if he were Jhan's guard. No one argued and that seemed strange. Jhan saw uncomfortable expressions on everyone's faces, even Rehn's face.

They were heading East, following a wide track through the forest that avoided the many miles of gullies and ravines that had slowed Jhan and Jaross on their journey. Rough wooden bridges spanned the few they did happen on and trees had been felled to make the road almost straight.

Eyes were watching Jhan again. Still stinging from his guilt and remorse, Jhan was long in noticing it. When he did and returned their stares, the men looked away with starts of embarrassment.

"What is it?" Jhan whispered wearily to Rehn, not certain he could deal with anything more. "Is it my face?" Jhan touched it, feeling that the swelling had gone down and that he could almost open that eye again.

Rehn shifted uneasily in his saddle. He shrugged as if it were of no matter, but Jhan saw him glare at the next man who stared and called him shameless for some reason that Jhan couldn't fathom. After that, it became a crueler game. They ignored Jhan completely and turned from him whenever he looked at them. Kile was the worst, ignoring Jhan even when he attempted to ask him why they were going East.

Jaross was more forthcoming, though he too, kept his eyes on the road. "We are going to travel the Ankar Road on the way back. We need to be swift. The snows are too heavy now to chance the wilderness."

"Dagara is on the road," Jhan replied, feeling as if he were about to fall from the saddle in shock. If he had held the reins instead of Rehn, Jhan might have tried to run for it.

"He's preparing to attack Shunagra," Jaross corrected Jhan grimly. "We were able to gather good information in Khor. Dagara Ku Ni is waiting until the snows recede to attack the North. He isn't a

fool.”

Jhan hardly heard him, the blood draining from his face. Until they turned North there would still be a chance that they might run into the Dark King on his way to Khor. If that happened, Jhan thought, he would pay for the murder of Dagara’s spies a thousand times over.

Jhan shuddered, his crime shrinking and paling beside his sure knowledge of just how horrible his punishment would be. Jhan recalled Dagara’s torture and the evil games of his soldiers. It forced perspective into the bottomless pit he had been digging for himself with a shovel of horror and guilt. Justifying murder was still beyond Jhan, but he suddenly ceased feeling as if he would never recover from it. Those men had been shadows of the same evil.

The ride took its toll. Jhan was exhausted both physically and mentally by the time they stopped and made camp for the night. After Rehn helped him get off of his baku, Jhan barely had enough strength to stumble past everyone to a small stream. Crouching, Jhan scooped water with his hands to wash away the road dust from his face and to cool the persistent ache in his head.

Jhan heard a laugh and a rude comment. He straightened and turned, shocked, just in time for Kile to grab him by the arm and throw a cloak about him. Kile’s face was red and his blue eyes were full of his confusion and embarrassment. “Cover yourself! You look too much like a woman! It is... indecent!”

“What?” Jhan was confused now too.

“Your clothing is too tight. It reveals too much!”

Jhan looked down at his own body, trying to understand. The leather was fitting him like a glove to the point of being uncomfortable. His clothes highlighted the curve of his hips and the sweep of his long waist. The painstaking care Dagara had taken to sculpt his legs just so was evident in their perfect symmetry. From behind... Jhan flushed. The curves there too were very evident against the tight leather. Crouching at the river he must have looked....

“If you still had a dress, I would tell you to put it on!” Kile growled, going even redder. “You do not look like a man! The Dark King has taken that from you!”

Kile must have thought that it was the worst thing that he could have said to any man. He placed a hand on Jhan’s shoulder and squeezed as if to comfort him as he pulled the cloak roughly about Jhan, not understanding that his words were having the opposite effect. Murderer. Puppet. Pawn. Jhan might be all of those things, but at least he still had an illusion of being a woman. Unknowingly, Kile had given Jhan something to grasp and comfort himself with.

“Jhan.” That was Rehn. The man was pulling a pack from his imala and approaching with it, opening it as he walked. He licked dry lips and gave a nervous, self conscious look about him before he pulled out a dress. It was gray-blue with a collar embroidered with red flowers. Jhan recognized it as one he had left behind in Pekarín. “I thought...” Rehn stammered, tried again. “You left without any of your things. I thought, if we found you, you might want them. I have several more dresses as well as some other things of yours.”

Jhan reached out with shaking hands and pulled the dress to him, holding the material tight against him. Jhan’s words were sharper than he intended, almost accusing in his weariness. “Why didn’t you say anything before now?”

Rehn glanced at Kile and then away. “I knew that no one would approve. Now, Kile understands, I think, that you can never be a man. Dressing you as one, well, he can see as much as everyone else.”

Jhan lowered the dress. “I don’t need this any more, Rehn.”

“What do you mean?” Rehn was startled.

Jhan swallowed, longing to rest and escape this new torment. He picked through his words, knowing none of them could really understand, and tried to explain. “I needed the dress because I was afraid of forgetting who I was. I know, now, that it’s impossible for me to forget. I can dress any way that I like and I will still be a woman, inside.”

“And outside!” Thaós shouted in disgust from his place a safe distance away. “Put the dress on, freak of a brother! Your Dark King has made you a woman. You must dress as one to cover your indecency!”

“Put it on!” Kile commanded, seeming to agree. “I can’t have your lewd display disturbing the men.”

Jhan wanted to argue, but he didn’t have the strength and he knew that he would lose. Biting his lower lip, he handed the cloak to Rehn to hold up as a screen against curious eyes. Slipping off his clothes, Jhan put on the dress, settling its folds about him. For so long a dress had been like a security blanket to Jhan. He felt safer at once, warmer, and more confident.

Rehn lowered the cloak. Having turned his head not to look, he faced Jhan again and nodded, something confirmed. “I thought that you were taller.”

Jhan’s hem was eight inches from his heel. Kile looked ready to complain about that, but then shrugged. There wasn’t any way to correct it. Jaross’ distraught face was harder to bear. The man

looked Jhan up and down, rubbing a hand across his face as if he were having an inner battle of emotions.

Thaos was more vocal. He shook his head sharply, black hair whipping about like a lion's mane. His eyes were hot and full of angry disgust. "I cannot accept this!" It burst from him, an explosion of emotion and words. "Jhanian Kevelt! You dishonor our family and our land! That you allow this! That you wish it! Better that you were dead!"

"If I were Jhanian Kevelt, that might hurt," Jhan responded tightly. "Since I'm not, it's only cruel."

Jhan went away from them all and sat down, knees drawn up against his chest and chin resting on them. Rehn brought him a bowl of vegetables and a grainy broth after the fire was made and dinner cooked. He settled beside Jhan to eat as well and Jhan had time to consider him and his actions.

"Why?"

Rehn looked up, blinking. "Why?"

"Why do you do these things, Rehn?" Jhan wondered softly. "Why do you care about me so much? You, again and again, go far beyond what anyone should be expected to do even for a friend." Jhan's eyes narrowed. "The Sahvossa didn't really tell you to come after me, did they?"

It was clear on Rehn's face. "No," he admitted after making certain no one else could hear. "I had to tell them that so that they would allow me to come."

"Why?" Jhan repeated.

Rehn looked down at his bowl of food, stirring the contents with a wooden spoon until he found the courage to answer. "I had a sister. She looked much like you. Small and dark, with big blue eyes. She was twelve when it happened."

"What?"

Rehn swallowed and his jaw clenched, hand turning white on the spoon handle. "I was lazy. My father told me to feed the plow beasts in the stable. I wanted to rest under a tree and watch the clouds. My sister walked by. Ahnita, was her name. Just one of my many siblings; a pest. She thought that she could sing, but her voice was terrible. I called to her and told her to feed the plow beasts for me. We argued and I threatened to tell father about some small transgression that she had kept secret."

Rehn's mouth turned down as if he fought the urge to weep. He put his bowl aside and clasped his hands tightly together. "She went. I returned to my cloud watching. It was only a moment, maybe two,

and then I heard a thud. I took no notice. When my father came by later and shouted at me to feed the beasts, I told him Ahnita was doing it. We shouted some more and he dragged me by the collar to the stables.” Rehn wiped at his eyes, ran his hands over his face. His hands were shaking. “We found her, a tumbled, crushed little girl in the hay under a plow beasts hooves.”

“Rehn!” Jhan wanted to reach out to him, weeping in horror, but Rehn was hunched in a way that stopped him. His grief was too personal and raw for comfort.

“When I saw you, running in the forest, I thought that you were Ahnita, a wraith haunting me for what I’d done to her. That’s why I ran after you. When I discovered what you really were, and the Sahvossa explained what I was to do, it wasn’t so hard. You do look much like her. She wasn’t so pretty or so fine, but her coloring was similar. I felt that I was helping her, somehow, though I couldn’t explain why even to myself. I still feel that I’m helping her. You fill the space inside of me left empty when she died. You’ve been helping me to live with my guilt. That’s why I came after you. After you left, that space became empty again. I couldn’t bear it. You’ve become my sister, Jhan.”

Jhan stood and his bowl tumbled onto the ground, spilling his food. “I’m not your sister, Rehn!” Jhan shouted, feeling betrayed by the one person that he had never doubted. “I’m a murderer! A boy dressed as a girl!. A mad thing everyone despises and wants caged!”

Rehn said something, begging Jhan to understand probably, but Jhan was deaf to it. He walked away, and kept walking, right out of camp. Jhan heard footsteps almost immediately and a sword being drawn. “I don’t want to, Jhan.” Kile’s voice, full of threat.

Jhan stopped and turned, fists clenched and tears on his face. He felt that his world had come crashing down on his head. Jaross’ attack, the murder of the Dark King’s men, and now Rehn’s revelation that he had only been so true and kind to Jhan because he was imagining Jhan his dead sister, were knives in Jhan’s heart. Even the memory of the Dark King’s tortures seem to pale to the pain Jhan was feeling now.

“I can kill you before you can blink,” Jhan warned, fearing nothing and feeling that he had nothing left to lose. “It doesn’t matter that you have a sword. I killed three armed men in the marshes. Do you think that you can do better than they did?”

Jhan could see Kile swallowing, but he was hard headed and brave beyond all common sense. “I don’t believe that you can kill me.”

“I can!” Jhan snarled back.

Kile shook his head, knuckles going white on the hilt of his sword. “No, I meant that you *won't*. There were several times, when we were in Pekarín, where you could have killed me. You didn't.”

“A lot has happened since Pekarín.”

“Jaross told us some of it,” Kile admitted.

“You haven't told him much in return.”

“He doesn't need to know. He's just a boy.” Kile shrugged, but he was far from nonchalant. “Telling him that you're a trap waiting to spring, with unknown targets, will only frighten him. It's best that he thinks that you're only being taken back to your father, King Torian.”

“I'm not? What a surprise!” Jhan mocked.

“After you attempted to Kill Torian for the second time, he decided that it's best that you were locked up. King Tekhal has promised that you will be treated well and that it will be a comfortable prison for you.”

“But still a prison.” Jhan glared. “For the rest of my life?”

“There isn't any other solution,” Kile replied. “I heard you tell Rehn that you had chosen to kill those men in the marshes. I know they probably deserved it a thousand times over, but you still chose. Your objection to killing may have been the only thing keeping your compulsions in check. Without it, none of us may be safe.”

“Then why aren't you afraid that I'll kill you?” Jhan demanded, angry and defiant.

Kile looked away, briefly, jaw working and face reflecting his discomfort. “You told me once that you loved me. People don't usually kill the ones that they love.”

To be stung with those words, on top of everything else, was too much. Jhan held up his wrists. “Tie me up!” he shrieked. “I'm used to it. Take me all the way back to Pekarín like that. Everyone will be safe, even Thaós!”

Jhan hadn't meant it. He was being sarcastic. It was like an electric shock to see that Kile had rope in one pocket and that he had intended to do just that. When he approached slowly, Jhan didn't lower his wrists, frozen in disbelief. It wasn't until Kile had tied them tightly together that Jhan reacted.

“I don't love you! I hate you! I hate all of you!”

Kile ran a rope around Jhan's slim waist and pinned his hands so that he couldn't raise them. It was pathetic, Jhan knew. With one flip of the extra joints in his wrists, he could have freed himself and

killed Kile with one blow. The image of it in Jhan's head hit him like a bucket of cold water. That he had even thought it...!

"You are mad," Kile was saying. "You think you're a woman. That you should also think that you love me is part of the same madness. I don't blame you for it. I've had many unwelcome advances by women in my life. I treated yours in the same way. Don't dwell on it."

"You arrogant bastard!" Jhan exploded in humiliation and anger. "You- You.... I *do* hate you!"

"I don't prefer it," Kile replied quietly and took hold of Jhan's elbow to lead him back to camp. Once there, he used more rope to hobble Jhan's ankles. He also thought better of his first attempt and retied Jhan's hands behind him in a more complicated process. When Jhan tensed against the ropes, he felt a sharp pain.

"Don't struggle," Kile warned. "There are bones in your wrists and hands that can hurt very much if you put pressure on them. I tied the ropes in such a way that struggling will be very painful."

Jhan bowed his head. It pounded with a never ceasing pain in time to the beat and drag of his heart. There was nothing left. Kile had taken the last vestiges of self and freedom away from him without malice or apology. When the man turned and walked away, Jhan wondered if he even felt guilty or ashamed of himself.

Someone grabbed the rope trailing from Jhan's bound hands and jerked upwards until Jhan's feet left the ground. The rush of pain was incredible and Jhan strangled on a cry, choking on the shock.

"Free yourself, if you can, brother," Thaos's voice was vicious in Jhan's ear.

"Prince Thaos!" That was Kile, coming back, outraged. "You'll break his hands!"

"Don't interfere, Lord Dor!" Thaos snarled back, and Kile stood as if rooted, face turning red with fury.

"Your Highness!" Rehn came into Jhan's sight, frightened for Jhan, yet as unwilling to act as Kile. "Please, don't do this!"

Jaross looked ready to protest as well, but Thaos forestalled him. "I am a Prince of Karana! You will all do as I command! Stay out of this matter! It is between my brother and I!"

Jhan couldn't free himself. His feet kicked as he tried to twist and escape the horrendous pain. That pain overwhelmed Jhan and he began to black out. Only then was he released, falling heavily to the ground, panting and sobbing. Thaos came around where Jhan could see him, sword drawn and

glittering in his hand.

Jhan blinked at Thaos through his pain. Thaos was well inside the invisible perimeter of Jhan's killing compulsion, yet Jhan felt nothing. The darkness of Dagara Ku Ni failed to rise and take control to murder Thaos Kevelt.

Thaos grunted and sheathed his sword. "So. I suspected as much, but I didn't want to chance testing my theory while you were free and dangerous. Your compulsion to kill was only directed at Torian, our father."

It was as if Thaos's words were a force on Jhan's mind, compelling Jhan into his dark memories, searching for the Fortress and the Dark King. Jhan found it and felt again the clawed hands of Dagara Ku Ni on each side of his head, mind touching Jhan's as his teeth gnawed at Jhan's throat. *'Kill Torian Kevelt.'* It was a mental command repeated over and over, like the lash of a whip, until it filled every inch of Jhan's being, never to be forgotten or disobeyed.

Thaos's cruel hand pulled Jhan to his feet, bringing him back to reality. Jhan blinked through the fading nightmare to see Thaos's face close to his own, teeth clenched and eyes boring into his. "Do you want to kill me, brother?"

"No," Jhan whispered through the pain.

"Do you want to continue this fantasy and be a woman?"

"Yes," Jhan replied, more strongly.

Jhan felt his hands cut loose. They were so numb at that point that they dropped limply to Jhan's sides, prickling with the pins and needles of returning circulation.

"Then be one!" Thaos shoved Jhan to the ground and then turned and walked away, shouting to everyone. "My brother chooses to be a woman. I command that everyone treat him as such and name him accordingly."

Jhan was so confused that he could only sit with slack hands and a pounding head, feeling as if the world had gone beyond his ability to understand. When Kile came forward to take hold of and look at his rope burned wrists, Jhan discovered the will at last to act. He yanked them back out of Kile's grip, anger burning through him and making him shake with the force of it.

Rehn saw it and interceded swiftly, stepping between Jhan and Kile. "Calmly, Lady Jhan! Thaos has given you what you wanted!"

Jhan blinked and glared at Rehn. “Do you really believe that Rehn?” Jhan managed to say at last. “He didn’t command that for my benefit!”

“I don’t understand,” Rehn replied, naive and confused. He tried to see to Jhan’s wrists, as Kile had, but Jhan was just as unwilling to allow it. Rehn’s anguish was clear on his open face. “Lady Jhan -”

“Don’t call me that!”

Rehn swallowed, tried again. “Jhan, I should never have told you the truth. Now, you don’t trust me. I only wanted you to understand why I felt the way I do about you! I never meant you to think that we weren’t friends or that I cared about you only because you reminded me of my sister!”

Jhan half turned away. Hands once again under his control, he clutched his knees to his chest as he tried to contain his fury. “What is wrong with all of you! Thaos just tortured me! None of you tried to stop him! Friends, Rehn? I didn’t see you coming to my rescue any more than those others!”

It was Jaross who spoke up, looking as if the whole proceeding had made him ill. “Thaos is a Prince, Lady Jhan,” he stressed the word ‘lady’ with sharp distaste. “We all must do as he commands.”

“That matters?” Jhan lashed back. “That gives him the right to do as he pleases to me?”

“Yes,” Kile replied without a pause to consider.

“And you’ll just watch?” Jhan closed his eyes, hiding behind trembling hands as his heart shriveled.

“Yes,” Kile replied again, just as swiftly as before, but softer; realizing the ugliness of it.

“Seems there is little difference between all of you and the tender mercies of Dagara Ku Ni!” Jhan’s observation was met with chilled silence. He didn’t care. When Rehn handed him a blanket, Jhan wrapped up in it and turned from them all to collapse into exhausted sleep.

When Jhan awoke the next morning, he found it biting cold and the camp fog bound. Soldiers moved about the camp like wraiths and the three campfires glowed sullen and dull red, throwing grotesque shadows against the wall of fog all about them.

Standing and throwing off his blanket unwillingly, Jhan moved closer to the fire where Thaos, Rehn, and Jaross were sitting. They were eating a grain cereal porridge as they talked about the road

ahead.

“My Lady,” Rehn said around a yawn and began to hand Jhan a bowl of food. Thaos forestalled him, taking it roughly and tossing its contents back into the pot warming by the fire. “Your Highness?” Rehn straightened in alarm, coming fully awake.

“Lady Jhanian forgets her place,” Thaos replied easily, as if he were talking about the weather. “She should have risen and cooked breakfast -”

“No!” Both Jaross and Rehn exclaimed at once. They looked at each other with wide eyes and then Rehn deferred to Jaross.

“If you wish to live, Prince Thaos,” Jaross explained in all seriousness. “you will never allow Lady Jhanian near a campfire and a pan! Her cooking is inedible!”

Thaos was caught off guard, something that he had planned gone awry and not liking it. He recovered quickly. “Still, there are other duties that should be done if there is a woman about.”

“Not by me with that kind of woman!” one of the soldiers snickered under his breath to his companion.

Jhan felt his face drain of blood and he stood as stiff and still as a statue, glaring at Thaos. One blow, maybe two, Jhan thought, and Thaos wouldn’t bother him anymore. Jhan fully considered it, imagining it in his mind. Thaos saw it and his hand went to the hilt of his sword, daring Jhan to act.

First Kile and now Thaos? Was killing becoming so easy or just the thought of it? Jhan wondered, and felt as if his empty stomach was going to turn inside out. He turned away from Thaos and put his cold face in his freezing hands, mortified. Had he really considered killing a man over aching wrists and an empty stomach?

Too much, Jhan thought as he stumbled away from them. It was all too much; the memories, the recent experiences, the rejection, the pain. Jhan could feel it coloring his judgment, attempting to make him hard.

Jhan’s gentle nature and his unwillingness to harm anyone was being flayed from him, not little by little, but in furious chunks. It was all too easy to mirror the brutality and respond in kind. He had to find a way to reject that urge, Jhan thought desperately, to bury it once and for all along with the deadly skill that made it possible.

“Prince Thaos,” That was Kile, concerned. “I don’t understand. Do you intend to starve, Pri- Lady

Jhanian?"

"*She* will not be harmed by missing a meal, Lord Kile," Thaos bit back. "She needs discipline. I see that others have coddled her too much."

"Prince Thaos," Jaross sounded unsure of himself, as if the last thing that he wanted to do was to defend Jhan, but found no other choice. "The Dark King has pared Jhanian down to what is minimal to survive. If you deprive him-her of food you might well kill her."

"I hope she hears you!" Thaos responded loudly. "Perhaps that will break her will all the quicker!"

"What do you hope for, Prince Thaos?" Kile wondered tightly. "Why begin this charade?"

Thaos stood and strode in quick strides to where Jhan was standing, hiding in the shadows. Thaos was a wall of warmth from the fire, but Jhan shivered, twisting his hands into his dress to stop himself from reacting to Thaos's threat.

"Somewhere in that twisted body is my brother, Jhanian Kevelt.," Thaos explained through gritted teeth. "Madness has made him demand to be a woman, but I know that he has never been truly treated as one. I intend to give him all that he wants until it sickens him and awakens the warrior spirit that I know is still burning in that boney breast!"

Thaos's hand gripped Jhan's shoulder and squeezed until it hurt. "You will stay by me, brother, and tend to all of my needs as a woman of my house would." He raised his voice. "I expect all to be respectful and honorable, as you might to a noble lady. Do not speak to my brother or help him in any way. He... She... is under my sword and care."

"Why do you want your brother back?" Jhan dared to ask. "I know that you hated him."

Thaos leaned close, speaking into Jhan's ear so that no one else heard. "My brother was a good general. For all his cruelty, selfishness, and yes, traitorous behavior, I want him back. I need him to lead the troops of Karana to victory. Only Jhanian Kevelt knows the heart of the enemy."

Jhan shook his head and it throbbed painfully. "Why can't you understand? Jhanian is dead and all that he knew with him! He is never coming back, Thaos!"

Thaos's hand tightened even more and Jhan panted at the double pain. "He will. I don't care what it takes."

Thaos propelled Jhan back to the fire. He forced Jhan to sit next to him while he continued his conversation to the others as if nothing had interrupted it. Thaos paused only once, cuffing Jhan

sharply. “Look down! Are you a whore that you dishonor yourself by staring at these men?”

The cuff sent an arc of pain through Jhan’s head and he flinched, bowing low with his head in his hands. Dinner the night before uneaten and breakfast denied him, Jhan found dizziness and a whiteness gather around his sight. Anger wanted him to retaliate, even if only in words, but weakness made Jhan impotent and silent.

“Lord Jaross?” Thaos had said the man’s name a few times, impatient.

“Your Highness?” Jaross sounded distracted, as lost in a haze as Jhan.

“The Dark King is not advancing on Pekarín as yet,” Thaos continued. “I wish to know your plans.”

“I will travel the road with you until we either meet the enemy or I must turn for home,” Jaross replied distantly.

“Where are your thoughts, Lord Jaross?” Thaos demanded hotly. “You stare at a woman of my house! Do you wish to ask for her hand in marriage?”

“Don’t be ridicule -, forgive me, Prince Thaos,” Jaross started again, stumbling on his words. “Lady Jhanian and I traveled alone for some time. It confuses me still. I hardly know what to think or how to react past anger and revenge.”

“Don’t think about her at all!” Thaos warned. “She is none of your concern. I have commanded it.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“She is in pain,” Rehn began worriedly. “Prince Thaos, please allow me to -”

“Will my commands be ignored?” Thaos exploded. Jhan was grabbed by the hair and pushed until his forehead touched the dirt. It seemed a cruel action at first and then Jhan felt the cold of the earth penetrate his aching head and the stabbing pain reduce itself to a dull throb. “Better, Lady Jhanian?”

“Yes,” Jhan whispered, feeling humiliated and grateful for the respite from the pain at the same time.

“This is my brother,” Thaos said. “I wish to teach him his place, not hurt him unnecessarily.”

The words were hollow and Jhan didn’t believe them, but Thaos offered nothing more to contradict them. Jhan lay against the earth until the men ceased to talk and began to rise, breaking camp. Thaos pulled Jhan to his feet then. “My cape,” the man ordered and turned, expecting Jhan to put it on for him.

Jhan picked the cape up slowly and fisted the thick wool in his hands, becoming overwhelmed by anger. When he dropped the cape to the ground again, Thaos picked it up casually and tossed it about his shoulders, as if having expected just that reaction.

“You have just lost the noon time meal as well as breakfast,” Thaos announced coolly.

Jhan looked at his small hands and said, without looking at Thaos. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then you are weak,” Thaos responded grimly.

“Stop this, Thaos.”

“Admit that you are Jhanian Kevelt,” Thaos told him simply. “Remember who you are and give up this perversion, brother. Only then will I relent.”

A soldier led Thaos’s imala to him. He mounted and checked it with a tight rein when it tossed its head and blew hot breath into the cold air. “Perhaps you did kill those Dagara spies in the swamp, as Jaross has claimed, but you don’t have the strength for it now. I’m in little danger from you, I think, and it will grow even less if you miss a few more meals because of your stubbornness.”

Thaos knew so little about what Jhan could do. It should have been a comfort, but Jhan felt only cold and alone, watching Thaos ride away and everyone else turn their backs as if nothing had transpired. Even ever faithful Rehn busied himself with his own imala, but his face was transparent, showing his anguish.

“Come,” Kile was on his imala with Jhan’s baku on a lead. Jhan stared at him with complete disillusionment. “He is a Prince, Jhan,” Kile felt the need to explain once again. “I don’t like what he’s doing, but there’s nothing I can do to stop him. If he orders it, my own men will take me out and slay me for disobeying his commands. Don’t- Don’t hate me for what I must do.”

“You are a coward!” Jhan hissed through the returning pounding pain in his head. “You know what’s right, but you’re not willing to stand up for it or me.”

“You are his brother,” Kile responded pointedly. “He won’t hurt you if you just do as he asks.”

“I’m not his brother!” Jhan lashed back, frustrated and face furious. “I can’t do what he wants! I can’t lead an army or tell him anything about Dagara except that he likes black sheets on his bed!”

Kile’s disgust and shock were evident. The man recovered, went wooden, and then motioned Jhan towards the small baku. “Stop this, Lady Jhanian. There isn’t any point to it. I have my commands and I must follow them.”

"It bothers you, doesn't it? The thought of what happened to me," Jhan pressed, wanting to strike Kile's tightly controlled face. Since he couldn't, Jhan had only his words. "Dagara only had me once, but he took his time and he -"

"Stop!" Kile shouted and his face broke, trembling. His eyes had gone wide, watering as if he fought tears of horror. Again he won control, and Jhan could only stare, not understanding how he had managed to wound Kile so quickly.

"I'm trying to make you understand, Kile, that what Thaos is doing is no different," Jhan said, trembling as well. "He wants me to be someone I can never be and he's willing to torture me to do it! Starvation and a little cruelty may not seem as bad as, say, having every inch of my body violated by Dagara." Kile went sickly pale. "but how far will Thaos go when he sees that his plan isn't working? How long will you stand by and watch?"

"You're wrong!" Kile bit back. "Thaos would never -"

"I'm a murderer," Jhan cut him off harshly. "I would never have thought that of me either, would you?"

Surprisingly, Kile sought to comfort Jhan. "It isn't murder to defend yourself from those who would kill you, Lady Jhanian."

"That's just semantics!" Jhan lashed back, refusing to be comforted; cruel now to himself. "Killing is murder, no matter what the reason. Having kind explanations to make yourself feel better about it only encourages more of it. I'm sure Dagara thinks everything that he does is for some greater good, even if it's only for his greater good. Thaos will make the same leap. He'll justify anything he does to me as for the greater good of Karana."

"Tell him what he wants to hear," Kile urged strongly, eyes becoming intense. "Give up your maddening stubbornness!"

"It's not stubbornness!" Jhan protested, pressing his hands to his aching head. "I can tell him that I am Jhanian Kevelt, but that's not all he wants, Kile. I can't tell him what I don't know!"

Kile struggled inwardly, looking as if he were trying to understand and to come to terms with something that he hated. Finally, he straightened his shoulders and gave Jhan a stern expression. "There isn't anything that I can do for you, Jhan. I have my orders. If Thaos does try and hurt you to make you do as he wishes... If you attempt to kill him with your skill... I will have to defend Thaos against you. I will kill you if I have to."

Jhan stood, frozen in disbelief, but he could see that Kile, the honor bound soldier that he was, meant what he said. Thaos was his commander, if not his Prince. Kile would do his duty, no matter what.

Camp had been broken up and packed. Soldiers and Prince were already heading down the trail, leaving a suddenly quiet forest behind them. Birds were returning and the sound of a rising wind became more noticeable.

Jhan found nothing to say. He hated Kile at that moment, weak and blind by his duty; bound like a slave to his station in life. Would the man really kill him to keep faith with Prince Thaos? Jhan found that he couldn't doubt it and it made him cold.

"We have to go. Get on your baku," Kile ordered, but he swallowed hard and seemed to be grinding his teeth together to keep from saying anything else.

Jhan tried, but he was already growing weak. His hands slipped from the saddle as he hopped awkwardly. A helping hand pushed Jhan up, suddenly, and into the saddle as if he were a feather. Jhan looked down from the beasts' back to see Jaross standing there, frowning.

"Still haven't made up your mind about me?" Jhan wondered acidly.

"No," Jaross admitted and went to get on his imala. Rehn was holding it by the reins. They both turned to take the lead and Kile and Jhan fell in behind.

"Shouldn't be this cold this far South," Jaross complained after awhile.

"It is Winter and the snows have probably fallen deep by now in the North," Kile replied absently. "The Vaha is fed mostly by mountain snow melt. The cold might keep enough of the water up there to allow us to cross the river instead of endangering ourselves by staying on the road."

"Something to discuss with our moody Prince," Jaross agreed. "I would rather face Dagara and his men with an army at my back, instead of a mad thekling and a handful of Pekarín soldiers."

"Prince Thaos has commanded us to be courteous to Lady Jhanian," Rehn interjected swiftly. "You must watch your language and your manner, Lord Jaross."

"Of course," Jaross replied mockingly. "Forgive me, Lady Jhanian Kevelt."

Jhan touched the healing bruise on his face. He could see with both eyes now, but he suspected that he still looked as if he had been in a boxing ring and lost. "I don't forgive you," Jhan spat back. "Not any of you!"

“It will be a long journey, then,” Kile muttered and the others nodded in agreement, turning their backs as if their guilt wouldn’t allow them to meet Jhan’s eyes.

“For me, I don’t think it will,” Jhan replied. Feeling death tapping at his thin shoulders, he hunched himself into his cloak and set himself to endure the ride.

They stopped for the noon meal by a small stream. Jhan was helped down from his baku by Rehn and he staggered, as if he were drunk, to sit by the stream. Scooping with his hand, Jhan swallowed handfuls of water to fill the aching void in his stomach. Jhan hazily wondered if the dimness all around him was caused by clouds or the threat of unconsciousness.

Pans clattered beside Jhan and he flinched, raising his hands reflexively to ward off a blow. When nothing happened, Jhan lowered them cautiously and glared up at Thaos. The man was standing over him with an unreadable expression.

“Wash them, Lady Jhanian. It’s women’s work,” Thaos commanded. He turned on his heel and strode away, arrogant in his confidence that Jhan wouldn’t dare disobey him.

Jhan stared at the pans, feeling himself burn with anger. It cut through the dulling effect of his weariness and hunger like a knife. With quick, violent motions, Jhan pick up the pans, one by one, and tossed them into the rushing water. He watched with satisfaction as the current swiftly carried them bumping and clattering downstream.

The crunch of boots on the gravel of the stream bank should have warned Jhan, but he couldn’t think fast enough to react. Thaos’s riding crop came lashing down on his head, his shoulders, and on the hands that Jhan lifted again to ward off the blows. The burning, stinging slaps lasted only a moment and then Thaos was striding past to order soldiers to run downstream and retrieve the pans. He returned quickly, too quickly, with a face suffused with fury.

“Now you have forfeited the evening meal,” Thaos managed to say in a strangely calm voice all at odds with the expression on his face. “You haven’t much time left, brother. I can see it plainly. Will you spend your last moment defying me?”

“Yes,” Jhan replied quietly, knowing that he didn’t even have a choice. He was unable to give Thaos what he wanted.

Thaos suddenly looked moved, putting a hand to his mouth and bowing his head a moment. “*That* sounds like Jhanian Kevelt! The brother that I grew up with was the strongest and bravest man that have ever known. He would never have allowed this,” Thaos motioned to Jhan’s body, “to happen! He would have died rather than allow it!”

“He did die rather than allow it!” Jhan exploded, hands clenching the air as if he were searching for the strength to strike out at Thaos. None was forthcoming and Jhan’s hands fell limply into his lap, spent. “I am not your brother!”

“Then who are you?” Thaos demanded in utter frustration.

Jhan slumped, knowing that Thaos would never believe his explanation. “I am a woman whom you just beat with a stick! I am a woman that you are terrorizing like a madman! I am a woman that you are starving to death!”

Thaos was silent for a full minute as he slapped his riding crop against one leg, gently, absently, repeatedly. “I commanded everyone to treat you as a woman. I don’t understand why you are refusing to do women’s work. If you force me to punish you for your disobedience, you have only yourself to blame.”

Thaos leaned down to Jhan, hand wrapped tightly about his riding crop. “You are fighting against the madness, my brother. I think my strategy is working.”

Jhan could have replied, could have protested, but he didn’t have the strength. Thaos gave him his back and Jhan washed his face with the chill stream water, trying to calm himself down. When everyone began mounting their imala to continue and Kile came to get him, Jhan found that his legs wouldn’t hold him up.

Kile was concerned, but Jhan knew, in the end, that Kile wouldn’t do anything about it. Jhan forestalled the struggle. “Put me on my baku.”

Kile obeyed, reluctantly, and Jhan wrapped his hands about the pommel to keep himself in the saddle. Kile kept his hands on Jhan’s briefly and Jhan felt a piece of meat jerky pressed into them. Hearts were foolish. Jhan felt his constrict and leap in his chest, forgetting, in an instant of charity, how much he had grown to hate Kile.

It was impossible to explain to Kile’s stricken face why he opened his fingers and let the jerky fall to the ground, but Jhan knew that it was the last breath of defiance. Jhan wanted to be a woman with all of his heart, but he would starve to death before he would allow Thaos to make him a subservient one;

no better than a slave.

Kile imagined an insult. His jaw worked and his eyes blazed. He jerked his hands from Jhan's and mounted his imala without a word. He said nothing through the rest of that day. Stopping at nightfall to make camp, he helped Jhan down from his baku and settled him by the campfire, but turned and walked away when he felt his duty done.

Jhan was past the point of caring. He lay where he was, the smell of dinner cooking sickening to his shriveled stomach. When Rehn placed a blanket over him and whispered something to him, Jhan couldn't make any sense out of it, his mind whirling.

"Wake, brother!"

It was shouted several times and Jhan felt it dropping into his mind like a stone until it hit the place where consciousness had sunk to its lowest ebb. Jhan dragged his eyes open with a groan and blinked, blinked again, confused.

The light of a lantern beside Thaos picked out the man's features as he looked down into Jhan's face from a vantage that was strange. It took Jhan a full minute to comprehend, from the pain in his wrist and the pull of gravity on his aching body, that he was being dangled by Thaos's strong hand!

Fear sliced through Jhan as he realized his danger and looked down. Jhan shrieked, his other hand coming up to grasp Thaos's hand and legs kicking in terror. Below him was a long drop into darkness! Thaos was dangling him over the edge of a cliff!

"Be still!" Thaos warned. "You are very light, but I have an old battle wound in that shoulder."

Jhan went limp, more from near fainting than anything Thaos had said. "Please!" Jhan whimpered. "Don't let me fall!" The unknown, the hidden death below, made Jhan a coward in an instant. "I'll do anything, Thaos!"

"You know what I want," Thaos replied. "I grow impatient. I thought a shock might jog your true self. You were always at your best when faced with battle and danger."

"All right!" Jhan shrieked as Thaos teased him by letting him slip in his grasp. "I am Jhanian Kevelt! I am your brother! Is that what you want? Tell me what to say or do! I-I'll ... anything, Thaos! Please don't let me fall!"

Thaos scowled, puzzled. "I've been told about your courage. Jaross told me that you had jumped out of a high fortress window. You've slain bandits and spies. Why are you afraid now? Hours ago, you were ready to starve to death rather than submit to me."

It was the darkness, Jhan knew. He couldn't see. He couldn't prepare. It was too much like the darkness hiding within him; the touch of the Dark King and his tortures. Die today? Maybe. No. Maybe tomorrow. Thaos was playing the same mind game.

"What will save your life?" Thaos seemed to take an eternity thinking it over. "Lick my boots clean every evening?"

"Yes!" Jhan shrieked as Thaos let him slip a tiny bit more.

"Clean up all of the imala dung, with your bare hands, all the way back to Pekarín?"

"Yes!" Jhan moaned, sobbing in terror now. His eyes looked down below his feet at the inky darkness, wondering if there were rocks to shred him to ribbons or rushing water to sweep him away. The darkness seemed to claw at him, a vicious beast attempting to pull him down and out of Thaos's grasp.

Thaos took another eternity to think. Jhan looked up into the dark pits of Thaos's eyes and saw the Dark King in those shadows, taunting him. "Submit as a woman to anyone I point out?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Jhan's voice reverberated off the cliff wall and echoed in his own ears.

"You mean that, don't you?" Thaos said it in a dead voice. "To save your life, you would do all of those things."

To not fall into the darkness and to be taken back to the light, Jhan was willing to say and promise anything.

"My brother is dead," Thaos admitted to himself at last, and his face twisted in grief as he released Jhan's hand and let him fall.

Between one second and the next, Jhan had only time for a start of shock before another hand grabbed his tightly and brought him up short. The weight of Jhan's momentum pulled Jhan's rescuer dangerously over the edge before he was able to grab a protruding bush and stop himself from sliding.

Jhan looked up into Jaross' panting, fearful face. "Your Highness!" Jaross shouted in a trembling voice. "Surely you don't wish to kill your brother! Think! Reconsider, I beg you, and quickly!"

There wasn't any answer. Thaos had simply walked away, uncaring, leaving them to their struggle.

Jaross' eyes were as frightened as Jhan's and the man's sweat rolled from his face and dripped onto Jhan's upturned one, despite the bone chill of the air. "I think that your brother is as mad as you are, Lady Jhan!"

"I think so too," Jhan whimpered. He clutched Jaross' hand with both of his. "Please, pull me up, Jaross!"

"I can't," Jaross replied in a strained voice. "I'm too far over the edge! I can't get any leverage to pull us back!"

There was a jerk. Jhan screamed and Jaross tightened his grip until Jhan thought that the bones in his hand would break. Jhan could hear roots popping out of the loose soil. Jaross' position was fast becoming dangerously precarious.

Thaos had left his lantern behind. Jhan could see the half shadow of Jaross' face; the trembling, wide eyed strain of a man doing battle with self preservation. Looking down at the darkness, Jhan swallowed, and did his own battle.

More roots popped. Jhan moaned. The situation was hopeless. He was going to die. Everything within Jhan begged him to hold on to the last, but Jhan knew that action would claim another life, Jaross'.

"Let go of me!" Jhan shouted upwards at Jaross, deciding at last. "It's hopeless!"

Jaross gasped in outraged alarm. "No! There must be a way! I'll shout for help! Someone will hear! We aren't that far from camp!"

"We've been shouting!" Jhan pointed out, weeping. "Let go, Jaross! You know that you have to! Don't die with me!"

Jaross' teeth gritted. "You like to give up, Lady Jhan! I've disliked that about you more than anything else!"

"More than anything?" Jhan lashed back. "I'm Jhanian Kevelt, Jaross! You've been dreaming of the chance to do this to me! Go ahead and get your revenge! I really liked feeling up your sister!"

Jaross was stunned, mouth open. His grip almost opened in shear surprise at Jhan's cruel attack of words, but it strengthened again at once and Jaross shook his head grimly. "You want to make me angry enough to let you go! You made me proof against your sharp tongue long ago, Jhan of Pekarin."

They dangled in a stalemate, both of their lives dependent on a few roots attached stubbornly in the

soft soil. Jhan whimpered, stifled it, and firmed his resolve. He was going to die, Jhan knew, and he wasn't about to take someone else with him if he could help it. Without warning, Jhan kicked and jerked himself out of Jaross' grip.

The last root gave in the instant that their hands parted. Jhan shrieked as he fell and looked up to see Jaross falling as well. They both hit the water only a short distance below, but it was numbing cold and Jaross landed on top of Jhan.

They had fallen into a small lake. All of their fear had been for nothing. Thaos hadn't really been willing to kill Jhan, only frighten him. Jaross shouted a curse for the Prince as he dragged Jhan to shore and pulled them both out.

"Lady Jhan!" Jaross exploded angrily, dripping wet and shuddering. "I was almost killed by a Duke because of you! I was nearly killed jumping out of a window for you! I came very close to dying by the hand of spies because I had gone looking for you! Now, I have nearly- at least I thought that I would die trying to save you from your own dear brother! I am glad that you are not really a woman! Marrying you might have truly killed me in the end!"

Jhan was limp in Jaross' grasp, so unresponsive that Jaross quickly became alarmed. He swung Jhan up into his arms and carried Jhan up the narrow, difficult track to the camp above.

Kile and Rehn were standing beside Thaos. They all turned at Jaross' loud approach, Kile and Rehn anxious and Thaos sullen and withdrawn. "Ah, you live," Thaos commented mockingly. "What a shame for Karana."

Jhan could feel Jaross' arms tighten on him in anger and the man's face, lit by the campfire, was flushed and furious; dripping with water. "Your Highness," Jaross replied with barely leashed violence. "Please inform me next time when I am to be more than a simple guard for a stroll in the woods!"

"What has happened?" Kile demanded, bewildered. "Why are you and Jhan- Lady Jhanian, all wet?"

"You'll freeze!" Rehn bent to pick up blankets, but Thaos forestalled him.

"Lady Jhanian will see to that!. It is her station, not yours, Ambassador to the Sahvossa!" Thaos commanded.

Jaross tried to put Jhan on his feet, but Jhan collapsed onto the ground, aching head striking stones and hard packed earth. "Jhan!" Jaross exclaimed in concern. "Rehn, the blankets! She's - "

“I said, no!” Thaos snarled. “Get Jhanian onto his feet. One day without food isn’t enough to kill a baby, let alone a grown man!”

Jhan’s head whirled. Jaross stepped over him and strode to Thaos. They argued. Kile and Rehn were shocked, speaking up and urging Jaross to calm down. They sounded afraid for him, Jhan thought. Could Thaos really order the soldiers to put them to death if they disobeyed? They really seemed to believe it.

The cold was robbing Jhan of the last of his warmth. He lay on his back shivering, eyes staring up at the dark canopy of trees, as the tiny flicker of life inside of him unexpectedly dimmed. Thaos was wrong, Jhan knew, to think that one day without food couldn’t kill him. Jhan had lain in nightmares for three days without food and nearly another on the trail. One more day had been the feather to tip the scale full of bricks.

“Jhan?” Bheni? Jhan blinked at the bleary face above his. The firelight flashed on the bronze skin and red braided hair of the warrior woman. She touched Jhan, feeling how cold he was and looking into his eyes. “What have they done to you?” Bheni wondered in sick amazement.

Jhan couldn’t reply. He felt Bheni stand and she shouted her question to the arguing men. Everyone stopped and stared. Only Jaross spoke, uttering Bheni’s name in surprise. The arguing began again, more wildly now.

Jhan couldn’t understand what they were saying any longer. He was slipping further away. When Bheni gripped his shoulder and shook him harshly, he wondered if she had returned to punish him for lying to her. She bent close, trying to make him understand her.

“Prince Thaos will not let me care for you,” Bheni’s words seemed to echo and slur. “He does not believe that you are dying! You are a Prince of the House of Kevelt, Jhan! You are Prince Thaos’s equal! Order me to help you! Order everyone to help you!”

Dying? Yes, Jhan thought, he was dying. The flickering fire inside of him was going out. He wanted to fight to keep it going, but he no longer had the strength. “Help me, Bheni,” it was an exhale of breath, but Bheni responded immediately. She picked up Jhan and carried him as close to the fire as she dared.

“Stop!” Thaos commanded angrily. “That creature has given up all right to be called a Prince of Karana! His orders have no weight here.”

“A man is born a prince,” Bheni responded. “You cannot take that away. I will obey his orders.”

“You will obey mine,” Thaos insisted.

Bheni’s fist lashed out and caught Thaos square on the jaw. Caught unaware, he fell like a cut tree and lay unconscious. “That! for your orders, Your Highness!”

Bheni bent and tried to untie the laces in the front of Jhan’s dress. A storm of words seem to be raging over both of them, but Bheni ignored them. Impatient, knowing that time was running out, Bheni used her knife to slash through the laces. She cut Jhan’s dress from him and threw the sodden cloth away from them. Snatching the blankets from Rehn’s anxious hands, she wrapped Jhan up as tightly as she could and then began throwing stones from the fire on top of another blanket. she lay this close by Jhan and threw her heavy, fur lined cape on top.

“He needs food!” Bheni shouted. “Someone, make a broth and cut some meat up fine.”

Too late, Jhan thought, grateful for Bheni’s attempt and strangely lamenting another dress lost. He felt the flickering fire within him blow out completely and a wall of whiteness hit his senses, dragging Jhan under and away from all of his pain and fear.

CHAPTER THREE

(Reunion)

Like rusted hinges, Jhan's eyes slowly opened. Sunlight and candlelight did a mad dance across his pupils, but, little by little, they adjusted enough to make out wooden rafters. Jhan took his time picking out the details; wood grain, wooden pegs holding it all together, and warm sunlight pooling and shinning like a live thing.

A strong, competent hand lifted Jhan's head unexpectedly. The room spun like a top and Jhan's eyes blurred. A warm spoon was put into his mouth and a broth slid easily down his throat. Jhan swallowed automatically and the process was repeated over and over again until he couldn't bear the disorienting spinning any longer. Jhan slid into unconsciousness again.

'Do not fight.' The voice penetrated Jhan's deathlike coma like a hot blade. *'Go from this world.'*

Jhan thrashed in pain and longing. Home? Could he go home now?

'No.'

Then go where?

'Where all souls go when they are released from flesh.'

Die? The voice wanted him to die? Jhan's stubbornness and anger rose to the occasion. He wouldn't die to please anyone!

"Fight, damn you!" That was Kile's voice now, echoing in the perfect whiteness that had engulfed Jhan and driving away the cruelty of the other voice. "You can't leave me! You don't even know...!"

Know what? It intrigued Jhan. He had to find out what Kile meant. Curiosity drew Jhan like a lifeline. He struggled in the whiteness, thrashed, fought his way inch by inch until it released him.

“At last!” It was an exhausted sigh of relief from Bheni.

Jhan blinked and found himself staring up into Bheni’s smiling, mahogany face. He struggled to think, confused and wondering if this was yet another dream. “What happened?” It was the barest of whispers from Jhan’s dry, cracked lips.

“You almost breathed your last, Prince Jhanian.”

Memory returned like a slap and Jhan’s face twisted bitterly. “Don’t call me that,” he protested weakly.

“As you will, but I do not think that you should discard such a title out of hand,” Bheni suggested seriously. “Without it, you would have died right at your dear brother’s feet, none able to lift a hand to help you.”

Bheni wiped at Jhan’s forehead with a cool, wet cloth. She seemed to be examining his eyes and looking deeply for something. Her words chilled Jhan and he remembered feeling the flickering fire of his life blowing out. “How -” Jhan stuck on the words and then forced them out, wanting to know. “I died. I felt it.”

“For a moment, you did die,” Bheni agreed softly, understanding his fear. “If it were not for an herb I kept for Lhiddi, you would have remained so.”

“An herb?”

“Thalo,” Bheni explained as she calmly worked her way down Jhan’s face with her cloth. Pulling back the thick blankets a little at a time, she went even lower. “It is very powerful, a last resort to start the heart after it has failed. Sometimes, it works. Sometimes, it does damage. Sometimes, it kills. There is never any telling.”

Jhan gripped the blankets and pulled them back up, too distraught to submit to Bheni’s attempt to bathe him. Bheni relented, walking away to put her rag into a bowl of water. Her back was stiff, something important left unsaid, but hanging in the air nonetheless.

Following Bheni anxiously with his eyes, Jhan became aware of the room around him. It was small, the floor polished wood and the walls whitewashed and clean. A little fireplace crackled with warmth and a thick glass window let in light. The bed Jhan lay in was a four post affair with good quilts and soft sheets. It was such a startling change from the rough blankets out under the open sky, that Jhan became disoriented.

“Where is this place?” Jhan asked dazedly.

“Along the road,” Bheni replied as she turned again to Jhan, composed. “Prince Thaos wished to strap you on your Baku and continue the journey, but I convinced him that you needed time to recover.”

“Thank You, Bheni.”

Bheni simply stared, whatever she wasn’t saying overwhelming her and shaking her composure once again. Jhan tried to comprehend the look in Bheni’s eyes, but he was simply too exhausted.

“Does your head hurt?” Bheni wondered with patently false nonchalant. She busied herself around the room, picking up things and folding them to put them away, as if Jhan’s reply was of no consequence.

“No,” Jhan realized in relief, recalling the knifing agony that had become a constant companion.

“Good,” Bheni replied. “You had a swelling behind one ear from some blow. I feared that your skull might have been cracked.” Bheni paused and then went on, her voice becoming very tight and controlled. “Can you- can you manage to sit up, Jhan? You have been asleep for several days. It is not good to lie so long.”

Jhan protested, feeling enveloped in warmth and comfort, the fingers of sleep caressing him. “Later.”

“Please, Jhan. Just for a few minutes?”

“No.” Jhan frowned, trying to think of a nice way to tell Bheni to go away and let him rest.

Bheni made a decision and came to the side of the bed. “Still so stubborn,” she growled with a shake of her head. “Come. I will help you.”

Bheni pulled the pillow out from under Jhan’s head abruptly and Jhan swore weakly, forced into trying to comply with her demand. Jhan struggled to raise himself on shaking arms and push himself up. His legs were sluggish, moving as if there was a disconnect between his brain and his nerves. Finally, sweating and trembling, Jhan managed to sit up against the pillow Bheni jammed behind his back.

Bheni’s relief was obvious. Jhan had been ready to shout at her, angry that she hadn’t really helped him, but that look startled him. Jhan understood suddenly and went pale. “You thought -” he began and stammered.

“That there might be damage, yes,” Bheni admitted guiltily.

Jhan squeezed his eyes shut as his head reeled, as much from the new elevation as belated fear. “Why did you save me, Bheni? If you knew that there was a chance...”

Bheni was surprised. “I thought that you were braver than that, Jhan! Are you saying that you would rather have died than to have taken such a chance?”

Jhan almost said yes, automatically, and then realized that he *was* braver than that. “No,” he replied honestly. “I’m just tired and not thinking very clearly. I’m grateful Bheni, truly I am.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“You don’t sound glad,” Jhan noticed in bewilderment.

“About that, I am,” Bheni replied, yet her face was clearly furious.

“What then?” Jhan persisted.

“I am angry that you were beaten, starved, and degraded!” Bheni exploded, discarding, all at once, her bedside manner. “When I arrived, you were lying on the ground, dying, while they argued!”

Jhan tried to remember that night. It was a chaotic mixture of images fraught with panic. “I seem to remember Jaross trying to convince Thaos to -”

“Convince?” Bheni spat out in disdain, her fists clenched. “There was no time to try and convince Thaos to help you!”

“I don’t think Thaos realized that I was that far gone,” Jhan pointed out wearily and then felt irritated. He didn’t want to defend anything Thaos had done that night, but that’s just how he had sounded! Jhan pushed his pillow flat and lay back down with a sigh. He was just babbling whatever came into his head, he realized. He needed sleep desperately.

“What did he hope to accomplish by starving you?” Bheni demanded. “You are his brother! There was no honor in what he did to you!”

Jhan closed his eyes. A slow buzz had started in his ears and he could feel the weary drag and beat of his heart. “He thought that he could force me to *be* his brother, Bheni. He refuses to believe that Jhanian is never coming back.”

“For your sake, he had best believe it now!” Bheni growled and then finally noticed how pale Jhan was and relented. “Rest now. You will take long to recover, I am afraid.”

Jhan's relief was short lived. His own thoughts became a new force keeping him from sleep. "Will Thaos allow me to recover?"

"I told Prince Thaos that, unless he wished to take a corpse back to his father, he had best allow you several days rest. He was not happy, but he knew that I was right," Bheni explained to put Jhan at ease.

Jhan felt himself sink into the soft mattress. His body longed to tumble over the edge into sleep, but Jhan's mind wouldn't cooperate. It had to know one last thing. "Why are you here, Bheni?"

Bheni replied easily enough. "I told Lhiddi of our meeting in Khor. She ordered me to go after you, especially after seeing Jaross lead you through the city full of blood, bruises, and looking half dead. She told me that we owed you a debt for saving our lives from the bandits in Rhenwall and that you needed someone to protect you. I agreed."

"You left her behind?" Jhan's distress roused him and he pried open his eyes to see Bheni's face.

Bheni nodded, looking unhappy about that part of the decision. "I did not want to leave Lhiddi, but she told me that she had been taking care of herself long before I was born. Lhiddi insisted that she would be fine until our people came for her. Still, I took a day to find a healer to watch over her before riding after you."

"I-I don't need you to -" Jhan tried to think clearly, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. He could hear the pain in Bheni's voice and the longing to return to Lhiddi.

"I make my own decisions," Bheni interrupted firmly, knowing what Jhan was trying to say.

Jhan swallowed hard, far too weary to deal with this, but knowing that he must. Bheni had saved his life. She deserved more than to be chained to him out of a sense of duty. "I could order you to go away. Is that what you want? You could tell Lhiddi that you had to follow my commands."

"I do not want that, Jhan," Bheni responded curtly. "Go to sleep, now, and let me make my own choices."

Jhan thought that the argument was far from over, but her words were compelling and he found he couldn't think any longer. Sleep closed his eyes with gentle fingers and he gladly let himself fall into its embrace.

“He still looks sickly, woman! Feed him!”

“There is a manner in which it must be done, Your Highness. Too much too quickly and Prince Jhanian will only throw the food back at me.”

“Why should I trust your Island medicine?”

“It has kept him alive thus far, Your Highness, despite your abuse-”

“I am a Prince of Karana yet, time and time again, I am spoken to in a manner bordering on insolence! I will no longer tolerate it! Use a quick tongue on me again, woman, and I will forget about your skill and remember that you struck me! I will have my men throw you out and whip the skin from your back!”

Jhan pried open sleep encrusted eyes, blinking at the sunlight and trying to focus on the strange tableau going on at the foot of his bed. Bheni was confronting Prince Thaos, the Prince with his riding crop in a white knuckled hand and Bheni tall and defiant with arms crossed over her breast.

“It isn’t proper that you tend my brother, in any case,” Thaos continued. “I will send Rehn to you and you will instruct him in the use of your herbs.”

“I am a warrior before I am a woman,” Bheni seethed, trying to keep her indignation under control. “I have tended many ill men, Prince Thaos. My modesty and honor are not compromised by a young man who cannot even get out of bed!”

“He *is* weak,” Thaos agreed unexpectedly and his dark features became even darker with his mood. “You are certain he will heal?”

“If you abstain from beating him with your riding crop, yes.” Thaos looked confused, having forgotten the incident Bheni was alluding to. That nearly made Bheni’s anger slip the bonds of her control altogether. “I saw the marks...” she bit out.

Thaos grunted, remembering at last, but he only shrugged. “Men can be cruel to each other. We don’t dwell over long on it. My few taps pale in comparison to the scars my brother has given me, and he was only *playing* at the time, Mistress Bheni!”

Bheni latched onto those words and cut to the heart of the matter with daring. “Are you seeking revenge, then?”

Thaos glared at this new insolence, but, surprisingly, he condescended to reply. “Jhanian wanted the throne of Karana. My father was going to put me aside and give it to him. Can you imagine,

Mistress Bheni, the scheming and the slander that were perpetrated by my brother to turn my own father against me?"

Thaos gathered himself together with an effort, determined to make the point. "You see a weak man in that bed, maybe someone you want to mother and protect, but know this, woman, he was a general for the Dark King and he killed many good men for his ambitions. Don't drop your guard."

Bheni looked shaken, but she didn't falter. "Then it is revenge you want?" she persisted.

"I want my brother, whole and standing beside me," Thaos replied intensely. "As a commander of armies, he is the better man than I. Karana needs him. He was beginning to redeem himself before Dagara Ku Ni captured him. He was returning to the brother that I once knew, the one who would have given his life for Karana. I need that man again, not this..." Thaos motioned at Jhan in disgust without looking. "This mad man who thinks that he is a woman! If you are the healer that you claim, then use your herbs and bring my brother back to me, Island woman! Heal him!"

Bheni could have protested then and there and told Thaos that Jhan would never be his brother again, but she was strangely silent. Thaos mistook that as assent. He turned on his heel and walked out of the room, slamming the door closed behind him as if he wanted to make certain that Bheni's angry, dark thoughts didn't follow him.

"I am heartened by such faith in my skill," Bheni muttered to herself.

"You should have told him," Jhan startled her by saying as he attempted to sit up.

Bheni went to Jhan's side and assisted him, positioning the pillow behind his back so that Jhan could lean against it. "Would he have listened? You, I think, know the answer to that already, Jhan."

Jhan nodded reluctantly, agreeing, and then put a hand to his head as the room spun. "I don't feel very well."

"Why should you?" Bheni growled. "You need weeks of rest! You need to gain weight and to heal."

"Thaos isn't going to allow me that much time," Jhan replied with certainty.

"You are a prince of Karana. I will carry your orders to the men of the inn and we will -" Bheni began, but Jhan cut her off.

"You may care that I am a prince of Karana," Jhan told her with a sigh. "but no one else does. Thaos is the real prince and they will do what ever he orders. Arguments and mobilizing innkeepers

isn't going to help."

"You will submit without a fight?" Bheni was stunned.

"Of course not!" Jhan exploded, the anger stirring his pulse and moving his sluggish blood. "but it's me against them, Bheni, and, unfortunately, there are more of them to force me to do what they want!"

Bheni shook her head, not understanding. "You have killed armed men with your bare hands, Jhan! I do not think that you realize how strong you really are. You do not realize how truly frightened those men are of you and your skill!"

"Why should they be frightened?" Jhan wondered, self deprecatingly. "They know that I won't use it. They know -"

"They do not know anything, Jhan!" Bheni was impatient with Jhan's obstinacy. "You may wish to be a maid, but you are a man. You will only defeat their plans for you if you accept that fact and use the strength you know that you have!"

"I can't!" Jhan shouted back and then bit his lip to quiet himself. He took a deep breath and then tried to explain. "I don't expect you to understand, Bheni. You're a warrior; a very strong woman who can stand toe to toe with any man and defeat him. I may have a temper, but deep down men frighten me with their strength. I'll never believe that I'm equal to that strength. It's not in me, never has and never will be. I'm too gentle to fight unless I haven't any other choice. They sense it, even if they don't remember me telling them that. You are wrong to think that they're afraid of me!"

"Let me find a way for you to escape then," Bheni suggested after a long, tense moment of reflection on Jhan's words.

"Escape to where?" Jhan trembled in anguish. "Where can I escape my memories and my pain? Where can I go where Dagara Ku Ni can't find me? Let them take me back to Pekarín, Bheni! It doesn't matter to me anymore!"

"And when they know, at last, that you are *not* Jhanian Kevelt?" Bheni demanded harshly. "What do you think they will do? Pekaríns kill creatures such as yourself!"

"I don't want to die, Bheni," Jhan admitted wearily.

Bheni let out a strangled sound of frustration and headed for the door. "You say that, Jhan, but you are putting yourself in a situation where you might be killed and denying me the chance to find you a

means of escape! I do not think that you are being honest with yourself.”

That stung, but Jhan bit back a rejoinder as Bheni left him. She wasn't right, Jhan knew, he wasn't responsible for what was happening. There was nothing he could do to change it. At least, he amended, nothing he would allow himself to do.

Jhan rubbed at his forehead. The blood was pounding behind his eyes. He longed to lie down, but Jhan knew that he had to get his body moving again. He had to be ready when Thaos tired of waiting for him to recover and demanded that he get on his baku and ride.

One of Jhan's dresses was thrown over a chair, wrinkled from being stored in a pack, but clean. Jhan longed to put it on, tired of being naked and in bed. He measured the distance, five steps at least, and gauged his strength to walk that far.

Throwing the covers aside, Jhan swung his legs over the edge of the bed. The bed was high off of the ground and he had to slide down the side until his feet touched the cold floor. Jhan wriggled chilled toes and flexed his feet, testing them, before taking a deep breath and standing up. The room spun immediately and Jhan sprawled full length onto the floor.

“Jhan!” The door had opened and the exclamation had come from Rehn. The man rushed to kneel beside Jhan, knowing better than to touch him, but frantically concerned. “Why are you on the floor? Did Prince Thaos -?”

“No!” Jhan bit out, embarrassed and frightened to be naked and vulnerable. “I was trying to get to my clothes. I guess that I'm not as strong as I thought.”

Rehn reached out and snagged the dress from the chair. He helped Jhan sit up and put it on, but Jhan pushed Rehn's fingers aside to lace up the front of it with his own trembling fingers.

The fall had been a shock. Such complete weakness terrified Jhan. He felt as if he were trapped, at the mercy of anyone who deigned to help him. It was almost more than Jhan could bear and Rehn could see it. The man licked nervous lips and decided to brave Jhan's anger. “I'll always be here to help you, Jhan. We're friends.”

“Until Thaos orders you not to be!” Jhan reminded him. He sounded petulant and whining in his own ears, reinforcing his feeling of weakness and utter helplessness.

Jhan had hurt Rehn. The man actually flinched, ducking his head and not meeting Jhan's eyes. “I don't have your temper, Jhan, or your ability to get away with questioning my betters,” Rehn finally replied slowly. “In Pekarín, I'm an important person. Outside of where the Sahvossa hold sway, I am

no one.”

Rehn turned his hands into fists. Looking down at them, he continued, “I want, more than anything else, to beat that arrogant expression off of Thaos’s face! I want, with all that is in me, to take you away from him and keep you safe! Jaross,” Rehn ground out the name hatefully. “I could have killed him after what he did to you!”

“I don’t understand you.” Jhan was unforgiving. “I would have done what was right no matter what!”

“I know,” Rehn replied tightly. “I’ve watched you suffer for your convictions, Jhan, but I was raised to obey my betters unquestioningly and to do my duty. Kile, I know how you blame him, but he was raised the same way. It is the order of things here.”

“What do you want from me?” Jhan demanded. “Do you want me to say, *‘That’s all right, Rehn, I forgive you because you were brought up that way?’* Well, I won’t, ever, so don’t hold your breath!”

“I just want to be your friend, Jhan.” Rehn’s voice ached.

Jhan refused him harshly. “If Thaos had raised a riding crop to beat you, I would have stopped him.”

“And *you* would have escaped with your life! You are Thaos’s brother and a prince, Jhan,” Rehn pointed out.

“Do you treat me as one? Do any of you?” Jhan wasn’t about to let Rehn get away with that one. “I’m mad, weak, contemptible. It seems it’s easy for you to forget your *‘conditioning’* when your *‘betters’* aren’t up to your standards!”

“Thaos explained to us that you had been stripped of your position and powers by King Torian,” Rehn explained doggedly. “You will always be a prince, but you are a powerless one.”

“Oh, I see! There are levels to this business!” Jhan snapped sarcastically.

“Politics, yes,” Rehn agreed, “but the decisions aren’t mine to make and never will be. I have to do what I am told by my betters.”

“Stop saying that word!” Jhan exploded, fists beating the air as if he longed to strike Rehn with them and make him see sense.

“What word?” Rehn held his ground tenaciously.

“Betters!”

“I’m just a farm brat, Jhan,” Rehn responded, reasonably. “I’m trained to plow a field and to tend beasts. I couldn’t write or read until I came to Pekarín. Thaós trained to be a prince and a warrior. He will be a king when it’s time. He will lead men and make law. How am I the equal of that?”

Jhan reached out and gripped Rehn tightly on the arm, hating how the man was belittling himself. It shook Jhan out of his self-serving indulgence, but only for a moment. “You have always been kind, gentle, and good, Rehn. You would do anything to help anyone. Thaós is selfish, hard-headed, brutish, hateful, vindictive, abusive... shall I go on? Titles don’t make the man, Rehn, deeds do.”

“You forgot to mention coward, Jhan!” Rehn replied, voice filling with sudden bitterness. “I can’t confront Thaós and suffer the consequences, even to help you. I’m not willing to die!”

Jhan couldn’t accept Rehn’s words. To be denied the help he desperately needed was intolerable. Feeling he’d been betrayed, Jhan snapped back in retaliation, “Yes, I suppose that I should have added coward.”

Rehn went white, not having expected Jhan to agree. “Are you willing to die for me?” he wondered. It was an honest question, not asked out of anger.

Jhan opened his mouth to say yes, but doubt overtook the word and silenced it before it could emerge. Jhan suddenly realized that he didn’t know and Rehn could see it on his face. Flustered, Jhan turned to hide his confusion. “Just go!”

“Painful to know yourself too well, isn’t it?” Rehn observed, managing even now to be sympathetic as he stood and straightened his clothes.

“Go!” Jhan repeated furiously.

“And leave you on the floor?”

Jhan felt himself shaking with humiliation. Rehn relented and didn’t require an answer or a plea. He carefully put arms under Jhan and lifted him gingerly. Putting Jhan back onto the bed, he tried to cover Jhan with the blankets. Jhan jerked them out of his hands. Rehn backed away, but he didn’t leave as Jhan fervently wished.

“Mistress Bheni is a good woman, but she shouldn’t be tending to you,” Rehn pointed out uncomfortably. “Allow me to do it. I know you better than she does. I know your ways and your fears.”

“Do you?” Jhan’s voice was fierce, but his face was tight and controlled. “She is a woman and I am a woman, Rehn. It’s your touch, not hers, that I feel ashamed of.”

Rehn straightened and Jhan knew that he had managed to make Rehn angry. “Your temper will lose you many friends, Jhan, along with your persistence in wanting everyone to live up to your standards!”

Jhan’s nostrils flared and his anger became so hot that he felt dizzy. “I don’t expect everyone to live up to my standards, Rehn, but the ones who do are the only friends that I want!”

“So be it!” Rehn turned and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The sudden silence was startling. Jhan was left with the sound of his own heart pounding in his ears and the ghostly echoes of his cruel and unfair words in his thoughts. What had he expected from Rehn, or from any of them for that matter? Rehn was right to accuse Jhan of wanting them to die for him. That’s the punishment they fully expected from their *‘betters’* for disobeying.

Jhan had risked his life and killed to save others, but the ones that he had saved had faced death. What if they hadn’t been about to die? What if they had only faced pain and degradation, but nothing permanent? Could he have risked his life then? It bothered Jhan that he couldn’t find an answer within himself. He was suddenly made aware of his arrogance in expecting others to do what he couldn’t find it in himself to do. Rehn had been right, seeing straight to Jhan’s heart and knowing him too well.

“Oh, Rehn!” Jhan sobbed. He feared that his hatred of his own vulnerability, and his unreasoning anger, had driven away the one true friend that he had ever had.

“Falala Deyora, Your Highness.” The short, stocky woman wore a mound of white dress protected by a large, blue apron. Her graying blonde hair was tied up on her head with a large blue ribbon and her round face beamed good-naturedly at Jhan and Bheni as her green eyes sparkled excitedly.

Bheni was standing behind the woman with arms crossed over her breast wondering, as much as Jhan, what it was all about. “The Lady has all she needs, Mistress Deyora.”

“First,” Falala clutched her hands together nervously and smiled broadly, “just let me say how honored my husband and I are to have so many important personages staying at our modest inn. I hope that you have found everything to your liking?”

Jhan exchanged looks with Bheni, but Bheni only shrugged with wide eyes. Jhan was sitting in a

chair, trying to catch some light and a fresh breeze from an open window. After a week, the bitter cold had retreated a little to give way to a warm day. Jhan had been longing to go out and enjoy it. Bheni had been less enthusiastic, and they had been arguing about it when the innkeeper's wife had suddenly knocked and entered the room.

"Everything is fine," Jhan replied at last, uncomfortable.

"If it isn't, only let me know, and I will set it right!" Falala assured Jhan.

"Thank you. I will."

Falala continued to smile, overwhelmed into speechlessness. It was Bheni who called her back to the real world. "Is there something else?"

Falala started, coloring self-consciously. "Forgive me, Your Highness! I must seem a simple woman! I have never seen a Princess before and certainly not a Prince of Karana as well. Two VERY important personages as well as two Lords... I hardly know how to contain my delight!"

"Princess Jhanian is not well, Mistress Deyora," Bheni stressed sternly and Jhan was grateful that she didn't correct the woman about Jhan's gender. "She needs rest and quiet for as long as she can. We are grateful for your attention, but, if there is nothing else...?"

"Oh, but there is!" Falala seemed flustered now. "Forgive my prattle, Princess, but your brother, Prince Thaos, has instructed me to help you from your room. He thinks that you need to exercise and to move about in order to get well faster. The Prince has instructed me not to take no for an answer." It was clear that Falala thought that the last was only a joke between brother and sister, but Jhan knew it for the order that it was.

"He thinks that I have been lying to him, I suppose," Bheni growled in annoyance. "He must want to see how ill you are for himself."

"I'm not that ill, Bheni," Jhan protested, picking up the argument they had been having when Falala had interrupted them. "I walked to this chair by myself and I didn't fall down once! I don't think you realize how good this little body is at healing. It's taken a great deal of abuse before and kept working just fine."

Bheni was stubborn, taking her nursing duties too seriously. "You died, Jhan! I gave you an herb that can do damage that you cannot see! Why not grasp as many days of rest as you can instead of risking doing more damage because you were not aware that anything was wrong?"

Jhan was silent, wondering, and then asked gently. “Why are you so frightened for me, Bheni? Did someone die because of this herb?”

Bheni looked reluctant to reply, her face going very still. At last, she replied quietly. “My old teacher, Master-of-arms Hakena Bhenari, fell during practice and I thought that his old heart had stopped. I commanded a healer to give him the herb. The healer protested, but I was above him in rank.” Bheni shuddered and half-turned away. “Hakena Bhenari survived, but his mind was gone and his health was very poor. He managed to hang on for a year and then he died very painfully. I have never forgiven myself.”

Jhan went cold, feeling his luck keenly. “I see. You want to coddle me until you know that absolutely nothing has gone wrong?”

“Yes,” Bheni responded and squared her shoulders. She faced Jhan again. “I had to give you the drug. I do not dispute that, but I do not want to grieve or feel guilty for you as well as my old teacher.”

“I can’t let you.”

“What?” Bheni was startled.

“I can’t let you coddle me and keep me here. I feel much better.” Jhan stood to prove it. “Besides, Thaos has ordered poor Falala and we can’t have her getting into trouble, now can we?” That was to take the sting out of his words.

Bheni looked ready to argue some more, but Falala stepped in, having grown even more flustered at their exchange. “I feel that I shouldn’t be overhearing your conversation. Should I leave and return later?”

“No.” Jhan spoke before Bheni could open her mouth. Jhan walked over to Falala and motioned for her to proceed him from the room. “Let’s go see my dear brother, Mistress Deyora.”

Relieved, Falala curtsied awkwardly and smiled. “At once, Your Highness.”

Bheni leaned against the doorway disapprovingly, arms crossed over her breast. “Call for me when you need me to pick you up from the floor.”

“You aren’t coming?” Jhan became instantly apprehensive, having assumed that Bheni would follow with her comforting support.

“I think that Thaos has tired of seeing my face. I will spare him another look at it.” Bheni relented only slightly at Jhan’s anxious expression. “Do not worry, Jhan. This inn is full of people! I do not

think Prince Thaos would dare abuse you in front of so many commoners. Royalty is usually overly concerned about appearances.”

Jhan wasn't comforted. He knew that this was Bheni's revenge for his rebellion. She needed to show Jhan just how much he depended on her. Jhan needed to show himself how much he didn't and to regain confidence. Turning a shoulder to Bheni, so that he wouldn't continue the argument, he followed Falala down a hall and to the top of a flight of stairs.

From this high vantage, Jhan could see everything in the huge expanse of the inn's main room below. It was a great wooden hall filled with roaring fireplaces, long tables where people could sit, thick beamed rafters hanging with lit lanterns, and small slits for windows that were opened outward to let the unseasonably warm breeze blow through.

Men and women were separated by custom. The women were seated in one group with children of various ages playing around or in the middle of their circle. They were laughing and talking in a rising and falling buzz. The men stood about more gravely, some smoking pipes while others gestured and talked over tankards of drink.

“I don't see the Prince,” Falala observed, disappointed. “He must have grown tired of waiting.” She turned to Jhan. “What is your pleasure, Your Highness?”

Jhan looked down at the milling people, wondering where Kile, Rehn, and Jaross were. Was Thaos speaking with them? Making plans to leave? If so, there wasn't time to do much of anything.

“Let's join the women,” Jhan suggested, feeling daring. “I'd like something to drink and a little conversation, I think.” Some normalcy, Jhan thought to himself. A little chance to forget danger, long roads, and impossible demands.

Falala was mortified. “Oh no, Your Highness! Those women are relatives of mine and a traveler or two. They're not fit for your fine company -”

“I'll be the judge of that,” Jhan cut in smoothly. “I'm not much of a Princess, Falala, as anyone in my company could tell you.”

What Falala thought of that, Jhan couldn't tell, but her hand was there to steady him as they went down the stairs and she helped Jhan find a clear space on one of the tables to sit.

“Her Highness, Princess Jhanian,” Falala announced importantly. She hurried off to get Jhan a drink, as if she feared that something might happen in her absence and was determined to hurry back to avert disaster.

All the women had stopped to stare at Jhan with wide eyes, children still playing happily; unaware of the tension. Jhan stifled a groan, knowing that he had made a mistake. Jhan's first impulse was to rise again and go back to his room, but he was breathing hard from the exertion of coming down the stairs and he was far too shaky to make it alone. It seemed that Bheni was going to get her satisfaction despite his best efforts to deny it to her.

A toddler, with a fist stuck into its mouth and a flowered dress on, stood up and tottered over to Jhan. A girl, Jhan guessed, and smiled down at her as she stared up, fascinated with his newness.

Impulsively, Jhan picked the child up. Tenderness welled from deep within Jhan, and it killed his uncertainty as the baby reached to tug on his raggedly shorn hair. Jhan talked nonsense to her for a full minute. When he looked up and set her down again, he saw all the women smiling and nodding encouragement to each other.

"Princess Jhanian," one of the women began, but Jhan shook his head. "Just Jhan," he corrected and she smiled. "Jhan, then, welcome. I am Kristora Deyora, sister of Falala. This is Herika, that Brhela, and she is..."

Since waking from near death, Jhan had been a helpless, whining, angry ball of misery. Now he was nodding at all the names and faces and beginning to recover, feeling relieved and suddenly more sure of himself as he began to make choices for himself instead of having someone else order him to their will.

When Falala returned with his drink, Jhan took it and sipped cautiously. It was fiery. Jhan choked and Falala started in concern. "I meant water, or fruit juiced, anything but alcohol!" Jhan protested. "I'm not a drinker, Falala."

Falala went white. "Please, forgive me, Your Highness!" Everyone was mortified, looking at Falala as if she were in danger of losing her life. They all profusely apologized for her thoughtlessness. Their fear sickened Jhan.

"It's all right!" Jhan shouted to be heard over everyone, and then softened his tone when they calmed down. Jhan set the drink aside. "It was my mistake. I didn't specify what I wanted."

Shock was on every face. They couldn't comprehend that Jhan was apologizing. "Thank you, Your Highness!" Falala looked ready to fall to her knees in relief.

Jhan began to weep helplessly, covering his face with his hands and hating what they were doing; what they felt forced to do. The tables had turned in an instant and Jhan had been unprepared to find

himself suddenly an object of fear instead of the one being afraid.

There was uncertain silence and then a soft hand touched Jhan and pulled his hands down. Falala looked into Jhan's face, frightened still. "Highness! Are you hurt? Why are you crying?"

Jhan wiped at his tears, shaking with emotion. "You're terrified of me!" he sobbed, surprised by the strength of his own reaction. "You think that I'm going to hurt you!"

Falala searched Jhan's eyes, fearing he was joking with her. When she saw that he was serious, she let out a breath of amazement and straightened. "Such a gentle princess you are! Come!" she motioned to the other women. "She needs women about her and some comfort! Bhrina! Get some of that polek juice for her Highness!"

It was like a tight string breaking. The women came forward and sat around Jhan, all talking at once. Timidly, at first, they asked about the court of Karana and the doings of nobility, but then, when they saw that Jhan was distressed by it, they began talking about themselves.

It seemed that one of the girls was to be married soon. There was a large discussion about arrangements. Talk flew back and forth as some of the women were doing embroidery while other women were stirring or kneading bowls full of food for the evening meal.

"Your hair, Princess..." A small, blonde woman nervously came forward, pushed along by several other women. "I don't wish to offend, but, obviously some accident -"

Jhan touched a hand to his hair, coloring. "Yes, an accident."

"I am a fair barber," the woman went on. "If you will allow, I can trim it into... order."

"Please, I would be grateful," Jhan responded eagerly.

"I am honored!" The woman curtsied, flustered.

The woman was quick and sure with a pair of shears. She bemoaned the inch she had to remove to make a straight line of Jhan's hair, but she remedied the severe look with a short braid and a sky blue bow. Without a mirror, Jhan had only his hand to gauge the work, but he felt that it was pretty and the other women were nodding in appreciation at the woman's skill.

"Thank you -"

"Chantisa," the woman beamed.

"Chantisa," Jhan repeated and smiled, not able to express to her his gratitude adequately. Jhan was suddenly feeling less like a victim and he knew that there wasn't any way to repay her for that.

Falala took Jhan's attention then, jealously wanting every moment she could get with a Princess, especially one who seemed deigned to act more like normal folk. Once her last vestiges of awe and deference dissipated, Falala talked incessantly. Mostly, she told Jhan about the inn and the hopes of her husband to attract more customers. It was one of the reasons that she had been so overjoyed to have nobility stay for so long. Once word went about that nobility preferred their inn, people would travel just to stay there.

At last, Jhan yawned, wondering about the lateness of the hour and surprised to see that the sun was dimming outside of the windows. A boy was climbing a ladder to light more lanterns in the chandeliers overhead and another was adding logs to the fireplaces.

"Dinner will be served shortly," Falala announced, noticing Jhan's wandering eyes. "If you like, I will have it sent to your room. You must be exhausted with all of us silly birds talking at once."

"I feel fine," Jhan replied firmly, admitting only to himself that, though he was very tired, he didn't want to leave the women. Like a voyeur, Jhan was enjoying being immersed in their family plans, playing with their children, and talking business as if he was a part of their family. He wanted it to last as long as possible.

"It gets hot in here when the evening meal is prepared," Falala insisted. She helped Jhan to stand, though Jhan felt strong enough on his own after his long rest on the bench. "There's a small garden through those doors. Why don't you sit out there and get some fresh air until I come for you?"

"All right," Jhan agreed reluctantly.

"Shall I have your brother join you?" Falala motioned to where Thaos leaned against the mantle of a fireplace, staring at Jhan in a frightening fashion from under his dark brows.

"No," Jhan replied quickly. "I- I'd like to be alone. I'll have a lot of time to see him later on."

"As you will, Highness." Falala opened a wooden door and motioned Jhan through. She didn't follow, closing the door after Jhan had gone through.

The garden was at the center of the inn, open to the sky and walled in on every side. There was a gravel walkway that wound through it, an empty fountain, and ragged plants that hadn't survived the cold weather. At the end of the garden, there was an oval pool of water with steps leading down into its depths. With the sun setting and a few hanging lanterns to dimly light the garden, the water was like a black mirror.

Jhan sat on a stone bench at the water's edge and peered into the glassy surface. His face was like

something out of a dream, not enough light to illuminate more than a white oval with pits for eyes and a tense mouth.

A face appeared beside Jhan's. Jhan stifled a start of surprise, recognizing the face instantly. "You've kept me waiting a long time, Prince Thaos," Jhan said daringly, not turning. He trailed his hand in the cooling water. "If we had meet earlier, we could have convinced Jaross, Kile, and Rehn to go for a swim." He was joking, attempting with his reckless anger, to get a rise out of Thaos. "I think that it might actually have been warm enough."

Without warning, Jhan felt hard hands twist into the material of his dress and heave him off of the bench and into the water. The water was deep. Jhan came to the surface, spluttering and treading water as his dress weighed him perilously down. When Jhan swam to the side, cursing Thaos and trying to climb out, Thaos put a hand on Jhan's head and shoved him beneath the water, holding him there.

Jhan panicked, clawing at the hands knotted in his new braid. They relented suddenly and Jhan surfaced again, desperately grabbing the stone side of the pool and pulling himself out. Wiping water out of his eyes, Jhan gasped at the scene before him. Thaos was standing over Rehn with a foot on the man's throat!

"You have forgotten your place for the last time!" Thaos snarled. "Guards!"

Two men with drawn swords burst from the inn, confused and looking for an enemy. When Thaos shouted, "Hold this fool!" they were shocked to find that it was Rehn he meant. Soldiers of Pekarín, they were probably Rehn's friends. They each took hold of one of Rehn's arms, looking disturbed and uncertain.

Thaos turned from Rehn. He had a purpling, split cheek and his eyes were like blue fire as he grabbed Jhan by the arm and jerked him to his feet. Glaring into Jhan's face he demanded, "Who are you?"

Jhan, dripping wet and getting chilled rapidly, was astonished. "Who do you think?"

"Not my brother!" Thaos shouted furiously. "I watched you, truly watched you all day! Not once in mood, manner, or gesture did I see anything of my brother! It is impossible! I've known men with head injuries who had forgotten who they were, still display mannerisms of their old selves. You don't even speak with the accent of Karana! I wonder that I had never noticed it before! When you spoke of swimming..."

Thaos shook his head as if it hurt, but his hand didn't lose its painful grip. "Jhanian was terrified of

water!” Thaos continued furiously. “He never learned to swim. He would never have sat so close, as you did, to any size pool of water. When I pushed you in, you confirmed all of my fears! You swam, little impostor! Now, I ask again! Who are you and why are you pretending to be a Prince of Kevelt?”

“Finally!” Jhan spat back and pulled his arm out of Thaos’s grip, his wet skin making it possible. He stepped back, eyes as fiery blue as Thaos’s. He saw Kile and Jaross come into view, looking alarmed. Good! All the players and the play about to end!

“I’ve told you, over and over again, that I am not Jhanian Kevelt!” Jhan shouted as he shivered and wrapped arms about himself. “Now that you are ready to believe that, let me explain it to you completely! Dagara Ku Ni captured Jhanian and tortured him until he committed suicide. Dagara wouldn’t accept Jhanian’s death, so he used his Power to try and bring back Jhanian’s spirit. Unfortunately, he captured me instead and put me in your brother’s body! I am a woman! My name was Christine! I had a life, a family, and an entirely different world before I was violated by Dagara!”

Jhan was panting now, emotions long held in check cascading out. “I am not mad! I am not an impostor! I am not a spy! I am a victim! I have been violated, raped, beaten, mentally and physically tortured, and taken away from my life and my world!”

Thaos put a hand to Jhan’s throat and it closed until Jhan stopped talking. “You are not making any sense except that you are confessing that you are a creature that has taken the place of my brother in my brother’s body! Possession! The most foul Power of all and the reason that we killed anyone who showed the gift of it! You will not escape that fate! My brother killed himself, if you are to be believed. I will make certain that his body follows him!”

Thaos pulled at the ribbon in Jhan’s hair until it came out, painfully. “Get a robe,” he ordered and waited patiently until Kile brought one, black and simple. “Put this on. Now! I won’t have you dishonoring my brother’s body by dressing it like a woman!”

“No!” Jhan refused to take the robe. Thaos’s reaction was predictable. He ordered a soldier to take Jhan’s dress off and put the robe on for him. Jhan struggled and the soldier was rough, leaving bruises and scratches. An open handed slap from Thaos sent Jhan sprawling after it was done.

“Take him to a secure place,” Thaos ordered Kile. “and throw Rehn Tarwallen in along with him. King Torian will decide both of their fates!”

Kile took hold of Jhan and guided him through a back door with Rehn and the two guards following behind. A hallway emptied outside and they crossed a courtyard to the stables. Kile opened a

door and pushed Jhan into a small room, without any window, and only a narrow cot that smelled of imala and some unwashed stable boy. Rehn was shoved in after and it was to him that Kile spoke.

“Why did you do it, Rehn?” Kile demanded. “You knew that Thaos would order your death for interfering!”

Jhan snorted, nursing the red hand mark on his cheek. “Stop the dramatics, Kile! You know King Tekhal won’t allow that. Thaos knows it too! He’s just trying to teach Rehn a lesson by frightening him.”

“Don’t speak to me!” Kile lashed back and his face was filled with loathing and fear. “You may be right about, Rehn, but you will not be so lucky! You will be killed and rightly so!”

Jhan turned his back, wrapping arms about himself to ward off a chill and shaking his head in disbelief. “This is just typical of my life, I suppose! Everything was fine when I was Jhanian, even though he was a traitor, murderer, and a wife beater! Now that you know I’m just Christine, a harmless woman who’s been victimized, you want to kill me! Is it too much to hope that you can both see how ridiculous that is?”

“You are possessing a man’s body!” Kile erupted, putting a hand on the hilt of his sword as if he struggled with himself not to use it on Jhan.

“As if I chose to be this way!” Jhan shouted back, not turning but throwing his hands in the air as he sat on the edge of the narrow cot and hunched in on himself. “I didn’t choose any of this, Kile! In fact, if you want to know, I would rather have died than allowed Dagara to do it!”

“You’re getting your wish,” Kile reminded him viciously.

“Not now!” Jhan exploded and did look at him then. “I’ve learned to live with this freakish situation and, once in awhile, I actually get some pleasure out of this life. It gives me strength to go on.”

“Enough!” Rehn interrupted in anguish. “Leave, Kile. You’ll get into trouble for staying so long with us. Do your duty and lock us up.”

“I don’t want to leave you with this thing! To think that you risked your life for it...!” Kile was torn, uncertain what to do for his friend.

“I can handle myself, Kile. If-If it wanted to hurt me, it could have done it many times before now,” Rehn pointed out.

Kile didn't have a choice and his face reflected that painful knowledge. Reluctantly, he turned and joined the other two soldiers. With a last look at Rehn, Kile closed the door and plunged the room into darkness.

Jhan felt Rehn sit gingerly on the other end of the bed. His fear was palpable. "You risked your life for me," Jhan said softly, trying to be reassuring. "After all the things that I said... You are the most remarkable man I have ever known, Rehn, and definitely *not* a coward."

Jhan heard Rehn swallow his fear. "Thaos was holding your head under the water," Rehn recounted as if he were in a daze. "He look crazed. I knew that he meant to kill you then and there. I- I couldn't allow that! I rushed him and knocked him from his feet. I wasn't even thinking clearly. He's a trained warrior. He overpowered me at once. I-I should have..."

"Let him drown me?" Jhan finished, going cold. It didn't need an answer. They both already knew it.

"You are a monster!"

That hurt, but Jhan wasn't about to take it quietly. "How am I a monster, Rehn? Did I become this way on purpose or did someone do it for me? Did I torture myself? Did I willingly teach myself to kill? Did I search out and discover how to have Power? Did I use my unasked for abilities to kill Thaos? Kile? You? Jaross? How much did I suffer when I could have simply snapped someone's neck with a flick of my wrist? I can, you know, that easily. You'd never see it coming!"

The darkness separated them like a wall and Rehn's long silence was oppressive. "Should I call you... Christine?" Rehn's voice came at last, soft and tentative.

Jhan didn't dare hope that he had changed Rehn's mind so quickly. Jhan replied carefully, "No... I suppose not. It's too painful. Every time that I hear it I would only be reminded of my old life. I've become something in between Jhanian and Christine. Since, 'Jhastine' sounds ridiculous, I think Jhan will still do fine."

Rehn didn't laugh. His voice was unnerved. "The Sahvossa knew, I just didn't understand."

"I didn't either," Jhan admitted. "They told me that I would learn to accept this body, but I thought that they meant that I would want to be a man. I have accepted that this isn't going to change, but I've accepted it on my own terms."

"They think you should be killed too."

Jhan winced and hugged his knees against his chest, inching back on the bed until his back touched the wall. “They aren’t omnipotent, Rehn. They don’t know everything and they aren’t human. They’re afraid of my Power, not because of what I am. It’s locked up, but that doesn’t satisfy them. They want it gone and having me killed would have accomplished that very nicely for them.”

“Are you frightened of them?” Rehn wondered.

Jhan shrugged even though Rehn couldn’t see it. He worked off his wet boots and socks and tucked his cold feet under his robe. “I don’t know what to think about them, Rehn. They’re too much like nature. You might as well ask me if I’m afraid lightning will strike me. At least they’ve shown me that they aren’t willing to try and kill me on their own.”

Rehn made a small sound. It was despair and uncertainty. “I don’t know what to think, Jhan. I’m just a farm boy! You seem the same; a gentle woman with a bad temper and a headstrong disregard for everyone about you! Even the Sahvossa don’t have the power to make you pause! What am I next to that? If you were a monster, you could kill me as you said. You could possess me and leave me in that body of yours, waiting for the executioner!”

“You’re terrified, aren’t you?” Jhan felt tears in his eyes. He wiped at them impatiently. “I don’t know what to say to you, Rehn. How can I reassure you? What will prove to you that I’m just Jhan, a hurt and lost soul who doesn’t want to harm a fly, let alone a simple farm boy?”

“I don’t know,” Rehn replied. “Just... Let me think about this.”

“All right.” Jhan sniffed and wiped at his nose as he settled more comfortably on the bed.

The darkness drew inwards and Jhan reminded himself that he was in a small room meant for a stable boy and that there wasn’t anything to be frightened of. Reason failed under the weight of imagination. With the only sound the intermittent shuffling of beasts in the stable and the occasional mutter and cough of the guard outside, Jhan had ample time to think of the real monsters he knew really existed in the world.

“Are you cold?” Rehn suddenly wondered. “I can feel you making the bed tremble with your shivering.”

Jhan’s robe was thick and warm. “No,” he admitted. “I’m... I’m just frightened. I don’t like the dark.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, Jhan,” Rehn said quickly, reassuringly. “You know that I’m not a violent man.”

“As well as you know that I am not,” Jhan replied cuttingly. “It doesn’t seem to keep either of us from being afraid of each other. Besides, I’m more afraid of just the dark, Rehn. I can’t help seeing horrors in it.”

The door chose that moment to thrust open and light streamed in from a lantern along with a rush of night chill. Jhan cried out in fear and found himself in Rehn’s arms in an instant, seeking protection and comfort. Rehn’s arms automatically locked around Jhan to give it.

Bheni’s surprised face was illuminated by the lantern. She held a tray of food in one hand and a pair of boots and socks in the other. The guard held the lantern, looking askance at Rehn and Jhan. Self-consciously Rehn pried Jhan away from him and stood up.

“What’s going on?” Rehn demanded.

“I’ve brought you some food,” Bheni replied uncertainly. She glanced at the guard. “Leave the lantern. On my honor, there will be no trouble.”

The soldier nodded, put the lantern on the floor, and stepped back, but not away completely.

“I hope those boots are for me?” Jhan asked softly and stood up, coming to take them from Bheni’s hands.

“Yes.” Bheni put the tray of food on the bed and then straightened, looking sick with guilt at the little room. “Falala has a daughter your size. She gladly gave them to me for you. She told me to tell you that she is aghast at your brother and that she thinks that he has gone mad.”

“She must be beside herself with confusion,” Jhan replied ruefully and picked at the tray of food. There was a cooked bird of some sort, a stiff meat pudding, a hunk of bread, and a pitcher of water.

“Why did you tell him, Jhan?” Bheni demanded, bewildered.

“He guessed!” Jhan growled back and bit into a piece of the bread. It was sweet and good. “I never thought that Thaos would be the one smart enough to put two and two together, but, there you are. I couldn’t deny it, Bheni!”

Rehn looked from Bheni to Jhan, outraged. “You knew?” He choked out at Bheni.

“Yes, I did,” Bheni admitted impatiently.

“And you said nothing!”

“There was not anything to say!” Bheni snapped at Rehn. “Jhan saved my life and the lives of others in my company! Was I to give up his secret to those I knew would try to kill him? Where is the

honor in that?”

Rehn spluttered and then sat down heavily on the cot, almost upsetting the tray. Jhan caught it and steadied it. “He’s just mad because he thinks he’s going to die for trying to save a demon, or some such thing!” Jhan explained crossly. “It would have been more noble a sacrifice if I had really been crazy Jhanian being drowned by crazy Thaos!”

Rehn put his face in his hands as if to hide from them. Bheni blinked and then that look of guilt crossed her face again.

“What is it, Bheni?” Jhan wondered.

“I blame myself,” Bheni replied at last, looking everywhere but at Jhan. “Not only was I angry enough to want you to go downstairs and then have to call for my help, I was also tired beyond bearing from caring for you. I thought to take some sleep. I slept through my duty to you.”

“I don’t think there’s anything that you could have done,” Jhan responded comfortingly, “and you don’t have any duty to me. I wouldn’t want to do without your company, but you can’t make yourself my nursemaid, Bheni.”

“I will not fail you again!” Bheni was adamant. “I shall protect you all the way to -”

“Then there will be three people going to Pekarín to be executed,” Rehn snarled from the cover of his hands.

“Rehn Tarwallen!” Bheni snapped and he looked up, startled. “I do not know you well, but I know Jhan. He is no better and no worse than anyone else. He is certainly not a demon or evil. Jhan doesn’t deserve anything that’s been done to him. Someone must stand for what is honorable and right. I shall, to the best of my ability, even against a prince of Karana for a prince of Karana! There is no more glorious reason to give up one’s life!”

Bheni’s face was shining with self righteousness. Jhan was moved, but strangely frightened as well. Bheni was doing and saying everything that he had demanded from Kile, Jaross, and Rehn, but now it felt wrong. She was giving him her life, in essence, and Jhan discovered that he really didn’t want to ask that sacrifice of anyone for his sake.

“I’m sorry, Rehn.” Jhan sat on the bed and looked guiltily at the man across the tray of food.

“What?” Rehn was startled and confused.

“I shouldn’t have demanded that you risk your lives for me,” Jhan stammered, not used to

apologizing. "Now that I hear Bheni say it... It's was more than selfish of me. What you did for me, saving me from Thaos..."

"I told you, I didn't think about it, I just did it," Rehn replied as if embarrassed. "I suppose, that if I had stopped to think, I wouldn't have had the nerve."

"I understand, really I do," Jhan responded softly.

"I do not!" Bheni interjected crossly, glaring at Rehn. "Are you admitting that you are a coward?"

Rehn sprang to his feet angrily, but the guard stopped them all with a shout. "Enough there! I don't want a brawl! You shouldn't even be here, Mistress Bheni! Please, come out now before we both get into trouble!"

Bheni retreated reluctantly. "Thaos has ordered us to leave at dawn," Bheni told them as she left the room. "I'll make certain that I have all of your things, Jhan, and I'll ask Falala for some potions and herbs in case you are not well enough for the journey."

"Thank you, Bheni," Jhan responded and meant it, wondering how he could inspire such friendship.

The door closed and Jhan and Rehn were left in darkness again. Jhan felt for the food and encountered Rehn's hand seeking to do the same. Rehn flinched away. "Eat first," Rehn instructed shortly. "You need it for strength more than I."

Jhan felt about until he found a cup and poured carefully from the pitcher. Taking a drink, he felt the tension growing from Rehn. "What are you thinking?" Jhan demanded. "Are you angry with Bheni or me?"

"It isn't always about you, Jhan!" Rehn growled. "If you must know, I'm wondering how I shall let my family know that I'm going to be executed!"

"Rehn!" Jhan sighed and took another long drink while he thought how best to respond. "I don't know why you're afraid," Jhan said at last. "You are the only human who can speak to the Sahvossa. No one is going to allow you to be executed! Now me, on the other hand, they've been itching to get rid of since I showed up to make their lives uncomfortable. I can't imagine Tekhal lifting a finger to save me from Torian, especially when politics and his people are at stake."

"You can't know that for certain," Rehn replied. "Not about any of it! I'm going to worry until I hear my reprieve from King Tekhal's own lips!"

“You’ll be waiting a long time,” Jhan responded sourly as he curled up on the cot with his back against the wall. “and I don’t think the waiting is going to be pleasant at all.”

CHAPTER FOUR

(Mutiny)

After a fitful night in total darkness, it was a shock when the door opened and bright, blinding sunlight streamed in. Soldiers poured in and grabbed both Rehn and Jhan, escorting them into the stables. Thaos met them there, standing with Jaross, Kile, and a man who held two pairs of leg manacles and one pair of wrist manacles in his hands. He was blackened by soot and had big, burly arms. A blacksmith, Jhan surmised with trepidation and anger, knowing what Thaos had in mind.

The blacksmith put the leg manacles on Rehn willingly enough, but he paused and stared from his great height down at Jhan, his simple face reflecting his bewilderment. "Your Highness," he complained in a hoarse voice. "Surely you don't mean me to put such things on the little lady? How is she a danger to anyone?"

Thaos had his arms crossed over his chest, scowling and impatient. "That little *lady* has killed many men with bare hands, Master Blacksmith! Looks are very deceiving!"

The blacksmith was skeptical, scratching the graying stubble on his almost bald head in confusion, but he wasn't about to stand up to Thaos. He bent to kneel to be at Jhan's height and gently locked the leg manacles and wrist manacles in place. There was a chain connecting them all together through metal loops. Jhan winced. They were still very warm, as if the man had just finished making them small enough to fit Jhan's tiny wrists and ankles.

"The key," Thaos demanded, putting out a hand. The blacksmith dropped a key into it and then wiped his hands against his leather apron as if he had just done something dirty.

"Satisfied?" Jhan asked bravely, jangling his wrist manacles together at Thaos.

"Hardly," Thaos replied with a grunt and motioned someone from behind him to approach Jhan.

Jhan started at the odd figure that came scrambling towards him. Like a crab, the short, fat woman in a ragged dress sidled up and whacked Jhan in the face with a handful of bird feathers dipped in some noxious powder. Jhan sneezed and tried to turn away, but she grabbed his chin and stabbed a reddened finger at his forehead, scrawling something there. Her bulbous nose and squinting eyes were screwed up over a toothless mouth in concentration, as her lips mumbled what sounded like an incantation.

"Stop it!" Jhan protested.

Jaross was uncomfortable with it too. "What is this, Prince Thaos? We are intelligent men here!

Surely you don't believe in this nonsense?"

Thaos was unrelenting, his gaze never leaving Jhan. "I would never have believed that someone could possess my brother's body either, Lord Jaross. The witch has promised me that her potions will bring my brother's spirit back to its rightful place."

"What potion?" Bheni strode in with her packs over one shoulder, eyes alert on the mumbling witch.

"Potions of her own making," Thaos replied. "Potions stronger than your own, perhaps. Yours have failed to bring my brother back to me."

The witch women broke her trance long enough to uncap a dirty bottle and begin to place it at Jhan's lips. Jhan turned his face away and clamped his mouth shut.

"Drink or you will die!" Thaos thundered.

Bheni snagged the bottle away from the surprised witch and carefully dabbed some of the potion on her finger. Smelling her finger and taking a small taste, she spat it out immediately. "This is Virtol mixed with Anis! How is a slow poison supposed to bring your brother back to you?"

"You lie!" the witch shrieked, but Thaos was already on the old woman, shaking her hard by the front of her dress and then casting her into a pile of hay. The old woman scrambled away and out of the stable as fast as her old legs could carry her.

Thaos was breathing hard, having not uttered a sound. Everyone could see the angry humiliation in his tense shoulders. "Enough! Get saddled and let us leave this place!" He turned and walked away, stiff backed, as if some last hope had burned to a crisp before his eyes.

Bheni let out a long breath as everyone slowly broke up and began the task of getting the imala and baku ready. Jaross glanced at Kile and shook his head. Kile's mouth was tight. It was obvious that they were both wondering at Thaos's sanity.

Bheni dipped a cloth into a water bucket and tried to wipe off whatever the witch had scrawled on Jhan's forehead. She swore after a long moment of scrubbing. "She must have used a dye."

"What does it look like?" Jhan wondered in dread.

Bheni shook her head disapprovingly. "A swirl with a two horns on top. At least, that is what it appears to be. I do not think the witch knew what she was drawing. She was definitely a charlatan out for Prince Thaos's silver."

“A fool and his money,” Jhan muttered, testing the range of motion of his manacles. “How am I supposed to ride in all of this?”

“Not comfortably,” Bheni guessed. “Sidesaddle, I suppose.”

Rehn was standing with wide eyes. He had been silent through the entire, bizarre proceeding. “It is the glyph to trap a demon,” he said suddenly and both Bheni and Jhan looked at him. “The mark on your forehead, I mean. I think that you were the one lying, Mistress Bheni.”

Bheni colored and clenched her hands. “How do you know of such things?”

“I had an aunt who dabbled.” Rehn was embarrassed to admit it. “She swore she could do things just by mixing certain potions together.”

“Foolishness!” Bheni retorted.

“So you say. We’ll never know, now, will we?” Rehn pointed out suspiciously.

Kile brought Jhan’s baku forward, breaking off their conversation. He blinked at the red mark on Jhan’s face and Jhan could see Kile beginning to have doubts.

“What’s the matter?” Jhan wondered, not willing to miss a chance to vent his frustration and anger. “Things not so clear in the morning light? Are you starting to think that maybe I’m crazy and everything I said last night was just part of my madness? Or, maybe, you’re beginning to wonder if Thaos is the crazy one and I’m just his crazy victim, both of us feeding off of each other’s fantasies? Pretty complicated, isn’t it?”

“Shut- up!” Kile snarled. He tossed Jhan up onto his baku as if he wanted to touch Jhan as little as possible.

Jhan hit the saddle hard and he struggled to get his balance, clutching at the saddle horn and hooking a leg over it with a rattle of metal. The short chain made it impossible to straddle the saddle. His awkward, sidesaddle position was the best Jhan could hope for.

Rehn didn’t fare much better, mounting his imala and finding it difficult to do anything but sit with a leg hooked on the saddle horn. Very dangerous, Jhan thought, if the animal should bolt or throw its rider. Jhan pulled at his chain until it wasn’t looped over the saddle horn. He saw Rehn take his cue and do the same.

Jaross was watching Jhan intensely from the saddle of his imala. “Poor Jaross!” Jhan mocked, staring Jaross down. “First, you were furious that you’d fallen in love with a man, now you’re confused

to have fallen in love with a real woman in a man's body. Seems there's a lot for everyone to think about this morning."

"I do not wish to think at all!" Bheni retorted as she mounted her imala. "Save your energy for the ride, Jhan, and do not waste it by antagonizing everyone around you. I know that you are angry, but it does no good."

"Angry doesn't even begin to describe how I feel, Bheni," Jhan growled back, but he took her advice and fell silent, gritting his teeth.

A soldier tied Jhan's baku and Rehn's imala to long leads attached to his own mount. Another soldier did the same thing on the other side. They were nervous and very careful of their prisoners, not wanting to give them any chance of escape. None of them wished to be the one to explain that sort of failure of duty to Thaos's uncertain sanity.

"Wait!" Falala darted forward with a heavy pack in her hands. Flustered by the milling soldiers, she slowed, but reached the side of Jhan's baku with surprising courage. With nimble fingers, she slung the pack onto Jhan's baku and tied it tightly to the saddle.

"What is it, Falala?" Bheni wondered from her position close by Jhan.

Falala looked embarrassed now, coloring uncertainly. "Just some clothes my daughter can part with and some things to make her Highness's journey more..." she glanced with trepidation at Thaos's back, "comfortable. While I helped Bheni pack your things, Highness, I noticed that you had very little in the way of a woman's needs. I can't pretend to know what is going on, but no brother should treat a sister so shabbily," Falala said that in a low rush, touching the metal manacles. "If there is anyone that I can send word to... Anyone who might soften Prince Thaos, you have only to ask, Highness."

Jhan gripped Falala's hand in hers and squeezed tightly. "Thank you. You're a wonderful person, Falala, but there isn't anything else that you can do. Once I reach Pekarín, there might be cooler heads."

"I will pray for it, Highness," Falala replied and hurried away, handkerchief dabbing at her tear filled eyes.

"You don't believe that, do you?" Rehn wondered from behind Jhan.

Jhan didn't bother looking around. "No, of course not. I just wanted to make her feel better."

"I didn't know demons were so considerate." It was hard to tell what Rehn was thinking. It could

have been an attempt at reconciliation, but Jhan wasn't in the mood.

"More considerate than regular people, it seems," Jhan replied with a rattle of his chains.

Bheni chanced tangling in the long leads attached to Jhan's baku, to ride in close and settle a cloak over Jhan's shoulders. She tied it in place as they left the stables, knowing that he was chilled from the cold morning air and that his manacles made him awkward. "I told you to not waste your strength on foolish anger," Bheni reminded him. "The road is dangerous and you are not in good shape to travel it. Concentrate on getting through the day in one piece."

Those words chilled Jhan even more, as if his cloak was as thin as gauze. As their company began a slow trot down a forest track, he began to think of the Dark King's soldiers coming down the main road straight for Khor. They would pass close, perhaps too close to go unnoticed. The tension of the soldiers was palpable, everyone's eyes darting about and ears straining to hear above the clatter and jingle of the beasts. Jhan's fear began to rise with their tension.

After two, bone shaking hours of trotting, Thaos allowed them to slow to a walk. The animals were exhausted, ears flapping and sides sweating. Jhan wasn't in much better shape. Balancing on the pommel of a saddle at a full trot had made Jhan ache in every muscle. He felt lightheaded and he must have swayed in the saddle. When Bheni reached over and took hold of his shoulder to steady him, Jhan was grateful.

They took a break at noon to chew on jerky and hard grain cakes. Jhan was helped from his baku by Bheni. Lying on his back on the ground with an arm to shade his eyes from the sun, Jhan ate and tried to rest. Rehn sat near him with his hands in his lap, not saying anything.

"You are white," Bheni commented as she finished tending their animals. She crouched by Jhan's side in concern.

Jhan sighed and rolled onto his stomach with a great clanking of chains. "I am always white."

"More than usual," Bheni persisted as she began to eat her noon meal, eyes keeping close watch on Thaos and the soldiers mistrustfully. "I do not think that you will make it through the day."

"Neither do I," Jhan admitted. "What do you suppose Thaos will do when I fall off of my baku?"

"Strap you back on," Rehn finally interjected ruefully. "Why don't you ride with me? Bheni and I can take turns. That way you can snatch some sleep."

"That is what I was going to suggest," Bheni replied, pleased. "But I did not expect you to

participate, Rehn.”

Rehn shrugged, his hands flexing in his lap as he stared down at them. “It’s all very confusing, just as you said back at the stable, Jhan. I don’t know whether you have possessed Jhanian Kevelt or you are simply mad. I’ve been thinking long on it as we rode and I have concluded that I can only judge what I see before my eyes. You are still Jhan. You still have a foul temper, but I saw your kindness when you needn’t have bothered. Whatever you are, I will deal with what is before me. If you change and become... evil. I will deal with that too.”

A large hand reached down suddenly, and grabbed the chain attached to Jhan’s wrist manacles. Jhan was dragged several yards and then dropped. Thaos crouched before Jhan, face ugly with anger. Wrapping fingers in Jhan’s hair, he brought Jhan’s face close to his own.

“I see what you are doing!” Thaos snarled menacingly.

“What?” Jhan whispered, terrified by Thaos’s bloodshot eyes and the way his nostrils were flaring.

“You are using your sweet tongue to turn their minds!”

“I don’t think I’ve *ever* been accused of having a sweet tongue before, Thaos,” Jhan retorted weakly. “Maybe everyone is just realizing how unreasonable you’re being?” Jhan swallowed, daring and not certain where he was finding the courage. “I think you’ve been under too much stress. I know that finding out that your brother is truly dead must have been a shock, but can’t you see that punishing me isn’t going to help anything?”

A knife flashed and Thaos put the tip of it next to Jhan’s mouth. “Perhaps cutting out your tongue will ease some of my *‘stress’*, demon.”

He meant it, Jhan could see it clearly. When Thaos gripped him by the chin, Jhan shrieked and threw himself backward, hands coming up to cover his mouth as he wriggled out of Thaos’s grasp. The man lunged after him, falling, and then scrambling on hands and knees as Jhan did the same. Jhan made it three feet before Thaos snagged his leg chain and dragged him back. He crawled over Jhan until he was straddling him, knee at Jhan’s throat.

“Go ahead!” Jhan shrieked. “Go ahead, you bastard! You think that you can do better than Dagara? He pulled out all of my teeth, changed them, and then put them back in again to suit him! He cut my bottom lip off to make one that was larger! He didn’t even like my damn eyelashes!”

Jhan was sobbing in racking heaves now, hands struggling with the manacles in a vain attempt to free them enough to use his skill to defend himself. It was hopeless. Attached to his feet too tightly, he

hadn't any range of motion to deliver a blow.

"Your brother may have suffered before he died," Jhan lashed out, his tongue the only weapon he had and the one he was about to lose, "but after I was trapped in his body, I was the one tortured past every conceivable limit! I was the one Dagara dithered over until he thought that everything was perfect! I was the one he raped and flayed alive! I was the one he gave to his soldiers to play with until I nearly died again and again and again!" Jhan was shrieking every word, past all reason, eyes blinded by black memory. He wasn't even aware when Thaos released him and rose.

Jhan curled up on his side, eyes closed tightly against the whirling darkness. "You're all so good at blaming the prisoner for his own torture," Jhan finished quietly, voice dead and barely above a whisper.

"You will stay back, Mistress Bheni!" Thaos's shouted. "Put down your weapon! Men! Take her away! It seems there will be a long line at the execution block when we reach Pekarini!"

Jhan opened his eyes, stunned and wanting to see what Bheni had attempted for his sake. The only sight he saw was Thaos bearing down on him with his knife still in one hand and an even more determined look on his face.

Jhan shrieked yet again and made another mindless, futile scramble to get away, falling and rolling as his chains tangled and tore at his skin. Thaos grabbed his leg chain and pulled him back as easily as he had the first time.

Jhan, dragged on his belly, looked frantically for help. He saw Kile standing the nearest, face white and eyes open wide in horror. The man's jaw was jumping as he clenched it and Jhan could see sweat trickling down the sides of his face.

"Kile!" Jhan cried out. "Please, help me! Please, don't let him do this! For God's sake! Stop him! Please, stop him!"

Thaos flipped Jhan onto his back, straddled his chest once more, and stifled Jhan's cries by shoving a stick far into Jhan's mouth. Jhan could only whimper like a trapped animal, the stick keeping his mouth wide open for Thaos to accomplish his intended task. The knife entered Jhan's mouth and Jhan felt it prick his tongue as Thaos scowled in concentration.

Kile barreled into Thaos, knocking him off of Jhan with an inarticulate cry. They rolled, fists lashing like two battling lions. Jhan spat out the stick, tasting blood, and didn't wait to see who won. Mind blanked by terror, basic instinct took over, and Jhan crawled and stumbled away, not even able to see clearly where he was going.

“Jhan! Jhan! Jhan!” Hands caught Jhan on his shoulders and someone lifted him to his feet, holding him fast against a wide chest. Through his tears, Jhan made out Jaross, face as white as his own. Jhan sobbed against him, begging Jaross to help him in a pitiful, small voice that was hoarse from his screams.

The battle ended. Kile stood, swaying, over an unconscious Thaos. Blood was streaming from a cut on Kile’s lip and his face was a patchwork of rising bruises. “You are distraught, Your Highness,” Kile slurred out. “You are not thinking clearly. Surely you don’t mean to disfigure a prince of Karana, your own brother? I think it is best that we... bind you until you can think more clearly. Failing that, we should take you and your brother back to Pekarín so that you can both rest and recover your sanity in your father, King Torian’s, tender care.”

Kile looked at the soldiers. The soldiers looked at each other. It was a tense moment. They knew and loved Kile as a commander and their lord. Rehn’s mistreatment had set them on edge. Kile was asking them to walk a dangerous tightrope of words with him. A wrong decision could cost them their lives and they were well aware of it.

“I believe that Prince Thaos has been acting... ill,” one of the soldiers offered at last. “I think that he will thank us for our intervention once he regains his health.”

“Both of them mad and both at each others throats with the fantasies of the mad,” another soldier agreed. “King Tekhal will commend us on our prudence in keeping them separate and unharmed.”

The other soldiers nodded and Kile let out a long breath. “I’m glad we are in agreement. Please, release Mistress Bheni and Rehn Tarwallen. I’m afraid that we will have to use Rehn’s manacles to bind the Prince. He is very strong and I think that he will not thank us once he awakens.”

“And the La- The Prince Jhanian?” a soldier asked.

Kile was shaking as he ran a hand through his tumbled blonde hair. “All of this talk about possession... it’s best forgotten, but Prince Jhanian is as ill as his brother. It’s best that we keep them both chained for now.”

Released by the soldiers who had been holding both of her arms, Bheni ran to Jhan, but Jhan was beyond all sense and he thought that Thaos was coming for him again. Slapping both hands tightly over his mouth, Jhan sank to the ground and curled into a ball, hiding his face against the ground in a vain attempt to protect himself.

Jaross joined Bheni in trying to get through to Jhan that he was safe. When Rehn was released

from his chains, he joined them. It was Kile who stepped forward and demanded that they step back.

“He needs air and some quiet!” Kile demanded, pushing everyone back. “Give Jhan a chance to realize that it’s over!”

They stepped away and huddled in a group, talking, but Jhan could hear them plainly as he rode the tidal wave of fear and unreasoning panic all the way to crash on a mental shore of sanity.

“I couldn’t just... watch that!” Kile was saying in a shaking voice. “After what Jhan said, about Dagara Ku Ni, I felt just as much a party to monstrous evil! Thaos is obviously unbalanced or he wouldn’t even have considered cutting out Jhan’s tongue!” Kile sounded as if he were about to be sick.

“The way he screamed... It made my blood run cold!” Jaross agreed. “I was about to act as well, Lord Kile. This whole business has made me feel tainted! I will be glad to see the last of your company, Prince Thaos, and especially Jhan. I think that I will be confused for the rest of my life because of him!”

“I think that we are all going to pay dearly for this,” Rehn interjected fearfully. “I know there isn’t anything else you could have done, Kile, but it remains to be seen whether King Tekhal or Torian will think so.”

“As Prince Thaos said, *‘A long line at the executioner’s block’*,” Bheni growled with hands crossed over her chest defiantly. “At least we will all go with our honor intact.”

Rehn retorted miserably. “I don’t find such things a comfort when I’m likely to face a man with an axe!”

Jhan, slowly but surely, began to believe that he was safe. He uncurled and sat up, hunched inward and still tasting blood in his mouth. His eyes swept the camp, resting at last on Thaos. A soldier was gingerly placing Rehn’s manacles on the Prince and taking the key from him. He brought the key to Kile and Kile slipped it into a breast pocket of his tunic absently. Only then did Jhan let out a shuddering exhale of relief. They all turned and stared at him.

Bheni cautiously approached and bent to kneel by Jhan. “Open your mouth,” she commanded. “You have blood on your lips.” Jhan hesitantly complied. Bheni nodded, satisfied. “Only a nick. How do you feel?”

Jhan closed his mouth with a snap and said nothing at all, unable to describe the shear horror of what had just happened to him and how he felt about it. He clutched his knees to his chest with a clank of chains and rested his cheek against them, closing his eyes tightly.

"I think that we should spend the day here and plan our next move," Bheni suggested. "My Lord Kile?"

Kile nodded, reluctant to give up the day, but knowing that they all had to adjust to this radical change. "Thaos will wake soon and I'll have to explain this to him. There will be shouts and curses, I'm certain, and the Prince will not suffer the journey quietly. I will have to assume a rank higher than his and command in his place. It troubles me, but I don't see any other way of safely getting back to Pekarín."

"We should send a scout ahead," Jaross suggested. "Prince Thaós didn't bother, but Dagara's troops can't be that far ahead. We can't move quietly with our strange company and our beasts, so we should at least avoid any entanglements."

"Agreed," Kile nodded approvingly and then motioned for a short, copper haired soldier. "Crelin! Take your packs and run up the road five miles and make certain that we aren't about to run into any troops. Stay the night there. If there isn't anything to report by morning, keep traveling ahead until there is. Understood?"

"Yes, Lord Kile!" The man gave a salute and went to get his pack from his imala.

Kile sighed, his shaking finally stopping and confidence returning. "This is much more orderly. Prince Thaós, I think, would have killed us all with his rash charge to Pekarín. He was right when he said that he isn't much of a commander."

"It probably explains his anger at Jhan," Bheni surmised thoughtfully. "He had been relying on Jhan to recover fully and lead Karana into battle instead of him. I would not want the lives of soldiers in my hands if I knew that I was a poor general. The fear of that very thing might have driven Prince Thaós to his madness when he finally realized that Jhanian was not going to take the burden from him."

"I don't envy you the journey, Lord Kile," Jaross sighed. "Nor the explanations at the end of it. You are risking a great deal for the little demon."

"Look at him, Jaross," Kile motioned to Jhan. "Try as I might, I can't imagine that pitiful creature a demon or in any way evil. I think that we have all been duped by his fantasies, even Prince Thaós. Jhan weaves them so well and he believes them so strongly... it's no wonder there isn't anything left of Prince Jhanian for Thaós to see."

"I think you're right, Kile," Rehn agreed. "I was frightened, at first, but he's just Jhan. I'd stake my life on it."

“You may have to,” Jaross warned.

Bheni broke away to unpack blankets. She spread them out near Jhan and then settled, cross legged, to wait patiently for Jhan to relax. Jhan was aware of her, but he found that he still couldn’t speak. He fell asleep, exhausted, sitting up with his head nestled against his knees. When he awoke, sometime later, he was lying on the blankets and wrapped warmly in another, the sun beginning to set and two campfires blazing.

Thaos was sitting near one of the fires. Jhan saw him as he sat up and looked around. The Prince was still bound by chains and his eyes were burning as hotly as the fire. When they skewered Jhan, Jhan turned away, feeling his insides go cold.

“How are you feeling now, Jhan?” Bheni was still sitting near, mahogany face concerned.

Jhan still didn’t want to speak. Everything inside of him seemed locked tightly in a permanent flinch, his spirit crushed and blowing away in a cruel wind. It didn’t matter that everyone was risking their lives to help him, as he had demanded not so long ago. It didn’t matter that Kile had come through in the end to rescue him against all that he had believed was his duty. Jhan was locked in the horror of the moment and he couldn’t find a way to escape.

“Thaos has not said anything, either,” Bheni informed him tersely. “I suppose that he knows that it is useless to struggle and shout. He knows what we intend to do.”

The words fell on Jhan’s consciousness like snowflakes, melting quickly and gone without a trace. Hardly blinking, he simply stared at Bheni until she stopped talking, realizing that she was wasting her breath.

“Too much.” Bheni guessed softly. “You have struggled so bravely for so long. I do not wonder that you can not recover easily from this.” Bheni stood with a shake of her head. “You have to put it behind you, Jhan. Do not let it devour you. No one condones what Thaos attempted to do to you.”

Footsteps. Jhan flinched and raised a hand. “It’s only me, Kile, Jhan. I’m not going to hurt you. I need to speak with you. In private.”

Jhan looked up, blinking like an owl at Kile. Kile allowed that for a long moment and then decided that he had to be the one to act first. He put a gentle hand under Jhan’s arm and brought him to his feet. Slowly, he pulled Jhan away from the camp and into a screening group of trees. There, Kile released Jhan and took a step back, facing him sternly.

Jhan should have hated Kile. He should have protested, swore, asked Bheni to intervene. Instead,

Jhan simply stood, a hollow eyed wraith in a black robe and chains, feeling as empty and lifeless as a stone.

Kile's mouth was moving, hand pushing distractedly through his golden hair and blue eyes serious under drawn golden brows. Something about not making any trouble for him, Jhan pieced together without being able to hear anything but a droning buzz that should have been Kile's voice. Risked my life for you. Should be grateful. Will have to keep you in chains. For your own good.

Yes, Jhan thought hazily, he should have hated Kile. The man actually thought that beating Thaos to a pulp made up for his gross inaction of before, his accusations, his taunts, and his roughness. Grateful? Had Kile really expected that? Jhan had only disdain for his arrogance and a cold hardness where any other emotion should have been.

Kile stopped talking, a mirror image of Bheni's expression on his face as he realized that Jhan hadn't heard him. Jhan expected Kile to become angry and to shout indignantly. He did neither. His blue eyes softened unexpectedly and his broad hand reached out to touch Jhan's face. Why? To get Jhan's attention? To see if Thaos had damaged his tongue? Or out of simple sympathy? Jhan couldn't tell.

Kile's fingers, calloused from the sword and the reins of his imala, were warm. That warmth seemed to seep from them and heat Jhan's cheek. It traveled like electricity from that point throughout Jhan's entire body.

Like the perilous rescue on that bridge above the raging flood, Jhan again felt comfort and safety flow from Kile and envelope him. The darkness of Jhan's trauma was repelled, flowing back into the falling night about them, powerless against Kile's bright light. Released from its grip, Jhan swayed, the leaden weight about his heart lifting and leaving him suddenly awash in misery and horror.

Jhan threw himself against Kile. Arms manacled too tightly for him to put his arms around the man, Jhan pressed against him instead and hid his face against Kile's broad chest as he began to sob, shaking like a leaf. Surprisingly, Kile's arms came up and wrapped about Jhan, one hand stroking his dark hair away from his tear stained face.

"Don't blame you," Kile murmured soothingly and it sounded as if it were coming from the bottom of a well. "Go ahead and cry. What Thaos tried to do... It was a near thing. It rattled me too."

Jhan could never forget things and step over them to go on with his life. He would always have to go through them to reach the other side. This was no exception. He wept until his face was red and

puffy. Kile held him all the while, indulging Jhan far longer than anyone would have. When Jhan was finally too exhausted for one more tear, he simply lay with his ear against Kile's chest, listening to the man's heartbeat and starting to think coherently again.

Something was happening between them, Jhan was slowly realizing. That strange electricity was sizzling between them wherever skin met skin. Their bodies seemed to be comfortable together, fitting perfectly despite their differences in size. Jhan tried to remember that he was angry at Kile, even bordering on hatred, but Jhan felt that he was attempting to convince himself of it. What he was really feeling took nothing that had happened between them into account. It didn't care. It only knew that, without a doubt, Kile was the man that he loved with every fiber of his being.

Jhan wanted to weep again, angry at himself for his weakness and knowing the futility of it all, but Kile had reached his limit of indulgence. He slowly pushed Jhan away, as if he were pushing against something that he longed to hold onto. It was obvious, from his pale face and troubled eyes, that Kile was feeling exactly what Jhan was feeling and denying it far better than Jhan could.

Kile didn't ask if Jhan was feeling better. He didn't say anything at all, except a few words to break the moment and the tension. "I won't tell anyone."

Jhan nodded shakily as Kile led him back into camp. Curious eyes looked up from every point, but no one said anything as Kile helped Jhan settle back onto his blankets. Bheni was instantly angry. "What has happened? Lord Kile?"

Kile shrugged and straightened, regaining his composure with a great effort. "We had a discussion about the journey ahead. That's all. I let Jhan know what I expect of him."

"And he did not like it," Bheni guessed as she looked Jhan over to make certain that Kile hadn't hit him.

"Jhan never likes being told what to do. You know that," Kile returned acidly and strode away.

"I know it, but is it the truth?" Bheni wondered, returning her gaze to Jhan. "Did he hurt you?"

Jhan was recovering enough to shake his head, no, and pull his blankets up around him. He still didn't feel like talking, but that was more from being stunned by what had transpired than the numbness of his fading trauma. Jhan simply couldn't express any of the roiling emotions within him or find the presence of mind to utter a word.

Bheni excepted the silence and stood up. "I will get you something to eat and then you should rest. I do not think that Lord Kile intends to travel any slower than Prince Thaos and you will need every

ounce of your strength.”

Jhan watched her go and she passed close by Prince Thaos to reach the evening meal. Jhan met eyes with Thaos. The darkness and the horror Kile had helped Jhan shed were still crouching in Thaos’s eyes, promising revenge. Jhan knew that he would need his strength to fight against that as well. He began by moving his blankets until a tree blocked his sight of Thaos like a shield against the Gorgon of myth. Next, Jhan sat and tried to gather the will as well as the strength to go on.

“You don’t have to be afraid of Prince Thaos. Everyone has orders to keep you two separated,” Jaross reassured Jhan.

Jhan looked sideways at Jaross, chewing despondently on his bottom lip as they rode side by side down the trail. Prince Thaos was up ahead, sandwiched between soldiers. Jhan and Jaross were lagging behind everyone else, a rope tied from Jhan’s chains to Jaross. Jaross was idly making the rope swing back and forth as he spoke.

Jhan had been looking at Kile further up the line, not Thaos, but Jhan didn’t see any reason to correct Jaross. He treated Jaross to the same silence that he had been giving everyone else. Jaross took it more personally. “This isn’t about Thaos, is it? You’re still blaming me for that incident by the river.”

“Incident?” Jhan was startled into speech. His voice was rough with disuse, hand going to his short hair unconsciously as he tried to understand why Jaross had made this leap of thought when so many horrible things had happened since then. Was the man that self-centered?

Jaross was shaking his head and sighing. “I don’t know why you can’t understand! You fooled me... completely... utterly. I -” Jaross blushed. “I even fell in love with you!” he said that part in a rush, eyes making certain that no one else heard it. “When I found out that you were Jhanian Kevelt... well, I’m willing to leave that in the past. I can understand that you thought you were a woman and that you never meant to shame me, but you must understand what a shock it was... what a horror for me to find out in front of everyone! Can you understand, Jhan?”

“No,” Jhan replied shortly, unable to believe that they were actually having this conversation.

“Do I get a reason?” Jaross wondered, not yet offended, but about to be.

“You are the most selfish, self centered, idiotic - Stop that!” Jhan exploded, yanking the swinging

rope away from Jaross. “That is attached to me!”

Scowling, Jaross bent and retrieved the rope hurriedly, wrapping it securely about his hand this time. “I can’t let you do that. It’s necessary.”

“Necessary?” Jhan’s face twisted in pain and he couldn’t bear to look at Jaross any longer. The man had skin as thick as a rhino. Nothing Jhan had shouted at him had penetrated it.

“You did kill several, armed men before my eyes,” Jaross pointed out. “You have every reason not to want to go back to Pekarín. Even with chains and this rope, I still feel uncertain.”

“Then let someone else guard me,” Jhan suggested, seething. “Or do you enjoy leading me around like a dog?”

“A what?”

Jhan made an angry, frustrated, inarticulate sound. “Why are you guarding me?” he demanded at last. “Why you? Why not Bheni? Rehn? Kile? Even a soldier?”

“I asked for the duty,” Jaross admitted reluctantly.

“Why?” Jhan prompted when Jaross didn’t explain further. “Do you enjoy tormenting me with your idiotic, self-centered -”

“You’ve already called me those things,” Jaross growled.

“I wondered if you were even listening!” Jhan lashed back.

Jaross looked down at the rope in his hands, twisting it into an agitated knot. “You still confuse me, Jhan. I suppose that I asked to guard you so that I could try and figure you out.”

“Figure me out?” Jhan repeated sarcastically. “Don’t you mean figure yourself out? I don’t think you’ve ever stopped to consider me or my feelings about anything!”

“You see!” Jaross sat up straight and pointed at Jhan as if Jhan had just made his argument for him.

Jhan stared and then shook his head, rubbing at his suddenly throbbing temple. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“What you were just saying!” Jaross exclaimed excitedly. “You were made to look like a woman. Your face. Your hair. Even the way that you move. When you speak like that, you sound just like a woman as well!”

Jhan scowled, insulted now on top of everything else. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jaross scowled as well, trying to find the words that he needed to express his thoughts. “Women always think with their hearts. Men just aren’t like that. You keep talking about *‘feelings’* and being *‘hurt’* and whatever else!” Jaross stammered. “Women speak like that!”

“Jaross!” Jhan lowered his hand and glared, warningly. “Is there a point to all of this?”

“I guess that I’m trying to explain to you why I fell in love with you,” Jaross admitted at last. He looked completely embarrassed. “And yes, explain to myself as well!”

“Typical!” Jhan seethed, throwing his hands up and making his chains rattle alarmingly. “I’ve been dragged, belly down, through hell and back, and all you can think to worry about is whether you’re a thekling for falling in love with me!”

“I was wondering no such thing!” Jaross exploded and a soldier looked back at them curiously. Jaross waved him off and the man shrugged and turned back around, giving a lord his privacy.

Jaross took a deep breath to gather courage and to control his temper as he continued, “No matter how I look at you, I only see Jhan, a woman. A beautiful woman. I’ve never met anyone like you. I don’t think that I ever will again! Can’t you see, Jhan? It’s why I went a little mad when I found out what you really were. It’s why I’ve stayed so angry. The woman that I loved, and would have given my life and my heart for, doesn’t exist!”

Jhan trembled. The man had cut him to the quick and didn’t even know it. Jaross had voiced all of Jhan’s fears and the one thing that Jhan had denied for so long. The woman that Jhan pretended to be truly didn’t exist.

Jhan struck back, wounded and wanting to wound in return. “You fell in love with my face, Jaross. You admitted that to me a long time ago! Well, love isn’t about faces, Jaross, it’s about hearts and souls. If you think the pitiful thing that you felt for me was love, then you are a shallower, smaller man than I ever imagined. Jump into bed with the next woman who’s willing and I’m certain you’ll ‘love’ her too if her face is pretty enough!”

“I wouldn’t- I haven’t,” Jaross stammered.

“Then maybe you are a thekling.” Jhan stabbed deep and twisted with his words. Jaross went white. Jhan had hit him with his innermost fears as deeply as he had hit Jhan and they were both left speechless.

It was all so ridiculous! Jhan thought sourly. Manhandled by Thaos and put into a state of shock, he had never expected to be talking about Jaross’ confused love life or to have his own held up for the

lie and the impossibility that it would always be.

Jhan could just make out the glitter of sunlight in Kile's hair far ahead in the line of riders. Even that glimpse was enough to make Jhan's heart leap and throb. It didn't understand reason, realities, or the conflict of gender. It simply loved completely. "When you really feel love, Jaross." Jhan was unrelenting, reckless in his need to hurt Jaross in revenge. "*If* you ever do, you'll laugh that you confused such petty, shallow emotions for it!"

"I see," Jaross said suddenly and the tone in his voice made Jhan look at him with a frown. Jaross was gazing from Jhan to Kile in disgust. "It's Lord Kile that you love! Is he... are you two..." he couldn't go on, a hand covering his mouth as if he feared something obscene was bound to come out.

Jhan saw the situation getting out of control and he imagined several, ugly endings all involving Kile. He should have known better, Jhan thought, furious with himself. His anger had never accomplished anything good.

Jhan attempted a smile, but it came out weak and sickly. "I love him with my heart and soul, Jaross," Jhan acknowledged, knowing that it was useless to deny it, "but Kile thinks I'm mad and humors me. He doesn't have any feelings for me. I'm sure he'd react just as violently as you did, if you're foolish enough to ask him about it, especially in front of others. I don't need my hair cut again, Jaross, and my face is almost healed of bruises. Please don't start anything with Kile!"

Jaross rubbed at his face as if he were waking from a nightmare. "Of course I wouldn't speak of such a thing to Lord Kile! He'd beat me first before he'd start on you!" Jaross shook his head sharply and lowered his hands abruptly. "I'm more confused than when we began to talk! I still don't understand you. I still don't know what you are or what you hope to be. I thought, if I knew, I would be able to-to silence these doubts within myself, the ones you pointed out so cruelly."

"Cruel?" Jhan was outraged, blue eyes piercing Jaross' and holding him with their anguish and pain. "Cruelty is when I'm bleeding inside and people want to talk about themselves!" Jaross flinched, but Jhan hadn't any sympathy for him. "Look at me!" he demanded. "This is cruelty! I'm chained from head to foot! I feel like I'm going to die with every breath that I take, pared down by Dagara Ku Ni to be a weapon and nothing more; surely not to live a normal life and surely not to endure riding all the way back to Pekarín like this!"

Jhan yanked on the rope, but Jaross had a tight hold on it. Frustrated and angry beyond all reason, Jhan leaned over the space between their beasts, his hands locked on the pommel of his saddle for balance. "Think about someone else for once in your life, Jaross! Think about me! Spare me your

chattering nonsense about how I should blame myself for making you love me, for making you beat me up, and for making you doubt your masculinity! Next you'll be telling me that it's my fault Thaos tried to drown me and cut out my tongue!"

"Listen to yourself!" Jaross argued back. "I feel badly for your pain, but do you actually believe that your stinging words, your unreasonable anger, and your insulting and insubordinate behavior didn't cause Prince Thaos to lose all reason in his fury with you?"

Jhan was so surprised and horrified, that his grip slipped on the slick leather of the saddle. He overbalanced. The chain between Jhan's manacled wrists caught on the pommel as he fell face down between the riding beasts.

Jhan's baku honked and jumped sideways, panicking. Hanging almost upside down, Jhan swung, the rope Jaross was holding tangling around him as the baku turned to bolt and Jaross' imala whirled to get out of its way. A loop of the rope caught and twisted about Jhan's throat as Jaross frantically tried to get his end unwound from his hand.

Jhan had an instant. An instant that stretched on forever in slow motion as he realized what was about to happen. An instant in which Jhan used every corrupted muscle and joint in his body to twist and flip in a move that would have been impossible for a normal human. Jhan hardly knew how he accomplished the feat and hardly knew he had until he was falling to the ground, free of his manacles and chains.

Jhan shielded his head as the baku honked again, but Jaross had hold of its bridle now, his own imala tightly reined. Bheni was there, on foot and bending down along with Rehn, wide eyed and wanting to know what had happened.

Jhan lowered his arms and straightened, feeling a few pulled muscles and looking at the raw skin on his hands and wrists. His boots were tumbled on the ground near him and his ankles were throbbing and bleeding. "I don't know," Jhan heard himself mumbling in shock. "I fell, I guess, right out of the manacles. Luckily they were larger than they looked!"

Bheni slowly unwound the rope from around Jhan's neck. Jhan felt a rope burn there and he reached up and touched it, wincing. "A close thing," Bheni said in dismay. "How did you fall?" she shot a suspicious look at Jaross, but Jaross was sitting on his imala looking as shocked as she was.

"Probably fell asleep in the saddle," Rehn suggested as he looked at the scratches on Jhan's wrists. Both of Jhan's socks were bloodstained and torn. Rehn removed them and worked both ankles back

and forth. "Does this hurt?"

"Gods! They are both broken!" Jaross exclaimed, sickened and putting a hand to his mouth as if he were about to vomit.

Rehn pursed his lips, glancing up at Jaross' hysterics only momentarily. "No, they're not broken, my Lord. Jhan has extra joints. His ankles can bend in any direction, as well as his hands. I can only tell by feel, of course, but it seems that Dagara ripped out all Jhan's larger joints and replaced them with smaller, more intricate ones. I can't begin to imagine what that must have felt like."

"You're lucky that you can't," Jhan interjected tightly. "You wouldn't survive it."

"How did you -" asked Kile as he rode up and dismounted, meaning how Jhan had managed to get out of his chains. He put hands on hips. "What is going on?"

Jhan managed to stand, but he limped as he walked to his baku. Talking to it soothingly, he pulled the manacles from the saddle and threw them aside. Mounting stiffly, Jhan almost allowed himself to sigh in relief as he sat the saddle the way a person was meant to.

Jhan shot an acid look at Jaross. "It's all *my* fault, of course. Sorry to disturb everyone by nearly hanging *myself*. I'll try not to cause anything else to happen to me in the future."

"Lord Jaross caused this then." Bheni surmised as she straightened and put a hand on the hilt of her sword. "I cannot allow such things to go on, Lord Kile! I demand justice! I demand honor and decency! I demand that you allow Rehn and I to watch over Jhan from now until we reach Pekarín! We will keep any more such incidents from occurring if you give us the authority."

Kile ran a hand over his face irritably, not wanting any of this. "I can't," he replied. "If even chains won't hold Jhan, then I have to guard him. I'm the only one who is trained enough in the style Jhan uses to have any hope of stopping him if he chooses to escape."

Jaross was looking at Kile and his thoughts were plain on his face. Jhan went pale, anger forgotten to be replaced by the fear of Jaross' foolish tongue. Kile noticed Jaross' expression as well.

"What is it, Lord Jaross?" Kile demanded impatiently. "I won't allow any argument about this."

Everything inside of Jhan tightened, ready to flinch and heart ready to break. Jaross glanced at him only briefly, but his expression of disgust was instantly replaced by resignation. He shrugged. "It is nothing, Lord Kile. I agree with your orders."

Selfish and self centered, Jaross could have said a million things and never felt a twinge of regret

or responsibility for it. That he had chosen to say nothing, spoke to the depths of his disturbance.

Kile mounted his imala. "Can you ride, Jhan? Are you injured?"

Rehn handed Jhan's socks and boots up to him and Jhan slowly put them on, feeling bruises and scrapes acutely. One of his wrists was slow in bending and a finger throbbed in time to his heartbeat. "I'm fine, just unnerved by the experience."

"We should rest," Bheni suggested.

"No," both Jhan and Kile said at the same time. They looked at each other and Jhan finished the thought. "I'm fine. I'm sure Kile doesn't want to spare me any more travel time."

"We can't afford it," Kile was actually apologetic. "The snows are only getting deeper and Dagara's army is too close for comfort. Besides, the less time that I have to have a crown prince in chains, the better I'll feel."

Bheni rummaged in one of her packs and came back with a small jar of salve. She handed it up to Jhan and her face echoed her worry. "You know how to use this, Jhan. It will numb the pain," she paused and then rushed on, determined to say what she had to but not liking it at all. "You must be more careful, Jhan. You must be meek and agreeable and do all that you are told without making trouble! If you do not, I fear, at this rate, that you will not even make it to the Ankar Road! Save your strength. Hoard it like a miser, Jhan!"

"She's right," Rehn agreed, open face full of concern. "Once we reach the snows, it will be brutal. I -" Rehn looked away and swallowed and Jhan felt alarm grip him. "Bheni's right. You will need to be well, whole, and possessed of all your strength or you will not survive it."

That was blunt and Jhan believed that it wasn't an exaggeration. He looked sideways at Kile as the man bent to gather up the rope Rehn handed him. He reached out and tied one end to Jhan's baku and the other end to his own saddle.

"So, you're taking me on a trip that I may not survive," Jhan accused quietly. "You're risking so many lives for this nonsense! Why, Kile? Why not just turn your back and let me go? You know that this is wrong."

"Kings can be very insular," Kile replied abruptly and gave Jhan a measured look with his blue eyes. "They live behind walls like a spider at the center of a web. All information comes to them and they make decisions and formulate plans based on that information. King Torian demanded your return in payment for his troops, but there may be other reasons King Tekhal wants you back. I don't know. I

can't question because I don't know. I can only carry out my orders and hope that my King knows what he's doing."

Kile led Jhan to the head of the company and Jhan couldn't find fault with Kile's reasoning. He could find fault with being forced to comply to Tekhal's orders. It didn't matter to Jhan whether Tekhal had a good reason or not for having him return to Pekarín. It should have been his decision to return willingly.

The company started out and Kile became alert and attentive to everything around them. "We should be meeting up with Crelin soon," he murmured more to himself than to Jhan. "If the news is bad."

"Where are we?" Jhan wondered. "How far is it to the road?"

"I think it's better if you don't know the answers to those questions," Kile replied. "It might deter you from trying to escape if you don't know where you are."

Jhan smiled tightly. "Come on, Kile! You know me! Things like that never stop me!"

"Still," Kile replied with a shake of his head and refused to answer.

They didn't meet Crelin and Kile relaxed a little, but he had an air about him that was markedly different from the Kile Jhan was used to. This was the soldier Kile; the commander who had people depending on him. He took it very seriously, Jhan could see, and Jhan felt more secure than he should have knowing that Dagara's men might be anywhere up ahead.

Riding was much easier for Jhan now that he could sit astride the baku and lean over its neck to rest. When they stopped for the night, he was able to get off by himself. Jhan attempted to walk over to where Bheni and Rehn were tending their animals, but Kile pulled him up short.

"You're staying by my side at all times," Kile told Jhan firmly. "And when I'm indisposed, I will have men stand by you with drawn swords. Bheni and Rehn are your friends. I don't trust Bheni not to help you escape and Rehn... he is easily talked into anything."

"But -" Jhan was wide eyed. "I'm not going to let you- I have to change! This robe is filthy and I don't like it! I have to wash as well! I don't want you or those other men gawking at me!"

Kile was just as uncomfortable as Jhan, but he wasn't going to give any quarter. "Get together what you need and we will go a little ways outside of camp. I will manage not to impose on your modesty."

Jaross was in earshot. He stopped in mid stride and turned to look at them, face red and eyes narrowed as he twisted the lead of his imala. The beast snorted and stamped impatiently beside him. Everything in Jhan tightened, waiting, but, in the end, Jaross was uncharacteristically silent. He turned and led his beast away, head down in thought.

Jhan let out a silent breath and then threw up his hands angrily. "All right! I'll get my things!"

Kile hadn't expected Jhan to give in so easily. It was almost worth it to see his startled expression, but the situation was far too uncomfortable for Jhan to find any humor in it. Jhan leaned down by Bheni and began rummaging through the pack Falala had given him.

"Good. You are beginning to smell," Bheni said, breaking off her conversation with Rehn and turning. "That robe you are wearing was not fresh when you put it on."

Jhan scowled. "Thanks, I didn't need someone to tell me that."

Rehn was anxious. "I'll ask Kile to let me guard you while you change."

"We've already discussed that," Jhan replied sourly. "He's decided to be my personal guard and he won't let anyone else do it."

"How will you change then?" Rehn wondered. "I know how you feel about such things."

"Kile says that we will work it out." Jhan made a face at some of the dresses. They were definitely for someone under the age of thirteen, frilly and embroidered with large flowers. Two were passable, gray with a light green tunic and green with a gray tunic. Both were meant for outdoor play, Jhan surmised, and hadn't been touched with any embellishments.

Jhan chose the green dress with the gray tunic and discovered some under things to go with it. Piling them on one arm, Jhan took the small bucket of water Bheni had been using and the rag she handed up to him.

"I could ask Kile again," Rehn suggested, unwilling to give up.

"Thank you, Rehn, but no. He can be as stubborn as I can and we both know how bad that can be." Jhan turned and began walking back to Kile with his burden. Jaross stopped him halfway there, jaw working and red all the way to his ears.

"What is going on?" Jaross demanded through gritted teeth.

Jhan glared at him. "I don't know exactly what you're implying, but I think that you have a dirty mind, Jaross. I'm going to clean up and change and Kile is going to guard me while I do it."

“That is unacceptable!” Jaross bit out and Jhan was confused by the anger in his eyes.

Kile came forward, chin set as if he knew that there was going to be trouble. “Something wrong, Lord Jaross?”

Jhan handed the bucket and rag to Kile and shifted the dress and underthings in his arms. “It seems that Jaross finds this as unacceptable as I do.”

“Why?” Kile asked simply, golden eyebrows raised.

“Because he is- because you -” Jaross stammered and went even redder, hands balling into fists. “You can’t trust him! You shouldn’t go alone with him!”

Kile was confused, but firm. “I assure you, Lord Jaross, that I can hold my own against Jhan, at least long enough for help to arrive.”

“I should go as well,” Jaross insisted.

Jhan was surprised by Kile’s answer. Cool and collected, it was nonetheless meant to judge. “Jhan is very modest, as you can imagine, Lord Jaross. After having stripped him naked before everyone, I think that you can remember clearly how he reacted. I can handle this situation both modestly and securely. Don’t have any more fears on that account.”

Kile led Jhan away and out of camp before Jaross could formulate a reply. Jhan smiled grimly. “You managed to leave him speechless. I owe you one.”

Kile chose a secluded spot and put bucket and rag down at Jhan’s feet. Jhan stood uncertainly. There was a long silence and then Kile coughed uncomfortably.

“Well,” Jhan broke the silence nervously. “How do propose to make this... modest?”

Kile shrugged. “I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Jhan’s jaw dropped. “What? Well, that’s it then! We’re going back to camp. If you think I’m going to let you gawk at me, you have another thing coming!”

Kile stopped Jhan with a raised hand. “Let’s just think about this. I could promise to only look at the top of your head.”

Jhan crossed his arms over the clothes in his hands. “Somehow, I don’t think that you’re as chivalrous as Jaross when it comes to such things.”

Kile was startled. “I don’t understand.”

“When we traveled alone,” Jhan explained, “He never tried to look when I undressed.”

Kile snorted. “You don’t know men very well, Jhan. He looked. He was just... oh,” Kile stopped as if someone had hit him on the back of the head. “I see. If he *had* looked, he would have known much earlier what you were. Well, he is honorable, I’ll give him that, but I can be trusted to keep my word as well.”

“You could just turn around,” Jhan suggested reasonably. “Or hold your cloak up so that you can’t see.”

Kile shook his head. “No, I have to be able to see you. You might try and take me by surprise.”

“Why should I trust you when you won’t even trust me?” Jhan exploded. “You know I would never hurt you, Kile!”

Kile seemed taken aback by Jhan’s forceful certitude. “I’m relieved to hear it, but this is all very ridiculous, Jhan. Whatever you pretend, you are a man! I’m not interested in anything that you have under that robe!”

“I’d be disappointed if you were,” Jhan returned softly and turned his back so that Kile couldn’t see the anguish on his face.

“Jhan,” Kile sighed and tried again. “This situation is very confusing and awkward. You believe you’re a woman and you’re reacting like a woman. I’m not offended, but you have to inject a little reason into your fantasy. I have to guard you. You have to attend to your needs. There isn’t room, at this moment, for your delusion.”

Jhan nodded stiffly, took a breath for strength, and began to undress. Jhan felt hot with humiliation and ready to weep, but he kept breathing long and deep and concentrating on the task at hand.

Jhan washed off first, moving quickly. It wasn’t bone chilling cold, but the sun was sinking fast and it soon would be. Jhan felt Kile’s eyes on him and he went even hotter, knowing that the man had forgotten his promise already. “Satisfy your curiosity or did you get a good enough look when Jaross had me stripped?”

Silence, and then Kile decided not to deny it. “You’ve grown. I suppose that it caught my attention. You look less like a child now.”

“More like a man?” Jhan shot back as he began pulling on his under garments and then slipping the dress over his head, settling the folds down around him. The tunic went over that, thick and warm

like velvet. Jhan laced it tightly with angry jerks of his fingers.

“You know that you don’t,” Kile replied at last, uncomfortable. “It is a shame -” and he stopped.

“What?” Jhan prompted, not turning just yet. He braided his short hair to get it out of his eyes and tied it off with a small strip of leather.

“Well,” Kile went on haltingly. “I don’t think that you’ll ever remember being Jhanian Kevelt. You’ll always think that you’re a woman, possessing the Prince’s body. Dagara made you as close to a woman as possible, to be cruel I’m sure, but it is a shame he didn’t complete the task entirely.”

Jhan turned and Kile blinked, looking Jhan up and down and continuing, stumbling even more on his words. “You are beautiful, Jhan. Perfect. Any man’s ideal. But for that one part of you, things would be normal for you. You could live a real life, not this shadowy madness that is ruining you and destroying your family along with you.”

“Strange choice of words,” Jhan replied huskily, chin going up and anger snapping in his eyes. “You wish Dagara had made me a woman instead of never attempting it to begin with. I think that would have gone a longer way to healing my ‘family’.” Jhan shook his head and his mouth twisted bitterly. “If you only knew what Dagara would have had to do to accomplish your wish -”

“Not *my* wish!” Kile interjected hurriedly and he straightened, regaining composure and maybe some of his wits. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I guess that I’m just tired and babbling because we are both embarrassed. I didn’t mean to stare after I said that I wouldn’t. It won’t happen again.”

Jhan suddenly reached out a hand and touched Kile’s neck. He allowed it, frowning. “You’re dead.”

Kile went wide eyed. “What?”

Jhan lowered his hand. It was trembling. “I could have killed you right then and there and run into the trees. I’m very fast, probably because of some extra backbone Dagara gave me and some reinforced ankles. No one would have been able to find me.”

Kile stepped back, swallowing and putting a hand to the hilt of his sword. “Why didn’t you? I know how frightened you are of Dagara and his men. I know that you’ll do anything to avoid them.”

“Not anything,” Jhan replied carefully. “And we both know why I won’t hurt you, Kile, even though you want to deny it.”

“You love me still, I know,” Kile replied just as carefully. “I can see it in your eyes.”

“And?” Jhan prompted, daring Kile’s anger and maybe goading violence.

“And nothing,” Kile shrugged, voice going hard. “I don’t know what you expect me to say.”

Jhan smiled bitterly. “I can see just as clearly as you can.”

Kile was too stubborn for that kind of directness. “I’ve told you that you don’t offend me. I know that it’s just your madness making you speak this way. I can ignore it. I have been ignoring it.”

Jhan pulled at his tunic and looked down at his dress. It covered his ankles and swished just shy of his heels. “Ignore me or ignore how you feel about me?”

Kile gritted his teeth and then spoke through them. “You are a man! How could I love you?”

“Jaross found it easy,” Jhan taunted. “He’s still having trouble with it.”

“He’s just a boy,” Kile growled, dismissive.

“A jealous boy,” Jhan amended for him, looking up again. “Why do you think he wanted to escort us out here?”

“What did you tell him?” Kile demanded hotly.

“Nothing,” Jhan replied. “He guessed my feelings for you and he didn’t like it. I was afraid he’d say something in front of everyone and you’d react badly. I told him that you weren’t returning my affections.”

“Then he’s a thekling?” Kile wondered distastefully.

“No, I don’t think so. He’s somewhat confused by it,” Jhan replied.

Kile wasn’t disgusted, just matter of fact and very uncomfortable. “I trained with Narin in Pekarín. He’s never made any secret of his preferences. I grew used to him and his ways, but I am still uncomfortable with the thought.”

“I can tell,” Jhan sighed and then threw up his hands in despair. “I’m sorry, Kile. I’m making a mess of things. My temper again! I’m not a thekling. Jaross isn’t a thekling. You’re certainly not a thekling. I’m just confused and confusing everyone else!”

It was safe ground and both Jhan and Kile retreated there, nodding and denying what they both knew was the real truth. Kile looked relieved. “Some sense at last,” he sighed. “You never cease tying me up in mental knots, Jhan! Your madness is far too clever in weaving your fantasy. It draws everyone else into it.”

Jhan let it go at that, knowing that he couldn't hope for any kind of admission from Kile. It was all useless anyway. Why admit to something that they both weren't willing to accept. Kile wasn't a thekling and Jhan wasn't about to be one. Their love would never have a meeting point; a consummation. Kile was a man with strong passions and needs. Though Jhan had never felt anything sexual since being forced into Jhanian's body, he could still appreciate such closeness. Neither of them could accept a relationship without it.

They went back into camp and Jhan tried to go over to Bheni and Rehn. Kile gently took hold of Jhan's elbow and led him away to where the soldiers were huddled around a fire. "Sit down," Kile ordered. "Khelan. Get us some food."

A dark haired soldier spooned food from a pot into two bowls and brought them back to Kile. Kile took them and waited for Jhan to comply.

"I'm not going to let you do this," Jhan resisted stubbornly as he tossed the dirty robe off to one side and put hands on hips.

Khelan, a middle aged man with a limp and a scar or two to show on his face, looked Jhan up and down. "What a temper and no respect for your betters! Should I whip her for you, Lord Kile?"

"No!" Kile retorted, incensed. "And Jhan isn't a woman! You know that, Khelan!"

Khelan shook his head and went to sit down. "I don't know what I know. My eyes can't help me, Lord Kile."

Kile made a long suffering face. He put the two bowls of food down and then motioned to a long length of leather. "Give me that, Khelan."

Khelan complied and Kile approached Jhan. He didn't ask, but simply bent to tie Jhan's ankles together with an intricate knot. "Sit down," Kile commanded again and handed Jhan a bowl of food.

Jhan had a notion to throw the bowl into Kile's face and he had the satisfaction of seeing Kile tense, fully expecting that. Unfortunately, Jhan was far too hungry and he feared that he might not be given another. He sat awkwardly and began to eat.

Kile relaxed slowly, suspicious, as he took up his own food and began to eat. Jhan finished quickly and then hurled the bowl at him. It caught Kile in the shoulder, even though he ducked at the last moment.

Thaos laughed, it was rough and unexpected. A shadow among shadows, he stirred and they could

just make out his amused face. “A woman, indeed! I think that you're completely wrong about that, Lord Kile. Who but a woman would choose to throw crockery instead of a punch or a kick? You leave yourself remarkably open to such attacks, Lord Kile!”

Kile was frowning angrily as he wiped a splatter of stew from his sleeve. “I know Jhan, your Highness. I’m in no real danger from him.”

“You have a lot to answer for when we reach Pekarín, Lord Kile,” Thaós warned, all humor falling away. “Don’t add failure of this mission to the list of your problems. If you allow Lady Jhan to escape, I’ll kill you myself!”

Kile’s jaw worked as he took up the leather strip dangling from Jhan’s ankles and brought it up to tie Jhan’s ankles to his wrists behind Jhan’s back. Jhan rolled onto his side, outraged.

“Does it hurt?” Kile wondered tightly as he wove knots.

“Let me go!” Jhan spat back. “I’m not an animal!”

“You’re acting like one!” Kile shouted back so loudly that Jhan was silenced. Kile looked about the camp at all the watching eyes and then sighed as he crouched down by Jhan. “This isn’t easy for me, Jhan. You haven’t done anything to deserve this mess, but we both have to make the best of it. I have to be absolutely sure that you won’t escape. What Prince Thaós is saying is true. I have to bring you back if I’m to have any hope of explaining all of this and saving our lives.”

“I hope you aren’t about to ask me to cooperate or to try and like it, are you?” Jhan snarled. “Because I won’t, I don’t, and I will make the journey back as hard as possible, Lord Kile!”

“Lord Kile,” that was Jaross, face serious as he stood close by. His hands were balled into fists as if he were holding himself back with an effort. “This seems excessive. Jhan will come to harm bound like that all night.”

“It does look... cruel, Kile,” Rehn interjected. He was standing by Bheni and they both looked ready to jump in and intervene. “I know Jhan brings out the worst in people, but surely you know this isn’t right?”

“I will not allow this, Lord Kile,” Bheni added. “It is barbarous! Allow me to stand guard, switching off with you. That way Jhan will not need such bonds.”

Kile didn’t lose his temper. He understood their concerns. “Jhan, are you hurt?”

Jhan wanted to lie and say yes, but he could feel the tenuous hold Kile had on command. He didn’t

really have the rank and he was young compared to several of his own soldiers. Having bound a prince and usurped his place, Kile couldn't afford to be undermined by Jhan.

"I'm not hurt," Jhan replied loudly enough for everyone to hear. "I can stay this way all night and it won't harm me. I'm not- not like any of you, remember? The Dark King changed me."

"Jhan will sleep among the soldiers and I will have my sword ready," Kile explained matter-of-factly as he put down blankets for himself and Jhan. "It's the only way to be certain that he won't escape."

"It still doesn't feel right, Kile," Rehn argued and he looked concerned. "You can't treat Jhan this roughly. He's strong in certain ways, but in the ways that are most important, he's not. He's definitely not, Kile."

"Are you speaking of his mind, Rehn?" Kile guessed as he sat down and tied the loose end of the leather strip around his own wrist.

"You've seen how it is with him," Rehn reminded Kile. "This sort of thing will unbalance him."

"Stop talking as if I weren't here!" Jhan snapped and rolled to look at them both. "I appreciate your concern, Rehn, really I do, but all that I want to do now is sleep! You're both keeping me from it with your arguing! Let's discuss it in the morning, all right?"

Rehn looked as if he had been slapped. "I'm just worried about you, Jhan."

"I know, Rehn! I'm sorry! I just can't think anymore and I'm too tired to shout." Jhan rolled back over and gave them his back. "Kile is doing what he thinks he has to. I'll explain the error of his ways to him tomorrow."

"I am certain that you will." Bheni chuckled grimly at Jhan's brave face. "I do not envy you, Lord Kile."

They walked away and Jhan sighed in exhaustion and closed his eyes, determined to escape into sleep. Kile's voice came to him hazily. "Thank you, Jhan. I know that you did that for me. It can't have been easy."

"I didn't do anything for you!" Jhan growled. "I really do need to sleep!"

"As you will, my Lady." That was the barest whisper and Jhan wondered if he had really heard it at all as he tumbled into sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

(Crossings)

“Come out and play, General Kevelt!” a harsh voice laughed.

Jhan whimpered and retreated further under the stinking cot he was hiding under. His back pressed up against a wall and there was no where else to go. Booted feet lined up all along the front of the cot and the ends of the clubs the men held rested beside them on the floor.

“I told you chasing him was no kind of sport!” Another man cursed. “King made him too fast and little.”

“Crawl under and get our General out then, Kivik!”

“And get my neck snapped? No thank you!”

“Drive him out then?” Yet another man suggested.

There were grunts of assent. The clubs began pounding the stone floor in a deafening rhythm as two came under the cot and began shoving brutally into Jhan’s body. The pounding became Jhan’s world, every nerve shredding and every ounce of humanity stripped away by fear.

“He’s going to kill you, Lord Kile!” Why was Jaross in this nightmare? Jhan wondered blearily.

It caught Jhan’s attention as nothing else could have. The sound of the drumming clubs receded and the fabric of the dream ripped and spun away. A hand was caressing Jhan’s hair, gently and persistently. He could hear a strong heartbeat in his ear and something warm and alive was pressed against him emanating safety; protection against the savage men of his dream.

“It’s all right, Jhan,” it sounded like Kile’s voice, but it was raspy and breathless. “No one’s going to hurt you. You were just dreaming. Please, let me go.”

Let him go? Jhan’s arms tightened about the warm presence beneath him and someone whimpered and groaned.

“I’ll slit his throat, Lord Kile,” a soldier suggested anxiously. “He won’t feel a thing. He’ll never know -”

“No!” Kile and Rehn protested together.

“I may be able to hit him,” Bheni suggested tightly. “He might be rendered unconscious before he

could react.”

“Don’t you see!” Jaross was loud and agitated. “This is how he killed Captain Jaryn! He squeezed the man until his bones snapped! He’s doing the same thing to you, Lord Kile! Let us deal with him before he kills you!”

“No!” Kile gasped again. “I think Jhan’s coming around.”

Reality reasserted itself slowly. Jhan became aware of little things; the hard buttons of Kile’s coat beneath him and the strong smell of the man’s sweat. The man’s calloused hand was still stroking Jhan’s hair and face while the other shook his shoulder gently in an effort to rouse Jhan from his nightmare. Finally, Jhan became aware that he was trembling violently, his teeth clenched into his bottom lip and his arms locked about Kile’s broad chest with the strength of a boa constrictor.

Jhan opened his eyes and found himself staring at Kile’s chin. The man was lying on his back and Jhan was on top of him, blankets tumbled aside and the remnants of Jhan’s leather bonds hanging about them both.

“Jhan, let go!” Rehn begged. “You are about to crush Kile’s ribs. Can you hear me? Please, Little Lady, don’t do this to my friend!”

Jhan slowly raised himself up on his arms, loosening his hold. Two things happened at once. Kile shoved Jhan violently off of him, taking advantage of his confusion, and Jhan saw the soldiers standing nearby in their red uniforms. The sound of the drumming clubs came back to Jhan in a rush and he used the momentum of Kile’s shove to roll to his feet and begin running, screaming against the horrors in his nightmare.

It was Thaos who tripped him up. The man rose up over his sprawled body and swung his chains around to come crashing down on Jhan’s head. Jaross caught them at the last possible moment and deflected them over Jhan’s body as he threw Thaos off balance.

Jhan tried to get up to run again, blinded by fear, but Rehn caught his hands and held him tightly. “Look at me, Little Lady!” Rehn demanded, but his voice was gentle. “Tell me what you’re seeing!”

“No escape!” Jhan sobbed. “I’m under the bed, but they’ll pull me out and... let me go! Oh God, let me go!” He pulled his hands away from Rehn and covered his ears. “Make them stop!”

“Stop what?” Rehn asked, wrapping hands in Jhan’s dress like an anchor.

“The sound! They’re pounding their clubs against the floor! Make them stop!” Jhan huddled in on

himself, blood running from his savaged lip and eyes dark holes that looked on hell. “Kile!” Jhan shrieked his name as the man’s face came swimming towards him like a bright beacon in the darkness. “Don’t let them hurt me!”

“What can I do?” Kile asked confusedly as he crouched by Rehn with a drawn sword, concerned for the safety of his friend.

“Make them go away!” Jhan reached out, but Kile flinched.

“You’re dreaming, Jhan!” Kile told him, no nonsense and firm. “You’re with us, with Thaos, Rehn, Jaross, Bheni... Look around you and you’ll see that I’m telling the truth.”

Jhan couldn’t see, couldn’t understand. He couldn’t rise above the nightmare. It was pulling him back under, whimpering and sobbing like a damned soul. Kile was like a shining angel before him, denying him salvation.

“Step away!” Kile shouted at the soldiers at last. “He’s afraid of you. Go over there, behind those trees!”

“Lord Kile!” Jaross protested, voice full of disbelief.

Jhan felt strong arms around him, pinning his arms against his sides effectively. Kile pulled Jhan into his lap and held him there like a child while Jhan wept. “There!” Kile said, uncomfortably playing to Jhan’s dream. “I’ve driven them away. They won’t hurt you any longer.”

It seemed foolish, but Jhan found the strength in Kile’s simple words to escape the clutches of the nightmare. The darkness parted and Jhan blinked against sunlight, finding himself looking through tears at Kile’s face. With the sunlight behind him, he was the most wonderful sight that Jhan had ever seen. Smiling in wonder, despite his swelling lip, Jhan began reaching up to touch that beautiful vision above him.

“True to your word, you are making this journey as difficult as possible,” Kile growled softly, jerking his face away from Jhan’s touch; impatient and embarrassed.

Jhan’s hand paused and then lowered as he frowned. Jhan came fully awake in a disorienting moment of time and looked about them with wide, confused eyes. “What happened?”

Jhan was suddenly sitting on the ground instead of Kile’s lap and Kile was rising, sheathing his sword and motioning impatiently for others to do the same. “I think Jhan has finally come to his senses. Explain our rude awakening to Jhan, won’t you, Rehn? I don’t trust myself to speak right now.”

Jhan wiped at his eyes, watching as Kile lifted up his shirt, hissing in pain, to awkwardly look at his torso. Kile's fingers gingerly probed purpling red bruises where Jhan's hands had dug into flesh. Jhan raised those hands to his mouth in horror. "Did I do that?"

"Yes," Rehn replied and rubbed at his face wearily. "Sometime, during the night, you managed to get out of your bonds and curl up with Lord Kile. Knowing you, I would have thought that an unlikely thing, but I also know Kile. The idea of him initiating such a thing, while you slept, is a hundred times more unlikely. Anyhow, you had a nightmare and tried to crush Kile with your arms. We have just spent a harrowing hour trying to get you to release Kile without having to kill you."

Bheni crouched beside them, holding a bucket of water in tense hands. "I thought dousing you with cold water might have waked you."

Jhan stared at the bucket dazedly as the trembling overtook his body again. "If you had, Bheni, I would have killed Kile. They used to do that, pour freezing or boiling water on me until my skin came off. Hitting me on the head would have been a better idea."

Bheni went limp with shock, bucket tumbling from her hands and contents gushing out onto the ground. "I- I cannot imagine, Jhan! Such horror! How do you live with it?"

"Stubborn," Rehn replied for Jhan grimly and flicked Jhan's dress away from the pooling water. "Jhan's far too angry and stubborn to give up!"

Jhan crossed arms over his chest to hold himself against the trembling. "You're right, I suppose, but this nightmare was very bad. I thought, after I was made to remember everything, that I wouldn't have them again."

Bheni righted the bucket with a clang, hand white knuckled on the rim and dark face set in anger. "This journey! This is not good for you or anyone! I see no point in it at all! You should be released, Jhan! You do not deserve this!"

Kile overheard and he turned to them, lowering his shirt. "How can we keep him?" Kile wondered in defeat. They all looked at him and Thaos straightened, eyes like daggers. "Jhan has broken leather ropes and slipped out of iron manacles. I don't see how we can keep him against his will unless we kill him and I don't see how we can even do that without losing men trying to attempt it!"

"What are you saying?" Thaos demanded, completely taken by surprise.

Kile gestured roughly at Jhan, face distraught, but certain. "Go. Get your things and leave. I won't kill you and I won't let anyone die to keep you!"

Jhan stood shakily, eyes wide and disbelieving. Kile had swung the cage door open, but there remained to be seen whether he held a whip and a chair. Bheni reacted quicker and more trustingly.

"I'll gather your things, Jhan," Bheni offered. "If we leave now, we should be in Alatha within the week."

"And then what?" Jhan wondered distantly, staring into Kile's eyes. "Let everyone go to Pekarín and be locked up or killed?" Kile was amazed. It made Jhan bitter. "All that I ever wanted was to be free to chose, Kile. If you had just trusted me, asked me instead of demanded, you would have found out that I wouldn't let anyone die for saving me. I'm going to Pekarín. It's the only thing that I can do now."

Kile's relief was obvious. Thaós spat aside in disgust. Jaross nodded approvingly. Rehn was shaking. Bheni accepted the decision as an honorable act. Only Jhan knew that he was sacrificing himself. Whether on the alter of Torian and Thaós or the Dark King and his men had yet to be determined, but Jhan knew that he couldn't do anything less. Despite his terror, Jhan knew that there wasn't any safety for him, even in Alatha. They would find him, in the end, and it would all turn out the same. It was better to choose to be noble and to at least save the lives of his friends and the man that he loved.

"I only ask one thing," Jhan dared and Kile stiffened, mouth going into a hard line. "Release Thaós."

"You cannot mean that!" Bheni protested, but Jhan ignored her.

"Those manacles are very harsh, Kile," Jhan argued. "Thaós can't wear them all the way to Pekarín. I think, as long as I am going willingly and you watch him closely, that we can all walk freely. This is important to me, Kile. I can't stand to see even Thaós a prisoner. I know what it's like all too well."

Kile was reluctant, but he nodded. He approached Thaós slowly, hand pulling out the key to the manacles from a pocket. "Prince Thaós," Kile warned. "Jhan has made this request for you and I hope that you appreciate it enough to give him peace. You are still under the guard of my soldiers and I am still in command until we reach Pekarín. I will not, forgive me, your Highness, but I will not tolerate any violence on your part."

Thaós stood silently, saying nothing in reply, his chin raised and his eyes molten blue. Kile nervously unlocked the manacles and then stepped back as Thaós threw them aside with a violent

motion of one hand. “How you make them dance!” Thaos ground out at last to Jhan. “See how they hang on your every word and believe this sweet lie you weave!”

“Which part do you think I’m lying about?” Jhan wondered wearily.

“We’re going in the direction that you wish. Why should you leave us now?” Thaos pointed out.

Jhan shook his head in disbelief, face twisting at the painful memories Thaos would never guess at. “If you’re suggesting that I want to run into the Dark King... That I want to go back to him... I don’t see your logic.”

“Dagara controls you. You are his creature,” Thaos said and then skewered everyone with his eyes. “He can’t help but go back to Dagara! He’s only begging for my release so that you believe his lies more readily!”

“I’m sorry that makes sense to you, Thaos, but it isn’t even a little bit true.” Jhan sighed and turned back to Kile. “We should get going before I have a chance to rethink my decision.”

“About Thaos or about returning to Pekarín?” Kile wondered absently, hand on his sword hilt as he watched Thaos closely.

“Both,” Jhan replied honestly and went to gather his things.

“So, when do we reach this Ankar Road?” Jhan wondered after a few hours of travel.

Bheni and Rehn both exchanged looks. “You do not have a very good sense of direction,” Bheni observed.

Rehn fiddled nervously with the reins of his imala and then gave Jhan a guilty look. “Kile told us that it was best that you didn’t know.”

Jhan looked down at the wide, gravelly track passing under the hooves of his baku. “Let me guess, we’re already on the Ankar Road and headed North.”

“Yes,” Rehn admitted. “We turned wide of Lake Rheho and now the Vaha River is on our left. We’ll soon be crossing the river and skirting the Telaga Mountains. Kile hopes to ford the river instead of using the usual crossing. He’s not certain who holds it, the enemy or the Petrathi.”

“I wish that someone would trust me,” Jhan complained, deeply pained.

“Kile.” Rehn guessed with a nod.

“All of you,” Jhan snarled back. “You could have told me. Bheni could have told me.” Jhan looked accusingly at the woman, but she was unapologetic.

“You fear the enemy to the very depths of your being.” Bheni was blunt. “I knew that telling you we were so close would unsettle you.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Jhan muttered. “Just how close are we?”

Rehn swallowed and then said through a wince. “A day.”

The familiar chill settled about Jhan. He saw shadows snapping at him out of the corners of his eyes. His hands longed to pull the reins of his baku and turn its head, forcing it to flee in the opposite direction. Keeping himself still made Jhan shudder. He kept silent, struggling with himself, as sweat trickled down his face and sides despite the cold air. After an hour brought him even closer to the reality of his nightmares, Jhan couldn’t manage the fear on his own. He kicked his baku and loped the beast further up the line of riders, headed for Kile.

A hand snagged the bridle of Jhan’s baku and the beast honked and tossed its head as it broke its stride and fell in beside Thaos and his imala. Thaos’s dark face and his angry eyes were the last thing that Jhan needed.

“You haven’t escaped, demon,” Thaos warned. “I will convince them in the end and you will be executed in Pekarín.”

Jhan was shaking now from head to foot and tears were starting from his eyes. One of the soldiers nearest Thaos, a brown haired man with a round face and a shaggy beard, shoved Jhan’s baku away from Thaos’s imala with his foot. Thaos lost his grip on the bridle of Jhan’s baku abruptly.

“Sorry, Highness, but I have my orders,” the soldier apologized nervously.

“That won’t be a defense before King Tekhal or my father Torian,” Thaos promised.

Jhan didn’t want to see the soldiers’ frightened faces or hear his response. He urged his baku onward again and came up beside Kile. The man looked at him in surprise and then his jaw set and he looked away. “Rehn was never good at keeping secrets.”

“It shouldn’t have been one.” Jhan kept from sobbing it out, but his voice was still quavering. “Why won’t you trust me? I told you that I was willing to go back!”

“How do you feel, now that you know?” Kile wondered, but his tone said that he already knew the

answer and he didn't wait for Jhan to confirm it. "If I had been tortured, as you had, I would be running as fast and as hard as I could in the opposite direction. I can't even think about what must have happened to you. It sickens me! That dream you had, and the way that you described it, made my hair stand on end. Despite all of that, I can't apologize for still wanting you to return to Pekarín. We need you and we can't afford for you to change your mind, Jhan. I was trying to keep you from regretting your decision until it was too late to go back."

"I need you to make me a promise," Jhan replied, cutting through Kile's guilty recitation impatiently and ignoring Kile's bewilderment.

Kile was sitting up higher than Jhan on his tall imala. His expression as he looked down at Jhan was suddenly guarded and Jhan knew, just by that hesitation, that Kile would keep this promise. "Tell me what it is," Kile said at last and his voice was tight with suspicion and concern.

Jhan wiped at his tear filled eyes and firmed his resolve to ask it. "One thing will get me past those bastards and on the way to Pekarín." Jhan's eyes locked with Kile's and he put all of that resolve where Kile could see it. "Give me a knife."

"No!" Kile's eyes widened in alarm, knowing that Jhan wasn't asking for the knife to defend himself.

"Kile." Jhan paused, swallowing hard, and then decided to be blunt. "They tortured me every single day I was with them. All day. All night. I was like a bone being fought over; tossed back and forth between Dagara, his soldiers, and even the men who guarded my cell. The closer we get to the men who did that to me, the worse my fear will become. I need a promise and a weapon."

"What promise?" Kile demanded, looking ill.

"That, if it seems that Dagara or his men will capture us, and I fail in trying to kill myself, that you will promise to do it for me."

Kile was shocked, going white and tight lipped. He was a long time in replying. "I've never been put to such a test, Jhan." Kile was honest and his voice shook a little at the edges. "I don't know if I can promise you that I'll be able to do it when the time comes."

"Promise," Jhan insisted. "Or I'll turn my baku around right now. I don't want to see you die in Pekarín, but I know that I'll never be able to face the road without your promise."

Kile's eyes darted about them as if he searched for some reason, some other option to avoid what Jhan was demanding of him. Finally, his face conceded defeat. "I promise, on my honor," Kile replied

as firmly as he could. He held Jhan's eyes as he said it and Jhan believed him.

Jhan held out a trembling hand. Kile took off his knife, sheathe and all, from around his waist and handed it to Jhan. Jhan clasped it to him and allowed his back to fall back, unwilling for Kile to see his fear and relief.

"What did you speak about?" Jaross demanded as Jhan came even with his imala. "Why did he give you a weapon? You *are* a weapon!"

Jhan belted on the knife and settled it comfortably with a steadier hand. He glared at Jaross. "Why are you still with us?" Jhan wondered, sidestepping Jaross' question. "I thought that you would be long gone back to Petrath by now."

"I'm reluctant to say," Jaross replied uncertainly, and then realization hit him. "If you have that knife to kill yourself if we are attacked, I don't want to be the one to tell you bad news."

Jhan felt as if a slow fire were burning under his skin. "Tell me, Jaross."

"Lord Kile doesn't trust you very much, does he?" It was Jaross' jealousy that made him thoughtless and vindictive at Jhan's expense. "Your honor means nothing to him. You swore to save him and his men, but he still won't believe you."

"Kile knows how much that's worth if I become really frightened," Jhan bit back. "He knows me better than you do."

Jaross frowned, shaking his head. "I think that you're wrong about that. I don't think that he knows anything about you. Have you really told him that you love him? Maybe I should ask. Then we'll see how much he truly cares about you."

"He knows," Jhan insisted, angrily taking pleasure in deflecting Jaross' plan. "He's known since we were in Pekarín."

"Then why are you still in one piece?" Jaross looked disappointed to have lost this wedge between Jhan and Kile.

"He thinks of me as a silly child," Jhan replied sourly and his own words stung him painfully. "If you want to know, he thinks the same thing about you."

Jhan was unprepared for Jaross' fury. The man actually put a hand to the hilt of his sword as if he were going to ride up and challenge Kile at once. "How dare he -"

"Wait!" Jhan shouted and Jaross froze in surprise as Jhan actually reached out to grip Jaross' hand

on his sword. Jaross looked down at it and flushed. Jhan quickly withdrew it and balled it into a fist. "What is it you want from me, Jaross?"

Jaross went very still and then his hand dropped from his sword. His eyes looked everywhere but at Jhan. "I don't know," he admitted. "but, when I see you with Kile, talking to him and so easy with him, I can barely control myself. I want to kill him!"

"What do you want from me?" Jhan insisted again.

Jaross shrugged, agitated. "The same thing that you want from Kile, I suppose, and know you can never have." Jaross looked at Jhan at last and his eyes were full of pain and longing. "I would give anything for you to be a real woman, Jhan."

Jaross had whispered the last and no one heard but Jhan. Jhan's eyes had gone wide, not understanding how Jaross could have changed so much from the noble and honorable young man of their first journey, to this dark and angry knot of confusion.

"When Kile looks at me, he sees only a man," Jhan replied clearly and steadily. "He will always see a man, because that is what I really am. Kile doesn't deal with feelings and fantasies. He knows better than to indulge in wishful thinking. Whatever he feels for me will never matter next to what he knows the truth to be. You should ascribe to some of Kile's philosophy of life."

Jhan reined his baku to fall back to the end of the line where Rehn and Bheni were still riding. "What did Kile say?" Rehn asked. "Did he blame me for letting you find out where we are?"

Jhan blinked, not understanding, and then he sighed, remembering what it had all been about to begin with. "I should just stay away from everyone from now on," Jhan replied obliquely.

"I have already suggested that," Bheni reminded him.

"I'm going to listen for once," Jhan replied with new determination.

The river was very low and very cold. They stood along its bank in a ragged, milling line while Kile rode out into the middle. It only came to his imala's knees and that seemed to puzzle Kile. He sat for a long minute while his imala honked and complained bitterly and then Kile shrugged and returned to the bank.

“This is not good,” Thaos said. “I’ve never heard of the Vaha being so low. The snows must be very deep this winter.”

“As I thought as well, Prince Thaos,” Kile responded with automatic deference, but his next comment was barbed. “We must still attempt the journey. King Torian is withholding his troops until our return. Your family has proven itself unbalanced enough that I fear that he will carry out that threat with no regard for our difficulties.”

Thaos sounded very dangerous, his voice a warning. “Have a care, Lord Kile. I may be your prisoner, but I am still a Prince of the Kevelt. Slander my family again and I will have satisfaction.”

Kile gave a bow in his saddle. “Your pardon, your Highness. I misspoke out of weariness and worry about my men.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Jhan said aside to Bheni. “Why is Kile worrying about Torian’s troops when Dagara will be playing down South all Winter?”

Bheni didn’t respond. Rehn looked purposely at the river as if he hadn’t heard. Jhan knew he had and was disturbed.

When the company began filing into the river to cross it, sunlight played in a thatch of red hair. Jhan blinked, realizing that it was the soldier, Crelin. When had he returned?

“Oh, my God!” Jhan exclaimed, understanding in a shattering instant. Rehn reached between their beasts and gripped Jhan’s arms, making Jhan look into his face. “They’re going to Pekarín, aren’t they?” Jhan demanded. “That’s why Jaross is still with us! We’re riding right for them!”

“No!” Rehn corrected urgently. “We’re riding around them, Jhan! Crelin has seen them and reported their position. There’s absolutely no chance that we will run into them! Believe me Jhan. Everything is going to be all right!”

“I don’t understand at all,” Bheni was saying as if Jhan weren’t about to go mad with fear. “Why risk his troops in such weather? How will Dagara supply them? How will he move wagons in the snow and ice? This Dark King is a bad commander.”

“He doesn’t care!” Jhan shouted at her, pulling loose from Rehn. Everyone was looking at him now, some pausing in mid stream to look back. “He’s drunk on blood and Power! He doesn’t care how many men die or how many battles he loses! He just wants to see destruction and know that he’s caused it!”

Thaos was intensely alert. "Do you know this, demon?"

"Yes!" Jhan shouted at him. Jhan remembered Dagara's burning hand cupping his face, trying not to sear his skin, but intrigued by the prospect and the lust to see Jhan suffer, even if it meant marring his creation. Jaded beyond imagining, destruction was the only thing Dagara had left that gave him true pleasure.

"Jhan," Kile broke into Jhan's escalating fear. "Remember! You have your knife and my promise!"

Jhan touched that knife, gripping it with white knuckled hands. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes tightly until his heart stopped its mad pounding. He was armed and he had Kile's promise. Dagara and his men wouldn't have him ever again. The only thing Jhan had to be afraid of was dying and that, strangely, gave him enough comfort to nod and open his eyes.

"I'm all right." Jhan wiped at his eyes and urged his baku into the water. He crossed the river with Bheni in front and Rehn behind, both nervous and solicitous. When everyone was on the further bank, Jhan looked back, feeling that he had crossed a marker of some kind that barred him from ever turning back.

They returned to the road after several miles. Kile sent a man ahead, once again, and a man behind to guard their backs. It made Jhan feel a little easier, knowing that they wouldn't be surprised. Still, he rode silently, hands gripping the reins of his baku and eyes wide, straining to see through the sparse forest all around them.

Everyone in the company was following Jhan's example and the tension was thick. Hands stayed on their weapons and, when anyone spoke at all, it was in hushed, anxious tones.

Nothing happened to disturb the quiet of the day. They made camp by a tumble of rocks and a fallen tree, to hide the light of their fires, and huddled close together. Kile ordered two of the remaining three soldiers to stand guard on the camp's perimeter and made plans to switch off in the night with the third. He had everything so orderly and secure, that Jhan was actually able to sit and not think too long on the danger they were in.

"It's cold." Jhan shivered. Rehn pulled out a thick cape from a pack and threw it over Jhan's shoulders. Jhan huddled into it gratefully as Rehn pulled out other things. Warm shirts, pants, and thick socks.

"I know that you would rather not -" Rehn began, but Jhan took them from him without an argument and stuffed them into his own packs.

“I’m not a child, Rehn,” Jhan replied tightly. “I’ve lived in some cold places. I know how to keep warm.”

“The cold you felt in Pekarín, when you left, was just a taste of what winter is really like there,” Rehn persisted. “Kile and I bought you these things while we were at the inn, but they’re going to seem like nothing against the cold that’s waiting for us. You need to eat as much as you can before we get much farther North. You need to rest and not cause- not leave yourself open to anymore stress or trouble.”

“I know,” Jhan replied. “I told you already, I don’t want anymore trouble. I’m going to stay with the two of you, at the very back of the line, and I’m not going to speak to anyone.”

Bheni made a face as she slipped gloves on her hands and tied their laces at her wrists to make them snug. “I have never seen you silent except when you have been unconscious, Jhan of Pekarín,” she pointed out irritably. “No matter the danger or the consequences, you persist in speaking and using your tongue as someone would a dagger. You have so much anger in you, and with good cause, but it is reason you need to find from now on.”

Bheni lowered her hands and gave Jhan a level look as she continued. “You say that you are not a child, but you are as reckless as one. If you hope to survive this, Jhan, you need to become the adult you claim to be. Forget anger, forget old scores, and old hurts. You do not have the luxury of redressing them now.”

Jhan wanted to shout back angrily, and in realizing it, Jhan saw how right Bheni was. His anger had never changed anything or caused him anything but trouble. At this point, it was endangering his life. He had to do as Bheni suggested; forget about his love for Kile, forget about Jaross’ maddening troubles, forget about Thaos’s dark threat. Jhan knew he had to especially forget about the Dark King and his men. Instead, he had to concentrate entirely on survival.

Jhan nodded and ate the two bowls of meat and vegetables that Rehn pressed on him. When the man handed him a third swimming in grease, Jhan balked. “I know I need to, Rehn, but my stomach is only so large.”

Rehn relented, but he set it close by to give to Jhan later. Bheni took over from there, crushing leaves into a bowl of water she had warmed on the fire and giving it to Jhan to drink. “You need to sleep and this will help you,” she explained.

Jhan drank cautiously, but found it minty and soothing. Wrapping up in blankets, he moved away

from everyone to lie down alone. Rehn and Bheni didn't question him, remembering the episode with Kile all too well. Kile was remembering it too, making his bed with a campfire and the entire company between Jhan and himself. Kile probably slept fitfully even then, but the drug Bheni had given Jhan pulled him into deep sleep and denied him even dreams.

CHAPTER SIX

(Faces)

“If you force me to keep eating like this I’m going to be sick,” Jhan protested, pushing the bowl of food away that Rehn was insisting he take. After two days on the road, snow had begun to fall. The cold at night was sharp and unpleasant, but not unbearable yet. The morning had dawned bright and clear.

Rehn took the bowl back, making an unhappy face. “You haven’t gained any weight at all, as far as I can see. I don’t know where you are putting it, Jhan.”

“I’m not putting it anywhere, Rehn. It’s not staying in at all!” Jhan replied with frustrated embarrassment. “Another nasty trick of Dagara’s probably.”

“Small and light equals quick and deadly,” Thaos growled as he walked by them and heard that part of the conversation. His blue eyes skewered Jhan and Jhan looked away, biting his lip. Thaos walked on and Jhan let out a sigh.

“I hate that Jaross was actually right about something,” Jhan said absently.

Rehn looked up from the bridle he had picked up to mend, eyebrows raised in surprise. “What would that be?”

Jhan managed a small smile. “I can admit that I’m wrong sometimes, Rehn.”

“I’ve never heard it before,” Rehn teased. “but it’s good to see you smile about it. Tell me how Jaross is right.”

“He told me that I was to blame for some of the things that have happened to me,” Jhan explained. “I was very angry and told him that he was wrong, and how dare he, and all of that, but you know, I suppose that I am very good at making people crazy enough to try and hurt me.”

Bheni crouched down, holding their beasts by their leads; prepared to leave. She was frowning angrily. “It is true that you do not know when to retreat, but you should not blame yourself for the battle to begin with, Jhan. You have a mighty spirit and they- they try to bind you and contain you to their will. Do not ever be sorry or blame yourself for fighting them.”

Rehn sighed, disappointed. “Then Jaross isn’t right and you’re not wrong at all, Jhan.”

“No, I am,” Jhan persisted. “Bheni just said it; I need to be smarter about my battles. I have to realize when I’ve pushed someone too far. I suppose that I get so wrapped up in my anger and fear, that I’m as self centered and insensitive as Jaross.”

“That’s right, you do,” Rehn agreed. “I’ve been the target for your temper enough to know it.”

That hurt, but Jhan knew it was the truth. “Well, I’m going to try and think a little more before I open my mouth,” Jhan promised firmly. “Maybe that will save me some bruises and some headaches.”

Jhan stood and took the bowl of food from Rehn.

Rehn was hopeful. "Are you going to try and eat that?"

Jhan pursed his lips and shook his head. “No, but it shouldn’t go to waste either. I’ll try my new resolve and give it to Thaos.”

“Jhan...” Bheni warned.

Jhan shrugged off her concern, looking down at the bowl in his hands. “I know it’s like trying to feed a savage beast in a cage, but it’s worth a try. I have to convince him that I’m not an evil demon before we reach Pekarín.”

“He will only believe that you are attempting to fool him with your ‘sweet tongue’, as he puts it, Jhan,” Bheni reminded him seriously.

Jhan sighed. “One man loves my face and another man loves my tongue. Men are very strange creatures, Rehn.”

“Most are just simple folk, Jhan,” Rehn protested with a chuckle. “and never get so complicated. Nobles have far too much time on their hands to come up with such foolishness.”

“Common sense from the common man. I salute your clear head, Rehn,” Jhan said with a smile. Rehn blushed and scowled, believing that Jhan was making fun of him.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Jhan turned from them and walked over to where Thaos was adjusting the harness on his imala. The man seemed deep in some dark thought, blue eyes half closed in the morning sunlight.

“I noticed -” Thaos whirled on Jhan and Jhan took a startled step backward, bowl of food held between them defensively. “I noticed that you didn’t eat breakfast,” Jhan finished in a small, uncertain voice. “I couldn’t eat this and I thought that it shouldn’t go to waste. Here.”

Thaos stared at the bowl as if it contained snakes and then, slowly and reluctantly, he took it from

Jhan's hand. "My thanks, demon," Thaos said mockingly. "but you are still going to die."

Jhan swallowed, smoothing hands on his dress and then twisting his fingers into the material nervously. "I didn't imagine that a bowl of grain was going to change that, Prince Thaos." Jhan kept his tone neutral, non threatening.

"Did you poison it?" Thaos wondered acidly, looking at the thick grain in the bowl suspiciously.

Jhan was determined to stay calm. "Well, I didn't cook it, if that's what you're wondering."

Thaos looked up sharply at Jhan's joke like a wolf that didn't know which way to jump. "Enough of this," he growled at last and turned away, tossing the contents of the bowl aside with a violent shake of one hand.

"Thaos!" Jhan shouted and then gritted his teeth as the man's head whipped about, face reflecting his eagerness for an excuse to fight. Jhan took a steadying breath and lowered his voice. "I was just being nice," Jhan continued. "I know you've been through a lot. I know how hard it must be for you to have lost your brother, yet see him every time you look at me."

"You are a perversion of nature," Thaos ground out. "You are a demon in a walking corpse!"

Jhan closed his eyes as if Thaos had spit in his face. "I- I've described myself that way a few times, Thaos, but not- not as a demon." He opened his eyes again, firming his resolve. "When I was a woman, I was simple, I suppose, leading a simple life. I wanted bigger things, but it never quite worked out for me, as much as I tried. I guess I'm trying to say that I never appreciated what I had. I had a good family and they loved me. My life wasn't the stuff of greatness, but it was good as well and I should..." Jhan swallowed and his lips trembled. "I really should have appreciated it more. Now, it's gone for ever. All I have is this corpse to live out my life in. A pathetic, twisted, shadow that will never fit in anywhere. Even poor Rehn, as good and kind as he is, can't really accept what I am."

"You talk a great deal," Thaos cut in. "Like a woman. I can almost believe that part of your story."

Jhan nodded shakily. "Good." Jhan held out his arms and Thaos stared at them suspiciously. "This is a prison for me, Thaos. I can never be anything but a woman and yet I will always be the exact opposite. I remember you once saying that you couldn't think of any harsher punishment than what Dagara did to me. Why has that changed? Can't you find any pity for me now that you know that all of this was forced on me? I know I horrify you and that you want me killed because of what I am. Does it surprise you that I can't blame you for that? I horrify myself. The least you can do is not hate me on top of it and not make my life a string of cruelty from beginning to end."

“You expect too much, demon,” Thaos replied indifferently.

Jhan took the empty bowl from his hand and Thaos let him, surprised. “Too bad,” Jhan said as he turned around and began to walk away. “It was pretty good grain porridge.”

They stopped at noon to rest, but everyone stood about uncomfortably. The snow was ankle deep and everyone felt that this was the first sign that they were entering the fringe of cold country. From now on, they knew, the journey was going to get very harsh.

Jhan ate a piece of jerky and chewed on a grain cake filled with something that tasted like onions and raisins mixed together. Afterward, he left the milling company and searched for some privacy to attend to personal business. Satisfied with a secluded spot, Jhan wiped his hands on his cloak and took a last look around to make certain he was alone. He wasn’t.

“Jaross!” Jhan complained, facing the man with a start. Jaross seemed to have sprung out of nowhere and Jhan suspected that he had followed him for a purpose. “A little privacy, please. You must know why I came out here!”

Jaross looked anguished and confused. His blue eyes were intense. They sharply reminded Jhan of Thaos in one of his worst moods. Remembering his promise not to make trouble, Jhan tried to walk past Jaross without giving the man a chance to respond.

Jaross wasn’t obliging. He caught Jhan by the arm and stopped him. Jhan looked down at Jaross’ hand. “Release me, Jaross,” Jhan warned. “The least I will do is scream until someone comes. The worst I will do might make us both sorry.”

Jaross replied in anguish, “I have to know!”

Jaross’ other hand caught Jhan by the chin. Jaross tilted up Jhan’s head to force Jhan to look into his eyes. Jhan began to be frightened, not knowing what Jaross intended, but beginning to guess.

“I have to know,” Jaross repeated. “If it is only your face, or...” Jaross choked on the last and suddenly kissed Jhan on the lips, hand tightening on Jhan’s chin to force him to comply. The kiss deepened and turned devouring while Jaross’ other hand slid from Jhan’s arm to run down along Jhan’s hip.

Jhan went cold. This was the last thing that he had expected from Jaross and the shock of it held Jhan motionless... until Jaross' hand did something that shocked him even more. Then Jhan reacted violently, cocking back a hand and driving it towards Jaross' face with the power of all his pent up humiliation and anger.

At the very last instant, before flesh contacted with flesh, Jaross' face was suddenly not there. Jhan's momentum and the sudden release of his chin, threw him off balance. Jhan fell to one knee in the snow, dress twisting about his legs as he stumbled and stopped himself from falling face first into the ground.

"How dare you!" Thaos's voice rolled like thunder over Jhan. Jhan flinched, raising hands and looking up to defend himself, but he quickly discovered that Thaos wasn't shouting at him.

Thaos had Jaross by the front of his tunic and he was shaking the man violently, teeth gritted and eyes like blue fire. Jaross was stammering something, an incoherent explanation, but Thaos wasn't about to listen to it.

"I saw you!" Thaos shouted deafeningly. "You were attacking Lady Jhan! What monstrous pervert has the Lord of the Nava sired?"

Time stopped. Jhan's eyes were caught by a movement beyond Thaos's shoulder. Jhan seemed to have an eternity to stare in horror and amazement at a creature out of nightmare. All covered in hair, it must have once been a man. It's face looked manlike, but it's mouth had been drawn out and filled with sharp needle like teeth. It's eyes were large and cat-like. Ears were flared and cupped to catch the slightest sound. A hunter, Jhan thought, as time slowly began again. He watched its springing lope, on two feet, towards Thaos, hands outstretched and tipped with razor sharp claws.

"Thaos!" Jhan shouted and threw himself forward from his position on one knee. He didn't think. He didn't plan. Jhan's body knew what to do, as much a killing machine as the beast that he was springing to meet.

Thaos was a warrior. Not knowing that he was being attacked from behind, he could only surmise that Jhan was attacking him. He pushed Jaross away from him and began to draw his sword. His eyes registered Jhan's speed and knew that he would be too late. Desperately, Thaos kicked out and tripped Jhan up as he spun and threw himself out of Jhan's way. Jhan let himself fall, slapped hands against the snow covered ground, and then flipped to come upright again in a blinding fast motion. Jhan's cape and his hampering dress twisted about him yet again and Jhan stumbled forward, unable to land cleanly and gain his balance.

Jhan saw only one thing before his vision was painted red with his own blood; the beasts clawed hand, as large as a dinner plate, slamming into the right side of his face. It flipped him over with its force and the world spun as Jhan went sprawling, sliding several feet in the snow before he came to rest face down and dazed.

The beast was howling. Men panted and swore and Jhan heard booted feet stomping the ground. Silence. Shouting. More stomping. Someone gently turned Jhan over and shrieked.

Jhan wiped at his left eye and blinked up at Jaross. Jhan had never heard a man make such a sound. To see the man staring down at him in sheer horror made Jhan want to scream too. When Jaross turned and Jhan heard the sound of someone being violently ill, he began to panic.

Hands caught Jhan by the wrists. Kile looked down into his eye. Sitting by Jhan's head, he appeared to be upside down. Jhan searched that face for comfort and reassurance, but Kile was mirroring Jaross' expression of horror exactly.

It was hard to speak. Jhan felt as if one side of his mouth was being pulled tight. "What happened? Why- Why are you looking like that?"

Kile mastered himself and managed to make his face go as blank as a whitewashed wall. His voice was trembling though and he choked on his reply. "The beast, whatever it was, is dead. Everyone is safe."

"Good," Jhan whispered. "Tell Thaos that he is an idiot! I was trying to save him, but he managed to get me hit instead. Oh, no, don't say that! I forgot that I'm supposed to be nice from now on."

"Nice?" Kile echoed in confusion.

"So I stay out of trouble." Jhan knew he was babbling, sounding like a little child, but he was too terrified to ask what he really wanted.

"By the Great One!" Bheni strangled on her exclamation. Her hands trembled as she bent to kneel by Jhan. She reached out to touch his face, but thought better of it at the last moment; the warrior taking control as she turned and began barking orders. "Hot water, at once, and needle and thread for wounds! We have to act quickly!"

Quickly? Jhan wasn't feeling any pain, just a stinging burn on the right side of his face. Maybe they were just over reacting? His right eye was glued shut by drying and fresh blood. It must look horrible, he thought.

“Oh, Little Lady!” Rehn landed heavily on his knees by Jhan, taking hold of his hand tightly. Rehn was weeping in great racking heaves, tears a river down his cheeks. “What have you gone and done to yourself?”

“It’s nothing,” Jhan tried to protest, voice quavering in fear. “It doesn’t even hurt, really. Why is everyone getting so upset?”

There were white, exchanged looks. No one said anything in reply. Bheni’s hot water came and she crushed a good amount of leaves into a cup and poured the hot water on top. She mixed it together thoroughly and then tipped Jhan’s head to help him drink it. The mint flavor was very powerful. Jhan guessed that she must be giving him her sleeping drug, but many times stronger.

Bheni took up the needle and gut thread, but her hands were shaking even more now and she hesitated. Strong hands took them out of her hands and Thaos straddled Jhan’s body. “Prince Thaos!” Bheni objected.

Thaos cut her off with a commanding glare. “I may be a prince, but I’ve sewn up a man or two in the heat of battle, Mistress Bheni. I have the steadiest hands at this moment.”

“Because you’re enjoying it!” Jhan seethed angrily.

Thaos gritted his teeth, but his eyes were as steady as his hands as he looked down at Jhan. “Bheni’s drug will cut the pain, I think, but you will have to be very still. Put aside your anger. Close your eye. Let the drug do its work.”

Jhan took a steadying breath, but he wasn’t about to be quiet. He was too frightened. “You *are* an idiot, a heavy one. Don’t put all of your weight on me, Thaos! My legs are falling asleep and my spine feels like you’re going to snap it!”

Thaos laughed grimly, shifting his weight. “You are brave, Little Lady!” he commended, using Rehn’s pet name easily. “I like your temper better than your awful attempts to be ‘nice’.” He leaned forward and Jhan felt the prick of the needle in his face, though he couldn’t see the man’s hands on his right side. There was a disconcerting tug and pull as the gut thread wove in and out, but no real pain.

“If you hadn’t tripped me, this wouldn’t have happened!” Jhan accused. “You and your stupid revenge and your stupid -”

“You shouldn’t call a crown prince stupid, Lady Jhan,” Thaos commented absently. “I did what I thought was right. You may not be a demon, but you are possessing a corpse...” he trailed off to knot and break the thread with his teeth. Jhan expected him to be done, but the man examined his work with

a critical eye and then began another line of stitches starting at Jhan's scalp. That shook Jhan. "I don't know why you would have expected me to have reacted in any other way when a supposed demon leaps at me," Thaos finished as calmly as if he were doing embroidery on a sunny day.

"I don't know why I tried to save your sorry life!" Jhan snapped.

Thaos worked his way down Jhan's face all the way to Jhan's ear and made another knot. "Maybe because I stopped Lord Jaross from attempting to compromise whatever honor he thought a man might have for him."

"What!" Kile exploded. "That filthy -" he used a word Jhan didn't know and his hands tightened painfully on Jhan's wrists.

"Kile, please," Jhan hissed and Kile stammered an apology and loosened his grip.

Thaos began yet another line of stitches and he seemed to falter, unsure how to proceed. Bheni pointed out something, her hand still shaking, and Thaos nodded. He began his row right along Jhan's right eye and Jhan could feel him pushing skin back into place. Tears started from Jhan's eyes and the salt in them made his wounds sting.

"He's just confused," Jhan picked up the conversation, determined to distract himself and keep himself from confronting what he really knew was happening to him.

"Who?" Kile wondered with glassy eyes.

"Jaross," Jhan persisted. "He just couldn't decide what he'd fallen in love with. I guess he just snapped. He was determined to prove to himself that he wasn't attracted to my body. I don't think he meant to force me to go along with it. He's just so self centered that he didn't even think far enough to ask."

"Are you excusing his behavior?" Kile wondered distantly. "I'm not so charitable."

Thaos finished his line of stitches and then winced and took his time manipulating skin around Jhan's mouth. He should have felt it, Jhan thought. It must have been awful for that look to be in Thaos's eyes, yet Jhan could only feel a burning sensation, as if that side of his face had been in the sun too long.

"Oh, I wasn't either, at the time," Jhan replied at last. "I can only kill, Kile, it's what I was trained to do. Jaross was a half second from being dead when Thaos pulled him away from me." Jhan trembled. "Now that I can think about it, I know Jaross wasn't going to really do anything violent. He

would have stopped if I had reacted with my mouth and told him no, rather than my skill. He's just a foolish, confused boy!"

"What?" Kile mumbled and Jhan realized that the man had no real idea what Jhan had just said. Kile looked green and a tear was tracking down one of his cheeks.

"Stop talking for once!" Thaos growled. Sweat was beading on his forehead, despite the chill of the air. "You make my head ache with your ceaseless chatter!"

Jhan went silent as Thaos started sewing, very slow and very careful. The stitches did a crazy dance this way and that and they tugged and pulled at the right side of Jhan's mouth. Thaos made a knot at last and sat back, wiping the sweat from his forehead and swearing explosively. He stood and walked away, head down and shaking as if he had just finished a marathon.

The drug caught Jhan in its embrace all at once. A circle of faces bent close and Jhan felt himself lifted and carried. His face began to flare with pain unexpectedly as a cold wind brushed over the stitches. Sunlight flickered in Jhan's good eye and he closed it. That was enough to send him over the edge into sleep, but Kile's voice was the last thing that he heard. "I've never seen anything so horrible. I don't know how Jhan's going to accept this." and then it was gone and Jhan was enveloped in Bheni's drug completely.

"We can't spend another day here."

"You'll have to wake him, Lord Kile."

"I know how you feel, Bheni, but Dagara is close behind us."

"There's nothing more we can do."

"There might be more such creatures. We have to be careful. I'll feel better when we leave this place."

Unidentifiable voices drifted in and out with Jhan's consciousness. Jhan fought to open his eyes, the drug reluctant to give up its hold on him.

"It won't get any better than that, will it, Lord Kile?"

“No, Jaross, I doubt very much that it will.”

They both sounded sad. Kile, Jhan roused enough to recognize his voice, sounded pained and yet annoyed at the same time.

“At least I have my answer,” that was Jaross. He sounded ill, voice weak and shaky.

“What answer?” Kile’s voice rose, even more irritated.

Jaross was embarrassed, but he replied readily enough. “I know now that I was only in love with Jhan’s face. Now that it’s destroyed, I feel that I’ve lost someone I love, even though Jhan is still very much alive.”

“Don’t you ever think of anyone but yourself?” Kile’s voice had an edge of danger to it.

“Yes, I do, Lord Kile,” Jaross shot back. “Jhan has been a part of my thoughts since we met. He’s been driving me insane with his beauty. I was ready to... I was ready to give up everything for him; everything I thought was honorable.”

“And now that’s all gone?” Kile retorted sarcastically. “Jhan gets ripped to shreds and you toss him aside because he’s no longer beautiful? No one deserves that, not even a boy who thinks he’s a woman.”

Jaross was floundering, trying to gather together the last vestiges of his dignity. “Jhan never returned my love, Lord Kile. He’ll be glad to know that I’ve come to my senses, because it’s- It’s you he loves.”

Jaross said that hesitantly, an unconscious need to push his embarrassment on to someone else. Kile wasn’t an immature young man, so he only sighed and refused to be angry. “I’ve known that for a long while, Lord Jaross.”

“So Jhan said, but I hardly believed him,” Jaross replied. “You didn’t look to be a man who would humor such perversion.”

“I don’t feel threatened by a mad child telling me that he loves me.”

“You know and I know, Lord Kile, that Jhan is not a child,” Jaross protested. “He doesn’t even look much like one anymore. When he grew taller and more like a woman, I was even more in love with him than before. Surely you haven’t been immune to his charm and his beauty?”

“He’s a man!” Kile snapped back, and then impatiently. “Where are you going with this, Lord Jaross? Are you attempting to convince me that what you tried to do to Jhan was at all reasonable? Jhan

may be beautiful, but that doesn't confuse me or make me wonder if I like men in bed! “

“I...” Jaross seemed stunned. “I wouldn't have... Lord Kile! We are both men and we both know how unreasonable our needs can be. You've bedded four women in the time I've known you and the last two can't have been called respectable even under the most charitable circumstances! If you are attempting to tell me that you can't look at Jhan and see what I see and feel even a little of what I feel, then you, sir, are -”

“Careful, Lord Jaross,” Kile warned, cutting him off swiftly. “This is going in a direction we will quickly regret. Jhan has chosen to make excuses for you and to forgive you. I am still withholding my judgment. If you stare and keep that look of horror on your face when he wakes, then I will judge you and it may come to blows. Do you understand?”

There wasn't a reply. Jhan heard boots crunching in snow and gravel, swiftly fading away. Jhan slowly pried his eyes open, blinking up at Kile's face and glad that both of his eyes were seeing him. “Four women? When did you have time for that?” Jhan wondered and tried to smile. It hurt, sending flaming fingers across the right side of his face.

“I hope that you aren't going to be jealous?” Kile replied softly.

Jhan's head was on Kile's lap and he was wrapped up in a fur lined cloak and resting on thick blankets. Warm and still relaxed from the drug, Jhan hardly felt anything except a languid contentment at all odds with the situation.

“I can't think enough to be jealous,” Jhan replied at last and blinked as if his lids had weights on them. The drug wanted him to sleep again, but Jhan fought it. “Tell me how bad it is.”

Kile knew what Jhan meant. He took hold of both of Jhan's wrists gently when Jhan lifted his hands to touch the stitches. “Don't.” Kile's voice was edged. “It's bad enough that you shouldn't risk getting them infected.”

Jhan frowned. “I remember Jaross screaming, no, shrieking actually.”

“He's a fool!” Kile snarled.

“And I'm not,” Jhan replied quietly. “You can tell me, Kile. Is it something that will hardly be noticed or is it bad enough to give children nightmares?”

Kile was evasive. “We won't know until it heals.”

“You like to keep things from me, Kile. Spare me and don't try it now.”

In reply, Kile sighed in defeat and simply let go of Jhan's wrists.

Slowly, Jhan brought a hand up to the right side of his face, touching the stitches gingerly. Following them with his fingers, misery washed over Jhan and tears trickled from his eyes as he began to realize just how horrible the damage was. The worst of it was around his mouth. The stitches were as crazy as a patchwork quilt going under his chin and along his jaw.

Jhan lowered his hand at last and Kile reached out and clasped it as if he needed comfort as much as Jhan. He waited for Jhan to collapse. To scream. To lose his mind in grief. When none of that happened, Jhan was as surprised as Kile.

"I suppose the drugs are dulling things," Jhan surmised. "or maybe I just can't believe it until I actually see it in a mirror."

"Are you in any pain?" Kile wondered solicitously. "I can call for Bheni. She can give you some more of her herbs and... well, you might prefer her company right now."

Jhan turned his head and looked about them. They were alone in a small clearing, but Jhan could just make out the low buzz of conversation off to their right. "My left ankle aches," he replied distantly. "I suppose I twisted it when I fell. Otherwise, my face just feels like I have a bad sunburn. And no, I wouldn't prefer Bheni to you right now. She'd probably tell me what I did wrong and how proud I should be to get such great scars."

Kile gently lowered Jhan's head onto a rolled up blanket and then moved to pull off Jhan's boot and sock. His face was tense. "I think you're wrong about that. She's been very concerned about you. She suggested that we move you away from camp so that she could change your clothes and clean you in private. She thought it best that you have quiet for a little time."

Kile was running hands along Jhan's ankle, but they lingered longer than was necessary. Jhan sighed impatiently. "Jaross falls in love with my face. Thaos loves my voice. Are you falling in love with my legs, Kile Helarion Dor?"

Kile grunted, not looking up. "No, I'm not in love with your ankles. Rather, I was wondering how feet can smell so badly."

Jhan laughed. It was such an unaccustomed sound that he startled himself. Kile looked up with wide eyes, a shadowy smile trying to cover up his distress. "I've suddenly become perfectly hideous and now you tell me my feet stink on top of it all!" Jhan laughed.

Kile's false smile faltered and then disappeared, realizing Jhan's humor was bitter. "I'm sorry,"

Kile apologized lamely. "I was just trying to-to take your mind off of it." He slipped Jhan's sock and boot back on with fumbling hands and then pulled the cloak back into place.

"Oh, Kile! Don't be sorry," Jhan replied, mortified. "I don't think that I would know what to say either if I were you."

"I know I wouldn't be laughing if I were you," Kile said with a shake of his head.

"I told you, it just hasn't sunk in yet." Jhan touched his face again, all humor dying. "When I was with Dagara, he used to treat me as a fine work of art. I used to wish that I were made of clay and that I could smash into a thousand pieces. I wanted to see the shock of it in his eyes. Ridiculous, isn't it? I didn't have much else to do but think about such crazy things."

Jhan lowered his hand and met Kile's eyes steadily, continuing. "I can't really explain how I feel, Kile. One the one hand I'm terrified, sick, and saddened, while on the other, I'm strangely glad, as if I've accomplished some sort of revenge on Dagara."

"Costly revenge," Kile muttered. "And he'll never know about it."

That caused an inward pain. Jhan almost bit his lip, remembered, and didn't. "At least my new looks will keep people from trying to get under my clothes!"

"If you mean Jaross, you don't have to worry about him anymore," Kile replied, angry and disgusted. "The fool only cared about your face, it seems."

"You fell in love with my face in Pekarín. I don't see how you can judge him," Jhan pointed out. Kile opened his mouth and Jhan went on sharply. "If you're about to tell me that my face doesn't horrify you as much as it does Jaross, then you are a liar, Lord Dor. If you go on to try to tell me that you'd consider loving someone with a face like this, then I'll give you an award as the greatest of liars!"

Kile was quiet for a long moment, as if not trusting himself to speak until he had considered everything that he was about to say. "I never fell in love with your face," he began. "and you know you should not pursue this any further. It doesn't do either of us any good, Jhan. What I think or feel is beside the point. How you feel is everything. If you wish me to be brutal and honest, then I can only tell you that you will never win a beauty contest, Jhan of Pekarín, and that, yes, children will be frightened of you and, perhaps, grown men as well. You must accept that, if you can, and choose how you wish to deal with it without considering how anyone else feels."

"You're crying." Jhan was frightened by it and he felt tears on his own face. "Is it pity?"

“Lack of sleep,” Kile replied, passing it off as he wiped at his face. “I sat with you through the night and into this morning.”

“Why?” Jhan wondered. “Rehn or Bheni could have watched me.”

“I didn’t feel it was safe for you to be out away from camp,” Kile explained. “We had a small fire, but I wasn’t certain such a creature, as the one that had attacked you, would fear it. Rehn isn’t a warrior and Bheni is a woman. I felt that I was more qualified to watch you.”

Jhan was dubious. “Sitting with me in your lap wouldn’t have given you an advantage if you were attacked.”

Kile was standing now, unable to meet Jhan’s eyes. “I had to keep away the flies.”

“Flies?” Jhan was blank.

Kile’s face twisted in distaste. “They kept trying to -”

“Never mind!” Jhan cut him off short and closed his eyes.

“I would like to give you more time to sleep and recover,” Kile said. “but Dagara and his men aren’t that far behind us. We have to get moving. How do you feel?”

“Outraged,” Jhan replied crossly and then rethought it. “Frightened,” he amended and opened his eyes. “You’re right and I know it.”

“You should keep taking Bheni’s drug,” Kile suggested.

“To keep away the pain?”

“No. It keeps you from arguing.” Kile managed a tight smile. “It makes my life much easier.”

“Ha. Ha.” Jhan held out a hand and Kile took it and pulled him to his feet, steadying Jhan when he swayed.

“Will you be able to ride?” Kile wondered in concern.

Jhan smoothed down his dress and took the cloak that Kile handed to him. Placing it about his shoulders, Jhan took a step away and then turned confidently. “I feel fine, Kile. The skin of my face may be ripped to shreds, but nothing else seems to have suffered.”

“Your ankle?” Kile prompted.

Jhan put his weight on it gingerly and then shrugged. “Sore, but not sprained. I can travel, Kile.”

“Good,” Kile sighed. “I feel better about my decision then.”

Jhan followed Kile back into camp. The man began barking orders, but everyone stood as if rooted, staring at Jhan. The soldiers who hadn’t seen the damage to Jhan’s face had dropped jaws and sick expressions. Jaross turned away and busied himself purposely with his imala. Thaos was kicking out the fire. He pause to give Jhan one, firm nod of approval and then went about his business.

“Is there pain?” Bheni wondered as she came up to Jhan, eyes full of anguish.

Rehn took hold of Jhan’s elbow as if Jhan were an invalid, the same anguished look on his face. “I argued that we should stay and let you rest, but Thaos and Kile wouldn’t listen!”

“I’m all right,” Jhan assured them. “I just need something to eat before we go.”

“Of course.” Bheni strode off and came back a moment later with a bowl of grain and some cut up meat. Jhan took it from her and began to eat standing up.

“You will begin to feel your wounds when the drug wears off,” Bheni warned Jhan carefully. “It may start while we are riding.”

“That’s the way it’ll have to be,” Jhan replied, definitely not feeling as sure as he sounded. “I’m just as eager as everyone else to get further ahead of Dagara and his men! A little pain -”

“It won’t be a little pain.” Rehn was, as always, honest and to the point. “Those cuts are very deep. You’re lucky Thaos sewed them up as quickly as he did before you lost too much blood. The one under your chin... it was very bad.”

“I’ve been subjected too the kind of pain you’ll never be able to imagine, Rehn,” Jhan reminded him. “This will be nothing compared to it.”

“I’m sorry,” Rehn apologized softly, but he was giving Jhan a look of awe. “I would never have imagined that you would take this so well. The way you’ve always insisted on being so much like a woman... I would have thought the loss of-of your face would have sent you into madness.”

Jhan turned away, not wanting to confront it. “Like I’ve told Kile, when I finally look into a mirror and see what’s happened to me, I probably will go mad. Now, it just stings a little. I can only go by what I feel. Anything else is too abstract to grasp. I still only see my face in my mind like it was.”

“Like missing an arm and thinking it is still there, until you look down and see that it is not,” Bheni guessed with a nod of understanding.

“Exactly,” Jhan agreed. “If everyone can stop looking at me like I’m a monster, I might even

convince myself that it never happened.”

Bheni didn't approve. “That will not be good in the end.”

“I know,” Jhan acknowledged darkly. “but I don't have the luxury of indulging madness or hysterics over what's left of my face. I have to get through this journey.”

When the camp was packed up and the imala and baku loaded, Jhan mounted his baku and handed one of the reins to Rehn. “If you will ride beside me and hold him...” Jhan asked uncertainly. “It will be best if things start to go wrong.”

“I was going to suggest it,” Rehn replied with a nod and took the rein. “You might feel all right now, but there's no telling about later.”

Later was only a few hours down the road. The snow was getting deep and a chill wind picked up and ran freezing fingers through Jhan's hair, prickling his exposed face. Jhan tried to duck away from it, but to no avail. The pain began soon after that; a slow throb that grew and grew until Jhan longed to pull at the stitches, some unreasoning instinct believing that they were causing the pain.

“Do you still have that salve of yours, Bheni?” Jhan wondered, hissing out his words through gritted teeth.

“You cannot use it on open wounds, Jhan,” Bheni explained sympathetically. “I can give you more of the sleeping herb, but the more you use it the less it will work effectively. The body grows too use to it.”

Jhan nodded his understanding, not trusting himself to speak. Another hour down the road and the pain was all encompassing, blinding Jhan with a headache as well. When Thaos came up beside him and said something, Jhan stared at him with a frown, not hearing a word.

Thaos bent to take the rein Jhan had dropped from his nerveless fingers. As Jhan bent over the neck of his baku, hugging himself against the pain, Thaos and Rehn led his baku between them, hands steadying Jhan in the saddle.

It began to snow heavily. The ground turned to mud and then to ice and they slogged through the rest of the day in miserable silence. Their only consolation was that the uncertain ground would slow Dagara and his supply wagons down enough for them to get far ahead. Kile was hopeful enough that he drove them without a noon rest, and partly into the night, before he relented and allowed them to make camp.

Jhan collapsed onto the blanket Bheni spread out for him and he curled up under his cloak and closed his eyes. The world was pulsing in time to the beat and drag of his pain. Talk passed over him, unintelligible, and Jhan closed his mouth like a stubborn child when someone tried to get him to eat. The throb of his face and head was turning his stomach sour. Finally, Bheni relented and gave him some herb to drink. It pulled Jhan under into darkness almost at once and he sighed in relief as he escaped the pain in sleep.

“It’s deserted,” a soldier reported, riding back from a cautious look at a small village at the side of the road. “They didn’t take much. We should be able to gather some supplies.”

“Why the sudden panic?” Thaos wondered suspiciously. “They’ve had weeks, perhaps months, to decide to leave and take everything with them.”

“I don’t like it either, Prince Thaos,” Kile agreed, a nervous hand on the hilt of his sword. “We should gather our supplies and leave quickly. I don’t understand why Crelin didn’t return and report this to us. I don’t like it one bit.”

“Advance troops of Dagara’s?” Jaross wondered.

“Could be, but I would have thought that they would have plundered the place before leaving,” Thaos responded. “They must need supplies as desperately as we do.”

“Khelan!” Kile shouted. “Take Bhalor and scout the perimeter of the village. Stay very alert!”

“My Lord!” Khelan responded and he and Bhalor separated and rode off in different directions.

“I need to get off, if even for a moment,” Jhan breathed through his pain and dismounted, staggering a little.

The village was made up of a neat thatched collection of houses and a few shops that were arranged loosely in a circle. Snow covered the rooftops and the drifts on the ground were unmarked by any passing feet. A few birds flitted back and forth, but otherwise it was like a frozen snapshot, silent and still.

Kile, Thaos, and Rehn had dismounted to search through the houses, carrying empty bags in hopes of filling them with provisions. Jaross was standing with the reins of his imala in his hands, looking nervous.

“The herbs are not treating you well,” Bheni’s voice pierced the white fog that was clouding Jhan’s mind. “We should not chance giving you any more. Your pain should go away in a day or two. That is not so long to suffer and...” her voice faded into the fog as Jhan became preoccupied with finding a place to sit down. He dropped the lead to his baku and staggered towards the house that he had seen everyone else disappear into.

Jaross stepped forward. “I wish to apologize, Jhan.”

That startled Jhan and he almost sat down on the ground in surprise. His eyes blearily tried to read Jaross’ face, but it was too much work for his pain numbed mind.

“I’ve been so confused that it’s effected me deeply,” Jaross went on. “I’ve not been myself. I swear that I never meant to lay hands on you or to force you to do anything against your will. Your face was like the sun, blinding me. Now that it’s so marred, I can think clearly once again. I can see what a dishonorable fool I’ve been.”

“Even when you apologize, you only consider yourself,” Jhan snarled. “I’m glad that having my face ripped to shreds served some purpose, Jaross!”

“I didn’t mean -”

The ground tipped under Jhan’s feet, or so it seemed to Jhan. He fell sideways as if he were drunk and Jaross grabbed him, lifting him up into his arms as if he were a child, and carrying him into the house.

“Jhan’s ill!” Jaross was shouting, but three other shouts of warning drowned him out.

The walls sparkled, Jhan thought through his fog. He was spun as Jaross turned about, looking around in amazement. Mirrors. The room was covered from floor to ceiling in mirrors!

Jhan’s eyes cleared as he roused himself from the drug, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. Jaross, tall and strong, with Jhan in his arms, dress and cloak swinging as he turned. Beautiful body, beautiful neck, and then, a half and half nightmare of beauty and horror melded together by raised furrows of red stitches and a fading red dye mark on a forehead.

It was his face, Jhan realized. The one side as perfect and white as ever, the other just as he had suspected; a hideous patchwork of skin stretched to cover wherever skin had been torn off completely. His mouth was knotted on that side and his eye was pulled at the outer corner into a permanent squint. The chin and jaw were the worst. Something large was missing and the skin there was sunken, falling into the space. Jhan understood now, why it hurt so much, yet didn’t hurt as much as it should. Nerves

had been torn away along with flesh.

A hand covered Jhan's eyes and other hands took hold of him. It was Thaos that carried Jhan from the house, but it was Kile who was speaking to him softly, urgently. Both of the men sat on the ground with Jhan held between them. A black lion of a man, Thaos, and a golden lion of a man, Kile.

"I wanted to ask if we could rest," Jhan mumbled through the drug. He should have been screaming, devastated, at the least collapsing in sobs, but Jhan felt nothing but a prickling belief that he had done something wrong.

Thaos was looking down at Jhan in a frightening manner, blue eyes sunken under scowling black brows and a mouth set in a thin line over gritted teeth. "What did you say?" Thaos was confused, it made him look even fiercer.

"Are you angry with me?" Jhan wondered wearily. "I know that you want to get me back to Pekarín for my execution, but I just can't go a step further, Thaos."

Kile spoke carefully. "It's the drug, Prince Thaos. It has a hard grip on him. I don't think he saw anything in the mirror maker's shop. He'd be screaming if he did, I'm certain of it."

Thaos nodded, but his intense look didn't leave his face. It pierced the fog and Jhan started to weep, saying, "You aren't going to hurt me, are you?"

Thaos shuddered all at once. His face softened. "No, Lady Jhan. I'm not going to hurt you. I think that you were right when you told me that you had suffered enough. There won't be an execution in Pekarín."

"Really?" Jhan relaxed in their arms, sighing. His thoughts were a jumble. The face that he had seen in the mirror was mixing with his drug induced dreams, taking the horror and shock and softening it until it was like trying to remember the fear of a nightmare on waking. It was distant and unreal, even though the image of it was frozen and stuck in memory; a curiosity to mull over with doubt that he had actually seen it at all. Jhan's mind simply refused to deal with it on any other level.

Jhan slept. He didn't remember consciously deciding to. His body simply gave in willingly to the drug and it pulled him down and down until he felt his heart slowing and struggling. Bheni was right, he realized distantly. The drug was too strong for him and the pain was going to win in the end. Unwilling to wake and face the trial, Jhan stayed in the drug's clutches as long as he could.

“It’s Crelin all right, what’s left of him.” Kile’s voice was very close to Jhan.

“No mistaking his red hair,” Khelan was saying somewhere below Jhan’s ear. The man’s voice was steady, matter-of-fact: a veteran used to death. It was Kile who sounded shaken, young, and inexperienced.

“Ripped to shreds.” Kile swore and arms tightened around Jhan. “It must have been another one of those creatures. We will camp in a close group from now on, no stragglers and no one going out alone for any reason. We’ll have to call Bhalor up from the rear. I don’t like not having a scout there, but he isn’t safe.”

“My Lord,” Khelan replied and Jhan heard footsteps going away.

Harness jingled and imala hooves began thudding all about Jhan. He felt a swaying motion. “Empty villages and unnatural creatures. This doesn’t sound as if we are ahead of Dagara’s men. I feel surrounded instead or following too close behind.”

“You are perceptive,” Thaos agreed. “What do you suggest?”

“I’d like to get off the road completely and send scouts to survey the area,” Kile suggested. “I’d like to know what the real situation is.”

“The snows are deep off of the road and the land dips and rises,” Thaos pointed out uncertainly. “I wouldn’t be wise to bog ourselves down. Speed, rather than caution, will keep us alive at this point.”

“I am in command,” Kile was stern, not giving any deference. “I have ridden many border patrols in dangerous situations. I’ve learned never to ride blindly.”

“And I have actually been to war,” Thaos snarled back. “This course of action is unwise, Lord Kile.”

“I don’t think it is,” Kile replied stubbornly and shouted orders.

Jhan opened his eyes. Disoriented by the sight of Kile’s face above his own and tree limbs passing by overhead, it was a long moment before Jhan realized that he was in Kile’s lap and that he was on the back of Kile’s imala.

“You must enjoy having me on your lap,” Jhan joked softly.

Kile looked down, startled, and then grinned good naturedly. “You’ve been asleep so long, that I decided to make you into a coat to keep me warm.”

Jhan sighed and touched his face. It ached, but not with the stabbing burn of before. “There isn’t much of me to keep anyone warm.”

“A scarf then,” Kile went on, and then more seriously. “Something happens to you every time I let you out of my sight. I’ve decided that I will personally nursemaid you all the way back to Pekarín. Besides, Rehn and Bheni need the rest.”

His words pricked at memory. Jhan remembered Jaross’ bewildered face, shouting, and a room that glittered with a hundred mirrors reflecting a hideous image. “I had a dream...” Jhan began, trying not to frown and hurt his face as he concentrated on the elusive images. “Is everything all right?”

“No,” Kile was flatly honest. “We found Crelin, murdered. I’ve ordered a scouting party. We’re going to find a secluded spot to make camp and wait until we know for certain where the enemy lies.”

“Jaross... I remember Jaross -” Jhan couldn’t bring the image into focus. “Is Jaross all right?” Jhan shook his head to clear it. “Bheni’s drug is too powerful! I’m not going to take it anymore.”

“I’m glad,” Kile responded approvingly. “You’ve been acting like a drunk for the last two days.”

Jhan felt himself flush in embarrassment. “I don’t remember much of it. Did I make a fool of myself?”

Kile’s grip tightened and he looked into Jhan’s face anxiously. “No! Don’t think that! I just meant that you’ve been half asleep and not sure on your feet. Bheni and Rehn have been watching you and not sleeping much, afraid you’d wander off and get hurt.”

Jhan sat up in the saddle, hooking a leg over the pommel and balancing against Kile as he blinked at the rough, forested country all about them. He felt very clear headed now and, aside from an unpleasant need for a bath and tangled hair in need of a comb, Jhan felt almost normal.

Thaos was riding beside them, jaw clenched and eyes angry. He acknowledged Jhan with a nod. “Lady Jhan,” he greeted tightly.

Jhan thought about his words for a full minute, trying to understand the man who’d uttered them. “Are you making fun of me?” Jhan asked at last. “Mocking your captive demon?”

“Not at all,” Thaos replied, giving Jhan a level look and Kile a piercing one. “You are a woman and you are in the body of a prince of the house of Kevelt. Mistress is beneath consideration. Lady suits you best.”

“I’m sure King Torian won’t care what you call me once you tell him what I am,” Jhan pointed

out.

Thaos was sitting straight in his saddle, chin lifted, every inch a prince. “I suppose the drug was clouding your mind when I told you that you were no longer under sentence of death.”

Confused, the surreal dream came back to Jhan. He turned it over and over in his mind and then suddenly picked out the part where Thaos had looked down at him in a fierce manner and announced his commuted sentence. If that had been real, then how much else was real?

Jhan leaned in the saddle to scan the line of riders. Jaross was conspicuously absent. “Where -”

“He’s gone,” Kile bit out angrily. “We grew tired of him and sent him home.”

“The man is a walking outrage,” Thaos added, just as angry.

Jhan looked from Kile to Thaos, not believing what he was seeing. Kile he might have understood defending him against the coarseness of Jaross, but Thaos? “I don’t understand,” Jhan admitted at last. “Your brother is dead and I’m in his body. You beat me, tried to cut out my tongue, drown me, drop me from a cliff, nearly starve me to death... did I leave anything out? Now you’re just okay with everything, Prince Thaos? What brought about such a transformation?”

Thaos looked pointedly at the right side of Jhan’s face. “If you were a demon, you wouldn’t have risked your life for me. I did all of those things to you and yet, you gave up half of your face without a thought.”

Jhan was angry now, voice bitter. “As I recall, you tripped me. I didn’t exactly plan for this to happen.”

“You know how it happened.” Thaos was stern. “Don’t accuse me of causing your ill fortune.”

“Ill fortune?” Jhan repeated and then turned his face away. “I should change my name to ill fortune. It’s what my life has become.”

“Little Lady,” Thaos muttered. “You don’t realize how *‘lucky’* you are!”

Jhan whirled on him, outraged. “Why would you conceive of saying something like that?”

Thaos laughed and it was dark and deep. “You should have been dead over and over again, but still you’re alive! If that isn’t luck, then what is?”

“You don’t have to live with this face or these memories!” Jhan snarled back.

Thaos shrugged, dismissive. “Memories can be forgotten, and your face can as well, if you harden

yourself to how people react and forgo mirrors.”

Mirrors. Thaos’s eyes widened and Kile swore. It was clear that Thaos wasn’t supposed to mention the word ‘mirrors’. The dream came back to Jhan in a powerful sweep and he remembered a room filled from floor to ceiling with mirrors. His mind pieced it all together in an instant and Jhan put a name to the horror he had seen reflected back at him. His face! That had been his face! Without the drug, Jhan’s mind couldn’t deny the reality of it any longer.

Jhan slid off of Kile’s imala and landed hard on his feet, stumbling on the uneven ground as he raised hands to his face. Shock struck him like a bolt of lightning.

“We are discovered!” a soldier shouted.

Jhan looked up, hands still on his face as a new nightmare unfolded before him. Soldiers on foot, dressed in orange tunics crisscrossed by a pattern of two black snakes, came pouring over a rise of ground, swords glittering.

“Ride!” Kile shouted. “There are too many of them!”

Jhan felt the rush and pound of imala and baku passing him by, but he was unable to move, eyes locked on the oncoming terror and mind unable to bear the stress of this horror on top of the horror of his face. His world had shattered and there was no putting back the pieces in time to save his life.

Kile reached down from his imala and attempted to pull Jhan up, shouting at him to help. The unaccustomed thrashing panicked the imala. It spun and bolted after the others, throwing Kile off balance. Kile tumbled out of the saddle, hands still locked in the material of Jhan’s dress. They hit the ground hard and rolled. Kile came up almost at once and began to run, dragging Jhan behind him.

It was useless. Kile knew it even as he clawed his way up the side of a ravine and drew his sword at the top. Shoving Jhan behind him, he took a shuddering breath, preparing to fight to the death.

Like a horde of ants, the men in their orange uniforms poured towards them. One stood aside and shouted for them to give up. Kile shouted an obscenity in reply. His sword licked out and blood flew as men began to die.

Jhan drew his knife and cradled it in his hands, point resting on his breast. He knew that it would only be the space of a few heartbeats before Kile was pulled down. Then they would have him. Jhan couldn’t allow that. He would do anything to prevent it.

Jhan took one last look at Kile, wanting to see his love before oblivion. Jhan was just in time to see

a man duck under Kile's reach and stab upward with a sword. Screaming, "No!" Jhan barreled into him and stabbed with all of his might into the man's chest. The soldier mouthed an 'o' of shock and fell back into the others, taking Jhan's knife with him.

Kile grabbed Jhan by the back of his dress and heaved him backwards before he could tumble after the dead man. His sword cut a swathe of blood and gore and then he stepped back, panting, as the enemy retreated a few yards away to regroup and reconsider their strategy.

A soldier took out a bow and began choosing an arrow from a quiver. Kile shook his head in defeat and began to lower his sword. "It's done," he groaned.

Jhan grabbed Kile by the front of his tunic with both fists. "You promised!" he shrieked into Kile's face. "You promised that you wouldn't let them have me!"

Kile nodded, trembling almost as much as Jhan. "I promised," he echoed in a dead voice. He knew there wasn't much time. He swung his sword around, as if it were a bat, and took a step back from Jhan to give himself room for a killing down swing.

Jhan closed his eyes, teeth buried into his bottom lip as he nerved himself to stand still for the blow. When nothing happened, Jhan's eyes opened cautiously. Kile was staring down at him with a white face and a sick expression. "Do it!" Jhan shrieked.

"Put down your weapons!" a man commanded. "We have orders not to kill you, but Grelan here can wound you most effectively with his bow!"

"I can't!" Kile ground out and lowered his sword.

Jhan grabbed Kile with both fists again and shook at him impotently. "Why not?" Jhan screamed, sobbing wildly. "Why won't you do it, Kile!"

Kile's eyes locked on Jhan's and he leaned close, his admission dragged up from the bottom of his soul to contradict everything he had believed about himself. "Because, I love you."

"Bastard!" Jhan swung at him with pure hatred and realized, too late, that the blow was a killing one. His hand came down on flesh as bodies slammed into Jhan and carried him to the ground.

Jhan screamed as they bound him, hands behind his back and rope looped about his throat in such a way that too much motion would choke him to death. He struggled violently, wanting just that, and the soldiers were forced to cut the rope and tie him again so intricately, that even Jhan's wiry body couldn't free himself.

Soldiers put Jhan on his feet and Kile was stood up beside him, still very much alive. Jhan started in disbelief and then saw the soldier at their feet who had taken the blow. He was dead, head split like a ripe fruit. Another soldier was staring down at the body appreciatively.

“You are still as skilled as ever, General Kevelt,” the man said in awe and then looked up with a smile. “I suppose that I should simply call you Prince Jhanian, now that you are no longer leading the army.”

The man was young, barely twenty-five. His hair was a mundane brown and his gray eyes were friendly, as if Jhan and Kile hadn't just killed several of his men. Jhan searched his face, shaking and wondering if he knew the man. He didn't, Jhan realized, but that didn't make the situation any less terrifying.

“I am General Lorilan Hykerian,” the young man introduced himself with a short bow. “I am King Dagara Ku Ni's second in command. He knew you were coming, Prince Jhanian, and he thought you deserved no less of an escort.”

Jhan fainted, dropping like a brick at the feet of the young general, unable to take the shock and stress any longer. It felt like an instant, but when Jhan awoke again, he was still bound hand and foot and laying in a moving cart. The sun was slanting to late afternoon and a flurry of snow was falling.

“Jhan?” Kile's voice was tentative as if he didn't know how sane Jhan was going to be.

Jhan managed to sit up. His arms were strapped to his ankles, crossed in a brutal manner that didn't allow Jhan to get any leverage to tug on any part of his bonds. Looking slowly around, he saw that he was surrounded by soldiers on imala back and on the Ankar Road.

“They haven't offered any violence,” Kile was saying distantly. “General Hykerian is taking us to Althan Fortress. He says that Dagara has taken it over. It straddles the road and it sits a day from the pass to Rhenwall. He's moved far quicker than anyone might have imagined, Jhan. The snow didn't slow him down at all!”

Jhan didn't respond. He looked down at his hands and then slowly went over every inch of the wagon, trying to find something that he could use to reopen the old, thick scars there.

Kile went on, oblivious. “I don't understand this Hykerian. He doesn't seem to see you as you are. He treats you as if you were some sort of legendary General and he's in genuine awe of you. He also seems to be under the impression that he is fighting a just war against the evil, invading Pekarins and that Dagara Ku Ni is a some sort of hero King saving all that is good from the darkness of King Tekhal.

All of his men are of the same mind and they are all unusually young for their positions.”

Kile grunted. “But then you were also. Eighteen is very young for a second to the General of the King’s army.”

Jhan tried to twist his hands to pull at the wood of the floorboards. Half frozen from the cold, he couldn’t get his fingers to work. He ended up cutting them on the rough wood, unable to pull up even a sliver.

“Prince Jhanian!” Hykerian’s voice, coming so abruptly and so close, made Jhan flinch. He looked up in time to see the man pulling his imala up alongside the wagon. “I hope that you are not too uncomfortable? King Dagara warned me that you would be unbalanced from the spells of the enemy. He told me to take great care that you reach him in comfort and safety. If this man is bothering you, I could take him out and slay him. I kept him only because he seemed to be your guard.”

Tears were streaming down Jhan’s cheeks, but his face had a blank, dead expression on it. Kile looked from Jhan to Hykerian and then replied for Jhan. ”I am his guard, General Hykerian. The Prince would be displeased if we were separated."

“As you will, Your Highness. “ Hykerian gave a little bow as if it had been Jhan who had spoken and not Kile. He reined his imala back and away and Kile sighed, puzzled.

“Do you see what I am saying?” Kile wondered to Jhan. “It’s as if he were riding in a dream, seeing only what he wants to see.”

Jhan leveled his dead expression at Kile and Kile fell silent. “It’s the Power,” Jhan replied stonily. “It’s easier with the young. Their minds are still being formed. Dagara takes them and molds them how he wishes.” Jhan’s face twisted and he looked away. “You should have killed me. Should have killed yourself. You’re still young enough. He’ll have you too. He’ll make you think and do whatever he wants. You can’t understand, but you will.” His face twisted even more. “Love me? You’ll see what your ‘love’ has done to me. You’ll come to understand why I hate you with every fiber of my being!” Jhan measured out each word like a blow.

Jhan didn’t want to see Kile’s expression and he didn’t want to listen to what the man was babbling now. He turned his shoulder and continued to grind his bloody fingers on the floorboards, determined to pull up something or to wear off enough skin and bleed enough to die.

CHAPTER SEVEN

(Nightmares)

It was a long, hard journey and Jhan barely survived it. The snows were fierce and deep, even on the road, and the wagon was open to the harsh wind that constantly blew. They slept in tents at night, huddled under furs and blankets, but Jhan wriggled out of them when he could and managed to throw up half of what they fed him. Still, Hykerian proved diligent in his duty, and he managed to bring Jhan alive to Althan Fortress despite Jhan's best efforts.

Kile tried to repair the breach between himself and Jhan during the grueling journey, but Jhan's mind was blind to his efforts, concentrating solely on his need to find a way to die. Kile begged Jhan not lose hope, but as the walls of Althan loomed on its bare hill, Kile grew silent, beginning to accept that there wasn't going to be any rescue.

"I must leave you here," Hykerian announced as soldiers came out of the fortress to take the prisoners. "It was an honor to have ridden with you, Prince Jhanian." Hykerian gave a low bow and he and his men turned their imala and rode away.

As they passed over a drawbridge and into a courtyard, Jhan knew that his worst nightmare had come true, yet all he could do was allow himself to be taken out of the cart and follow obediently when his legs were cut free and he and Kile were led into the fortress. Jhan had given up, utterly and completely.

Jhan lagged behind Kile, letting everything drain out of him, even his hate, with every step. Jhan remembered, all too well, his long days and nights of torture. He knew that his mind and his emotions were his worst enemy. Dagara was a master at twisting and pulling them to the limits of pain and torment.

Jhan shut his mind off and shoved his emotions down deep within himself, pulling a battered shield of numb indifference around him like a well worn cloak. When an arm draped over his shoulders and quietly led him down another corridor, Jhan didn't flinch or protest as Kile went on the other way without him.

"Such an unfortunate mess," The voice was slick in Jhan's ear, almost reptilian. Jhan recognized it and a shiver ran up his spine as long fingered hands played with his short hair. They walked down steps and deeper into the fortress as the voice continued. "Pity. Such a pity. It will take a great deal of work

to make you look presentable for his Majesty.”

“Careful, Daimon, “a voice warned behind Jhan. “He knows Hurane and he isn’t under the Power of his Majesty.”

“So thin and weak,” the reptilian voice tisked. “Even I am stronger than this one.”

“Don’t bet your silver on it, Daimon.”

“He knows me,” Daimon was certain. “He still knows my touch and his training.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

A door opened and Jhan was led into a large, opulent room where several men waited patiently. Steam rose from a copper tub filled with water. Towels, soap, scents, and brushes were stacked neat and ready.

A tall figure stepped in front of Jhan. Dressed in a black robe trimmed in red, he was like a spider, all arms and legs and large black eyes. His head was as bald as an egg and a tattoo of some fanciful glyph was on one cheek. His long fingers undid Jhan’s cloak and then patiently undressed him, sighing and tisking over every inch.

“Sit.” Daimon pushed Jhan onto a stool while the other man that had followed them came into Jhan’s view. It was Dagara’s healer.

The healer’s face was lined as deep as crisscrossing ravines and his eyes were glittering as if he were a breath away from madness. His hair was iron gray now and his mouth was set in a permanent grimace against pain and torment. His expert, calloused hands touched the right side of Jhan’s face gently.

“It seems that you did not fare any better out of Dagara’s tender mercies, Jhanian Kevelt,” the healer muttered. “I will have to open these again and heal them properly.”

He shook his head, mouth turning down at the corners. “Infection under that one. I’ll have to cut and grow the flesh back. I might need his Majesty’s help with that part.” He looked down where Jhan had been bound the tightest, taking Jhan’s purple wrists in his and turning them this way and that. “Gangrene there... and there. They really feared you getting free to have bound you so tightly. Damn! Frostbite as well. This will take time, Daimon. You’ll have to heat up your water again.”

Daimon shrugged with a smile. “I have no other purpose, Gyven, than to clean up his Majesty's

toys. I can wait.”

Jhan knew what came next and he began to leap off of the stool, to scream, to fight, to run, anything to get away as his mind bolted from the bonds that he had placed on it. Gyven forestalled him, casually touching a finger to Jhan’s forehead and using his Power to take control of Jhan’s body. Jhan’s muscles locked, trembling, and Jhan couldn’t force them to obey his will as much as he tried.

Shaking and weeping, Jhan was helpless as the healer began patiently pulling the stitches out of his face. Once that was done, he used a very small, fine knife to begin slicing into the healed scars. The blade was so sharp that Jhan barely felt it through his rising panic. Only when the man started cutting deep at the mess of his chin, did Jhan try to scream. His vocal chords were as frozen as his muscles and Jhan could only weep as the pain went on and on.

“Done,” Gyven announced at last, and let out a shaky breath. The floor was covered in blood and small pieces of Jhan’s flesh. A servant was busily moping it up with rags and a bucket of water.

“I know you despise your work, but you do it well nonetheless,” Daimon noted appreciatively.

“I’m glad that you know how I feel,” Gyven replied sourly. “You won’t be offended if I don’t thank you for the compliment.”

“Yes, well, fear of one’s life makes a good goad to do one’s job properly,” Daimon said as he put a hand under Jhan’s elbow and stood him up. “If you don’t mind...”

Gyven nodded and touched Jhan’s forehead again, but Jhan wasn’t released. Instead, he felt a cloudy disconnect between his mind and his muscles. He felt as if his knees were weak and he sagged against Daimon helplessly. The man led him to the copper tub and his servants picked Jhan up and lowered him into it.

There was a chandelier of lit lanterns just above the tub. Jhan found himself staring at his reflection in the copper. Somewhat distorted, it still reflected his face clearly enough for Jhan to see that it was healed; the right side as beautiful and smooth skinned as the left. Only a sunken pockmark along his chin showed where the damage had been.

Jhan didn’t feel relieved. He felt even more horrified, his only revenge against Dagara wiped clean as if it had never happened. “Stop crying!” Daimon exclaimed in exasperation as he scrubbed off the last of the red dye mark from Jhan’s forehead. “I don’t want you to have red, puffy eyes!”

They pulled Jhan from the tub at last, the servants toweling him dry while Daimon brushed his hair and set small, silver combs into it to hold it back from Jhan’s face. Finished, he slipped a leather leash

around Jhan's neck in distaste, hating how it ruined the effect of his hard work, and handed the end of it to a soldier standing ready.

"To his Majesty," Daimon ordered briskly and waved them away as if Jhan ceased to be of importance when he wasn't working on him.

The soldier grunted in reply and tugged Jhan, naked, out of the room and along a cold corridor. The freezing stone of the floor, walls, and ceiling and the damp air made Jhan groan and collapse onto his knees. He shuddered, holding himself in an instinctive bid to keep his heart warm. The soldier stopped only long enough to drop his cape around Jhan and then he was tugging Jhan along behind him again.

Two more long corridors and then they were treading fine carpets and passing good lanterns set in wall sconces. Up a flight of stone steps, they were halted by two soldiers guarding a thick, wooden door.

One of the soldiers grinned. "General Kevelt! I still recognize you! Maybe our king will allow a little sport later on, eh?" He had a scar slashing over one eye and it twisted like a snake as he leered and reached out a hand to Jhan.

"You must not want to live very long, Angar," Jhan's escort growled impatiently. "You know our orders."

Angar's hand twitched away, as if Jhan had burned it, and the man scowled. "Our king changes his mind often. I can only hope and dream, Lenet."

"As can I," Jhan's escort replied stiffly. "You didn't lose two fingers to our little General in a practice bout. The man never gave any quarter when he wanted to make someone an example." The man flexed the marred hand and then turned it into a fist. "I'll give our General some love pats worthy of my skill if King Dagara gives us the order, but only then, Angar."

Angar shrugged and opened the door. Jhan's escort retrieved his cloak from Jhan and pushed Jhan inside. He didn't follow, closing the door firmly behind Jhan.

Left in near darkness, Jhan blinked dazedly at tall candelabras flickering with red flames like bloody fingers. Their eerie light picked out the shape of a wide bed draped in furs and fur covered pillows. The floor was covered just as thickly with animal pelts. Thick tapestries blanketed every chilling wall.

Two of the red lights blinked and then blinked again as a dark shadow unfolded from a chair. Bare

to the waist, Dagara was as handsome as ever. His lean body was like a panther's, all whip cord muscle under pale skin. He wore loose, black trousers and soft black ankle boots. Silver bracelets glittered and chimed on each wrist. Diamond earrings sparkled like drops of fire at each ear and a string of them shimmered across his brow. When he opened his mouth in a sensual, appreciative smile, Jhan could see his perfect, white, sharp teeth.

Jhan reacted without thinking, desperate and succumbing at last to a fear so great that it moved muscles despite Gyven's tampering Power. Yanking the silver combs from his hair, Jhan tried to stab himself with their sharp points.

Dagara's smile never faltered. He rushed towards Jhan with inhuman speed. Passing Jhan by, Dagara whirled a foot around, catching Jhan in the back and sending him sailing across the room. Jhan crashed into the chair Dagara had been sitting in, and went sprawling. Before he could recover, Dagara was on him, powerful hands locking on Jhan's wrists and pulling him up from the floor and very close.

Standing on Jhan's feet, Dagara bent Jhan in half, backwards, and applied pressure on Jhan's wrists until Jhan let the silver combs fall from numb hands, moaning in pain and defeat.

"I taught you everything you know, Moon Flower!" Dagara laughed. "How could you imagine that you could defy me?"

Dagara righted Jhan once more, whirled him about as if they were dancing, and then threw Jhan onto the bed. Landing on his back, Jhan was free for only a second before Dagara was leaping on top of him with the lightness of a cat, and pinning Jhan's hands above his head.

"Like the Jhanian of old." Dagara's voice was like black silk. "I missed the way that you fought to the bitter end, screaming and swearing at me every obscenity known to man. I missed the feel of you and the smell of your fear. Even after you died and came back to life, you were still very sweet. My masterpiece."

Dagara's eyes bored into Jhan's. "I missed you so much that I finally searched for you with my Power. I could not believe my good fortune when I discovered you following in my path. It was almost too easy to send young Hykerian out to fetch you."

Something happened. A searing knife of Power sliced into Jhan's brain and Jhan found himself going limp. Dagara released his hands and Jhan lay as still as death; a bird transfigured by a snake. "Moon Flower," Dagara whispered and the name tripped wire after wire in Jhan's mind. He was pulled into a tight net of control in an instant and Jhan knew, without a doubt, that he would do anything

Dagara ordered.

Dagara felt free to roll sideways and look Jhan's body over slow and intimately, hand gently caressing. "You have changed. My tastes have changed as well. It would have displeased me if you had remained as small as I first made you. I like that you are taller, slender, yet rounded as well. Alaina Yhenii made me appreciate a woman's body. I never knew it could be so sweet and soft. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed punishing her for betraying me. Killing the Duke angered me to no end, my Moon Flower. That she would have allowed you to escape afterward... she would be regretting her mistake even now... if she had lived. She wasn't as sturdy as you, Jhanian. No, not at all."

Dagara's hand rose from its idle play and touched the pockmark on Jhan's chin. "I still like perfection. I will have to correct a few things." Without warning, Dagara rolled onto Jhan again and leaned very close. "And I still must punish you for killing Duke Yheni." Dagara's sharp teeth tore into the side of Jhan's throat and then he looked down into Jhan's eyes with a blood dripping grin.

"Welcome home, Moon Flower."

"You haven't been hurt at all." Kile dropped Jhan's brown robe back into place and then stood back marveling at Jhan's face. "I can still hardly believe that even King Dagara's Power could have healed such wounds."

That he couldn't connect a healed face with the healing Gyven had worked, after Dagara had ripped him apart, stunned Jhan. He stared at Kile from where he hadn't moved since being led into that well appointed room. Mute, as Dagara had commanded with his Power, Jhan was unable to do anything but scream inwardly and wish that he were dead.

"I had dinner with him while you were gone," Kile went on, disappointed when Jhan didn't answer him. He paced the rich carpets on the floor and stopped to pick up a crystal figurine from a shining wood table. The entire room was filled with such things. A great window let in light and a wide bed, covered in finely embroidered quilts, sprawled off to one side.

Jhan knew about the dinner. Afterward, Dagara had lounged in a chair at the table, throwing Jhan bits of what was left. Using Jhan's back as a footstool, Dagara had laughed as Jhan had been forced to eat off the floor. Dagara had taken pleasure in giving Jhan a mocking assessment of Kile. The plans he had laid out for the man had been nothing short of demonic.

“I don’t know what to think, Jhan,” Kile was saying. “You’ve told me such horror stories, but all I find is loyal men of good character and a well spoken king who wants to sue for peace. He intends to send me to Tekhal, as soon as the weather allows, with letters of his peaceful intentions.”

To draw Tekhal and Torian out, Jhan knew, and then to kill them all while they stood in the stronghold of the enemy. Rhenwall was a gate Dagara could pass with a blast of his Power. It was better to have demoralized and leaderless soldiers on the other side when he did.

Kile faced Jhan with a frown. “King Dagara told me that he is a landless King who was attacked by Karana and Petrath without cause. He’s told me that he fought and pushed his enemies back, as any man would have. He... He also told me that you had been so distraught by what your father had done to Dagara and his people, that you went to help him against your own country. He said that the stress proved too much for you when your people were killed in battle. You went mad. He denies that you were ever abused or tortured. In fact, he swears that his own healer, Gyven, cared for you every day until you escaped and found your way to Pekarín.”

It was all so perfectly horrible, Jhan thought as he felt his heart constrict in his chest. He didn’t want to hear anymore, but he was a puppet, waiting for someone to pull the strings. His mind was a prisoner, clawing and running into the walls that bound it; desperate to escape at any cost. The price, in the end, would be his sanity.

Kile sighed and took hold of Jhan’s hand. He led Jhan over to the bed and sat him down on the edge. He became nervous, eyes not meeting Jhan’s. “We should discuss another thing.”

Jhan couldn’t weep anymore. His tears had run dry after the long hours of torture. When Kile’s hand took hold of his perfect chin, Jhan could only recall, in gory detail, the manner in which Dagara had fixed it. He couldn’t see Kile’s eyes looking into his own and he couldn’t see the pain on Kile’s face. Jhan could only feel searing Power and see the red glow of another set of eyes.

“I know, in a moment of weakness, that I said -” Kile’s voice struggled, but he was determined. “That I said that I loved you. I can’t take that back. We both know it’s true. However...” Kile let that sentence drop, searching Jhan’s eyes for understanding. When Jhan still didn’t reply, he continued, frustrated that he had to actually speak the words. “You are a man. We both know that what we feel for each other can never be anything other than... than that.”

Kile released Jhan’s chin and paced, hands working at his sides. “I can’t understand it, or, maybe I can,” Kile continued anxiously. “Jaross said it best. He told me once that everything about you spoke of a woman, even your voice and manner. He denounced me when I said that you didn’t effect me the way

that you did him. It *was* a lie. You did effect me. Even after your face was scarred, it didn't matter. I still felt the same way. There's something about you... It speaks to my soul. I'm going to spend my life wishing that you had been a woman, but that's to the point. You aren't a woman and you never will be. Nothing can be between us. We both know that."

Kile walked away. There was a decanter of some strong drink. He took out the stopper and poured himself a glass with shaking hands, taking a long drink. "I hope that you appreciate how hard that little speech was for me," Kile whispered. "That I even admitted how I feel... I've hardly admitted it to myself."

The silence stretched. Jhan stared at the weave in the rug, unable to move or even to think enough to consider Kile's words. The man had poured out his heart and denied Jhan in the same breath. Unknowingly, Kile had crushed Jhan under his foot when Jhan had been most vulnerable. Jhan's mind simply melted. There was no other way to describe it. Everything ceased to matter. Jhan was aware, yet not aware, as still and as unthinking as a statue.

"Why won't you say something?" Kile demanded, angry now and turning to Jhan with the glass still gripped in a white knuckled hand. "Your eyes just... stare! Are you so angry with me? You should be glad that I didn't kill you when you asked! You feared so much, but it was just part of your madness! You almost drew me into it, Jhan. I almost believed you enough to slay you! Why can't you forgive me?"

Kile was believing everything that Dagara had said to him without even realizing it. Dagara was too clever for him and too powerful. A little at a time, Dagara would pull Kile in, lull him and make him believe totally before releasing him and sending him to spread his lies and assurances to Tekhal and Torian.

Kile set his glass down hard, face going suddenly firm with resolve. "King Dagara is sending me with his dispatches, as I said, as soon as the weather clears. He wants you to remain under the care of his healer and I... I agree. I don't think that you could survive any more traveling, Jhan. Rest here and, when Spring comes, I'll escort you safely back to Pekarín myself. Two more months, three at the most. We'll have peace by then and Althan will be back in Duke De Oro's rightful hands. I know you had trouble with him before, but he wouldn't dare treat you badly while I'm around!"

So sure of himself, Kile never doubted the truth of his own words.

“Wave and smile,” Dagara ordered softly in Jhan’s ear.

Jhan lifted a hand and gave a weak wave and a sickly smile as he stood in a chill wind on the balcony outside of Dagara’s rooms. Kile seemed surprised to see Jhan there, only noticing him by chance as he’d glanced back at the fortress. Kile gave a short salute in return and then urged his imala into the deeper forest. Jhan stared after him until Kile’s golden hair winked out of sight, knowing that his last shred of protection was now gone.

“Good. Alone at last.” Dagara retrieved his cloak from Jhan’s naked body and gently turned Jhan. Leading Jhan back into his dark rooms, he closed the balcony doors, drawing shut the black curtains as if he detested the light of the sun.

Dagara sat Jhan on a stool and began stroking Jhan’s short hair. “I may have to save your dear Kile,” Dagara was saying as he extended his Power to Jhan. Jhan felt the roots of his hair begin to flame and burn. “He’s even more malleable than Hykerian. If it turns out that he is also a good strategist, I may cut Hykerian’s career short and replace him with Lord Kile.”

As if through a white haze, Jhan recalled the last week of terror. Jhan’s silence had ceased to bother Kile and he had even, because of Dagara’s control over him, ceased to notice Jhan’s disappearances or question him about where he had been. Dagara had held much of his attacks on Jhan in check while he had worked with Kile, but now that was over with and Jhan knew that the worst had just begun.

“Curlier this time... and not so long. All of that hair was cumbersome last time,” Dagara murmured as he worked. Jhan moaned softly with every breath, a counter rhythm to Dagara’s silken, dangerous tones.

“There. Like that.” Dagara held up Jhan’s hair and then let it fall appreciatively. It flowed like silk, full of soft curls and long enough to fall just past Jhan’s waist. The stinging in Jhan’s scalp subsided. Shuddering and taking a deep breath, Jhan waited for the next torture to begin, knowing that Dagara was never satisfied.

“You are so hard,” Dagara noted in distaste. “I grew to appreciate Alaina’s softness. Since I don’t need you to be my little weapon any longer, we can add a little weight to your sharp bones. That takes a change. Here. Here. Done.”

Jhan choked on a scream as something reached down into his deepest being and changed the very

matrix of the body that he inhabited.

“Yes, I’m getting very skilled at that,” Dagara congratulated himself. “I’ve been tinkering with a few men, changing them into feral creatures to see how deeply I could effect the part of them that controls how a man is a man. Unfortunately, you ran afoul of one. Kile told me how it had marked your face and Gyven reported the damage he had to heal. Still, they served their purpose. I can do just about anything now.”

Dagara’s eyes were glowing like coals. He didn’t appear to know it. The hand he placed on Jhan’s face was burning hot. Jhan met those eyes and his own narrowed in pain. Dagara mistook it for a defiant glare.

“Do you have something to say?” Dagara wondered and he smiled, showing his sharp fangs. “You should be glad of my changes. Lord Kile gave me a confusing story of how you thought that you were a woman forced into Jhanian’s body by my Power. My last taste of you must have driven you over the edge to believe such a thing. Do you believe it still? Was it easier to believe that than to know that your enemy had you as a man? The ultimate degradation. Total domination. Complete defeat. Speak Moon Flower. Say what you will.”

Jhan’s tongue was released, but it felt impossible to use it. He knew Dagara only wanted to humiliate him and to make him fight. It’s what Dagara liked best. Jhan’s mind was hiding in the very back of his consciousness, crouching like a hunted animal and knowing that the hunter was waiting to spring. Still, there was a hard core of defiance there as well, the same defiance that had helped him survive when he had first woke to find that he was Jhanian Kevelt instead of Christine. It rose above the melted slag of sanity and dared to say the only word it could form. “Typical.”

Dagara blinked and those fiery eyes seemed to bank and grow dimmer, uncertain what Jhan meant. Jhan could see him turning the word over and over in his mind. Jhan hardly knew what he’d meant himself, but even his torture numbed senses derived a flash of pleasure that he had so discomfited Dagara.

Dagara found his own meaning at last and leaned close to Jhan, angry. He picked Jhan up with his powerful arms and threw Jhan onto the bed. Crawling on top, he drew a long, sharp knife and turned it so that it flashed and glittered in Jhan’s wide, dead eyes. “Do I bore you, Jhanian Kevelt, is that what you’re saying? Do you believe that I’ve plumbed the depths of what can be done to a man? Do you think you’ve suffered every torment of my infinite imagination?”

Dagara searched Jhan’s eyes. “You’re trying to hide from me, but it won’t work. I have the key to

all of your doors and I know how to wring the last ounce of your soul between my hands. I think we shall start with this fantasy of yours. Perhaps we should see how badly you want it to come true?"

"Jhan?" A panting voice sounded outside of Jhan's window and a familiar face was pasted against the thick glass.

Jhan sat in a chair near a fire, naked and leather lead trailing on the floor beside him. The small room Dagara had put him in was all but unused. Frozen in place by Power, Jhan would sit there until they came to either attend to him or take him back to Dagara. It was only by chance that he was facing the window when Jaross appeared there.

"Open the window!" Jaross begged anxiously. "Jhan!"

Like the puppet he was, Jhan rose stiffly and obeyed, throwing back a bolt and stepping out of the way as Jaross opened the window and scrambled in with a spray of snow and a rush of cold. Closing the window hurriedly, Jaross put an arm around Jhan and led him back to the fire.

"You'll freeze! Why don't you have anything on?" Jaross swore in a low hiss. He left Jhan to lock the door to the room and then returned, crouching by the fire and pulling off thick gloves with his teeth. He stretched out his hands to the warm flames and heaved a shivering sigh. When Jhan didn't reply, Jaross straightened, turned, and then froze; mouth dropping as if he were going to shriek.

"I-I, oh, Jhan! What have they done?" Jaross choked and sobbed. "What -! I knew when I ran into Kile that things weren't right! I knew -! Oh, Gods! What have they done? What have they done to you?"

Jhan stood before Jaross like a white wraith, skin as pale as milk and eyes like blue wells of suffering. His black hair lay about him like a curly, silken cloak and his body poised like a statue of perfection, curving delicately at hip and shoulder. Two small breasts swelled firm and round, their tips the color of a pink rose. Jaross saw none of that. His eyes were riveted at the place below Jhan's naval. What he knew should have been there was missing. All that was left was only something that shadowed a woman's form.

Jaross sat down on the carpeted floor heavily, hands going over his mouth as if he feared he were

going to vomit. He was shaking like a leaf and he sobbed, tears springing to his eyes. “The bastard left you!” Jaross erupted suddenly. “Kile left you and - and they cut you! I’ve heard of such things! Horrible stories of the desert people treating their slaves like that to make them meek! I heard a storyteller recount it and I had nightmares for a year! I-I this is- I’ll kill him! I’ll kill Kile for leaving you and I’ll kill Dagara Ku Ni for doing it! I’ll kill them all!”

Jaross was weeping full force now, covering his face as if there wasn’t any fear of discovery, and letting his horror wash over him. Jhan stared at the man’s bowed head, hardly aware that he was even there. Jhan was lost in a world that had become flashing, cutting knives and parting flesh. Blood red eyes drank Jhan’s soul and a silken laugh promised to take him to even greater heights of torment.

Jaross recovered with an effort and stood up. He searched Jhan’s face, startled and sickened that it had been made whole and perfect again. “We’re getting out of here. I won’t leave you,” and he stressed the ‘I’. “It was easy enough to get past the soldiers and move from balcony to balcony until I found you. It will be just as easy to escape.” Jaross flung open a closet and found it empty.

Jaross went almost as pale as Jhan as he turned back to him, unsure what to do. Beside the thin blanket on the bed there wasn’t anything to cover Jhan with. Jaross began to head for the door. “I’ll have to chance -”

There were voices raised in laughter. Jhan’s ever present guards. Jaross flinched and began to have second thoughts. His eyes went to Jhan and he began to finally realize that he didn’t have a workable plan. Jaross turned his hands into fists as he noticed the long leather lead tied about Jhan’s neck and Jhan’s glassy eyes.

“Do you even know I’m here?” Jaross wondered quietly, emotions making him choke on the words. He jabbed a fist at Jhan’s face and stopped it shy of Jhan’s left eye. When Jhan didn’t blink, his fear was confirmed.

“They were right. I am a child.” Jaross turned away from Jhan, crossing arms over his chest and bowing his head in anguish. “Prince Thaos ordered me to return home. I decided to defy him in the end, but I was just slow enough in making up my mind to meet Kile riding with his messages from King Dagara. The man seemed strange, eager to tell Tekhal and Torian that Dagara wanted peace and that he was a man to be trusted. It was as if he hadn’t had you as an example of the man’s cruelty before his eyes for months on end! When he told me that he had actually left you behind in the man’s ‘care’, I rode here at once to see for myself.”

Jaross slowly began pulling on his gloves. “It took hours to find you. I thought that I would freeze

to death! I almost gave up, resigning myself to seeking out Tekhal and voicing my fears to him..."

Jaross turned to look at Jhan again, his face stunned by sudden realization. "He doesn't know... I need to get to him and inform him of this! Kile will be telling him his lies by now and, though I don't think Tekhal is such a fool, he might believe them!"

Jaross reached out hesitantly and took hold of Jhan's cold hand. "I came to rescue you, not thinking, not planning, not caring about anything but what I wanted. You were right when you called me self-centered and selfish. My first thought should have been for King Tekhal and all of the people who are going to die because I let Kile deliver messages I suspected were wrong! I thought it more important to satisfy my desire to see you again, to prove something by rescuing you, to be your hero and to redeem myself for what I did to you back in that village... for the terrible things I said after you lost your face to that creature. I had a great deal of time to think about those things while I was alone and... and I grew to dislike myself."

Tears were starting in Jaross' eyes again as he stepped away from Jhan, softly unlocked the door, and then started towards the window. "I'm going to hate myself for the rest of my life, Jhan, for what I'm about to do, but it might be the first unselfish thing that I have ever done. I'm going to think of the greater good and put my feelings and desires aside. I-I can't rescue you. It was madness to think that I could. You wouldn't survive it. Kile told me that, but I didn't believe him. I can see it for myself now. I have to go to Tekhal. I have to warn him."

Jaross opened the window and the cold and snow slammed into him and covered him. He shuddered and braced himself. "I won't ask you to forgive me, Jhan, but I hope that you can still understand enough to know why I'm doing this."

Jaross didn't say goodbye. He slipped out of the window and closed it tight behind him. Jhan had a last look of the dimmed reflection of Jaross' face and then even that was gone. The snow melted into the carpet and the warmth recaptured the room while Jhan stood where Jaross had left him, not comprehending at all what had just transpired.

The door opened and two soldiers strode in, speaking together. The first one noticed Jhan's change of position immediately. He stopped and scowled angrily. Turning to the second soldier, he motioned with three fingers to indicate the three guards still out of sight behind the door. He finished the motion with a cut across his throat. The second soldier nodded grimly and went out, drawing his sword.

Jhan heard screams and frightened protests. All was quickly silenced and the second soldier returned, cleaning his bloody sword on a torn piece of cloth. The first soldier nodded approvingly.

“Fools to put hands on Dagara’s toys without orders.”

The second soldier smiled as he sheathed his sword. “They didn’t make any mess, it seems, so who’s to know?”

“Who’s to know if *we* have some fun?” the first clarified and looked disgusted. “I know who and what that used to be! That’s not my idea of fun!”

The second soldier looked Jhan up and down, still smiling. “Do you suppose that *it* is still virgin?”

“Knowing King Dagara’s tastes, yes. He played some with Duke Yhenii’s daughter, but I never heard he went that far with it.” The first soldier looked darkly at the second as he picked up Jhan’s lead and headed for the door. “Unless you want to end up worse than the little general, you’d best keep your pants on.”

“For now,” the second chuckled promisingly and ran a crude hand over one of Jhan’s hips.

CHAPTER EIGHT

(Oblivion)

“If you would just tell me what effect you wish to have, your Majesty and leave the dressing to me...” Daimon trailed off pointedly, fearful yet protective of his skill.

Dagara was dressed in a black silk robe sliced from hip to heel on both sides, revealing red silk pants tucked into golden boots. His hair was loose about his shoulders, and a silver crown, sparkling with diamonds, was on his head. His handsome face was irritated, eyes slitted and almost feral in their darkness.

Jhan sat on a stool, naked, washed, and perfumed. Gyven was standing near him, having just healed the last of Dagara’s attempts to make Jhan perfect. “There isn’t much more that I can do, your Majesty,” Gyven cut in. “You have brought him as close as... well, to be blunt, as close as your skill will allow.”

Dagara whirled on Gyven and Jhan, motioning angrily below Jhan’s waist. “I wanted his humiliation, his degradation, to be perfect. How can it be perfect when he isn’t perfectly female?”

“Because he was never born to be so, your Majesty,” Gyven replied in a small voice, sweat on his brow. “You cannot give him what a female has inside. This is just what it seems, a counterfeit. An appearance. There is nothing to mold or change. It is simply not there. Unless your Power is greater than I know of, you have reached the limit.”

Dagara was very displeased. “I tried to reverse him, to take him back far enough to recreate his gender. The Power refused to work the change. I felt the earth trembling.” His expression twisted and he gritted his fangs. “I wanted to make him pregnant and bear my child. Inventive, don’t you think? He dared to call me boring! He dared to mock me and my genius! I would have taken him to the very limit and had him look me in the eye when mind and body had reached the pinnacle of torment.”

Dagara shoved Gyven aside. “I *will* have that yet, but now, there are other matters; matters of conquest. You will listen very carefully, Daimon.”

Daimon crouched like a great spider at the center of its web, every sense attentive to Dagara’s will. “Your Majesty?”

“Jhanian is my masterpiece,” Dagara explained. “I wish him dressed like a royal consort. He will

be my gift to King Tekhal, my proof of sincerity. They will marvel that I have cared for him so well.”

“A female consort or a male?” Daimon asked, raising an appreciative eyebrow.

“Female,” Dagara replied impatiently.

“But, they will see what you have done to him, your Majesty,” Gyven pointed out, mystified.

“Out of kindness, Gyven,” Dagara laughed. That laugh was like claws along Jhan’s spine, rousing him slightly from his numbness. He became aware of the room, suddenly, but as if it were a dream. The people in it were shadowy apparitions on the edge of sight.

“It will distract them wonderfully until my men get into position,” Dagara explained patiently. “Watch the drama unfold, Gyven. You will be there by my side along with our lovely Jhanian.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Gyven muttered uncomfortably.

“You’re slipping, Gyven,” Dagara’s voice was like a whip and Gyven blinked in alarm and straightened. “Don’t tempt me to break that spirit of yours yet again!”

Gyven shuddered. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. I am merely tired. I meant no disrespect!”

Daimon brought forward a beautiful dress of dark blue velvet. “Left behind by De Oro’s wife,” he explained. “She was taller and more a woman, but it falls heavy and should still look well on Jhanian.”

Dagara nodded and seemed eager to help Daimon, slipping the velvet folds over Jhan’s head and down about his body. Dagara’s hands smoothed over Jhan’s curves possessively and his eyes glittered with his Power. Pulling down on the cleavage so that it hung low over Jhan’s small breasts, Dagara revealed an expanse of white skin and a long, slim neck.

Very slowly, as if he couldn’t help himself, Dagara ran his tongue along that expanse, tracing a sensuous, warm trail all the way up to where the pulse ran beside Jhan’s ear. When Dagara buried his fangs there, gnawing and tasting Jhan’s blood, Jhan was jolted in his seat by the flash of pain. It pulled Jhan from the numbness a bit more. He was able to smell Dagara’s musky scent, as well as the sharp tang of his own blood, as his back hit the floor and Dagara lay atop him devouring his neck.

Some time later, Jhan was sitting on the stool again, Gyven sighing in exhaustion as he healed Jhan’s neck. Daimon was muttering in relief that the blue dress was unharmed.

“Diamonds in his ears. They are my favorite,” Dagara was saying as if nothing had happened, blood trailing down his mouth unnoticed.

“Jhanian isn’t a he anymore,” Gyven remarked as he finished and stepped away, wiping his

forehead.

Dagara laughed. “You are so very correct, Gyven.”

Dagara took up a length of white silk and wrapped it about Jhan’s neck as if he were threatening to hang Jhan with it. Once, twice, and then into a great bow at the back of Jhan’s neck. Daimon was busy piling Jhan’s black curls on top of his head, weaving silver strands hanging with diamonds throughout a fantastical hairstyle. He ended by shoving silver posts, dangling with more diamonds, through Jhan’s unpierced ears. They spotted with blood, but Daimon was quick to sop it up with a bit of cloth.

Dagara pulled Jhan to a great mirror in a floor stand. He held Jhan in a bone crushing embrace so that they were both reflected there. He whispered into Jhan’s aching ear like a hissing snake. “Just a little audience, Lady Jhanian, with your dear father and King Tekhal. We’ll play with them awhile, you and I, and then I’ll put them in my Power and crush them. A little sport before we repair to my quarters for some more ‘personal’ pleasure. Shall we find out, together, how much of a woman I have managed to make you?”

Jhan stared at his reflection and his mind surfaced, still numb and cold, but helplessly present despite his fight to remain in the safety of madness. As if through a white fog, Jhan saw himself glittering at every point, skin as luminous as moonlight. His reflection was of a beautiful woman, mounds of dark curls framing blue eyes that mirrored back to him the same darkness that was in Dagara’s eyes.

A woman. He was a woman. Jhan wrapped the white fog of his mind about him and closed his eyes. Everything he had... *She* had ever dreamed and hoped for had come true in the most cruel and useless fashion. Instead of the greatest of gifts, it was a weapon to be used against her, a ‘sport’ for Dagara to torment her with.

Dagara released Jhan quite suddenly and strode away, leaving Jhan to be caught by Daimon and straightened as if she had been a doll tossed aside by a bored child. “Make certain that our Lady Jhanian has attended to her more delicate needs. We don’t want to have her making a mess when I present her to her loving father, now do we?”

“Yes, I mean, no, your Majesty,” Daimon agreed.

Dagara strode out of the room, with his guards in tow, and the room relaxed noticeably. Daimon sat Jhan on the stool once again and Jhan found herself staring at a splatter of her blood on the carpet.

“He expects King Tekhal to simply walk in, with King Torian, without any of his soldiers for

protection?” Gyven scowled in disbelief.

“He can just reach out and kill them all with his Power if he chooses,” Daimon muttered as he fine tuned Jhan’s hair. “He has done it before.”

“And left a wasteland to show for it,” Gyven replied. “I don’t think that he will chance that again. Even the weather wasn’t right a month afterward. Unleashed Power can destroy everything and everyone, Daimon.”

“And we are traveling towards the stronghold of the Sahvossa,” Daimon interjected worriedly. “I’ve heard enough stories about those creatures to be alarmed. They have great Power, I have heard.”

“And it is so, but they won’t use it against Dagara,” Gyven said with certainty.

“Why not?”

“My Power is only for healing and mind work,” Gyven explained. “Most people only have little drips and drabs. To have Power such as Dagara and the Sahvossa... that is the difference between a lighted stick and the sun itself. If it gets out of control, the Balance itself can tip.”

“The Balance? That religion of yours again, Gyven?” Daimon complained.

“Not a religion,” Gyven corrected, irritated. “A fact. Balance holds everything in check. Balance makes everything work with everything else. Tip it one way or another and everything unravels. Dagara’s Power was never meant to be.”

“Then how can it be?” Daimon demanded skeptically.

“I don’t know,” Gyven admitted. “But he seems able to open all the doors in his mind to the Power.”

“And the Sahvossa,” Daimon surmised. “Perhaps they are the other side of Balance’s scale? Perhaps they were meant to keep him in check?”

Gyven became confused, shaking his head. “We can’t know and... for us, it doesn’t matter, does it? We are Dagara’s slaves. Our torment might only end when the world or Dagara does.”

Jhan heard them and she felt herself following the conversation and understanding it. She didn’t want to. She struggled to pull back the white fog and failed. It slipped through her fingers and the room came into a hazy focus.

Daimon was shrugging and walking away, picking up bloody towels and shoos servants before him with his long fingered hands. “You make my head ache, Gyven. Take Dagara’s toy where he

wishes it to go and leave me and my narrow precepts of reality alone.”

When Daimon had gone, Gyven leaned close to Jhan and whispered, “You hear me, don’t you?”

Jhan blinked and was able to turn her head, looking at Gyven as if she were drugged and half frozen.

“Good.” Gyven’s mouth was set in a firm line. “Dagara has awakened the Power in you once again. Do you feel it? Do you see the doors in your mind all standing wide open?”

Jhan could. Those parts of her mind burned and pulsed dangerously, the Power a live thing that wanted escape. It was tearing down all of Dagara’s compulsions and controls as if they were paper walls and chains.

“You have grown strong inwardly.” Gyven was relieved, a mad hope in his eyes. “I saw it happen the first time you were here, but you hadn’t any mind left to control it. Dagara had crushed you completely and then sent you away. Now, you sense it. You know it’s potential. I can see that in your mind.”

Gyven moved as close to Jhan’s ear as he could, his breath stirring the diamonds hanging from Jhan’s lobe. “Dagara has made you as powerful as himself and he doesn’t even realize it! You’ll be able to take him unaware. You will kill him. Unleash your Power and take him, and yes, all of us down into darkness. End my torment. End *your* torment!”

Gyven touched Jhan’s throat and pinched flesh between thumb and forefinger cruelly tight. It squeezed a nerve that sent a shot of pain through Jhan’s entire body. Jhan jerked and gasped, but Gyven released her just as quickly, having made his point. “If you refuse. If you choose to join me in this nightmare of a life, I will make you suffer as keenly as Dagara ever could. I know your body much more... intimately.”

Gyven let that threat hang as pulled Jhan to her feet and led her out of the room. They traveled upward in the fortress, taking stair after stair until windows looked out very high over the tops of a rolling evergreen forest and a line of snow capped mountains. At last, Gyven opened double doors and pulled Jhan into a large audience hall. The floor was white marble and the columns had been gilded in silver. A long blue carpet, sprinkled with an embroidery of white flowers, led the way to a raised dais with a blue cushioned wooden chair atop it.

“Tasteful,” Gyven grunted. “De Oro must like blue.”

The room was empty and the cold was drifting down from high windows that weren’t sealed with

glass. It wasn't a room to be used during the winter, but Dagara had probably chosen it for its grandness, Jhan thought, and then was surprised that she could even think it. She groaned in despair and Gyven turned to look at her.

"Yes, the time is done for you to hide in madness," Gyven said roughly. "I closed that off to you while I healed you. There is only one way for you to escape and it won't be inside your own head."

Jhan wanted to scream, to cry, to run, anything but be led and placed on a blue cushion at the foot of the blue throne. The drama was going to begin there and Jhan knew that blood was going to flow before its end. She also knew that she would be forced to witness and perhaps, participate in all of it. Trapped outside of blessed numbness, madness, and oblivion Jhan knew that it would be like salt thrown into deep wounds and ground there.

"You know what Dagara intends," Gyven whispered. "He'll play with them, and dangle their hopes and dreams before them, before he has them all taken and put in his cells. There, he'll take them apart, piece by piece, just as he did you... just as he did me. Can you bear that? Your Brother? Your Father? Even the man you love? Yes, I know. Lord Kile told me all about it while I assuaged his fears about my skill. Poor mad Prince, he said, and how sorry he felt for you. Can you watch Dagara torture him?"

Gyven arranged Jhan's skirt so that it was a flow of blue velvet all about her. He fussed distractedly to position Jhan just right and then wiped a tear out of Jhan's eye. "Don't cry," he warned. "He'll suspect."

Gyven stood back, face going very dark and distressed. "You know death is better than what Dagara intends for them. Save them the horror, little puppet," Gyven taunted. "Little whore. Plaything. Perverted creature. Emasculated man who once led armies. Or, maybe I was wrong. Maybe you do like Dagara's touch and his -" Gyven said something foul and Jhan shook from head to foot. "He will do as he promised," Gyven warned. "He might even make your sweet Kile watch while he does it. I'll tell him how much you care for the man. He'll make him part of your torment."

Gyven leaned close to twitch something from Jhan's dress with a harsh motion. "I'm surprised that anything can horrify you at this point, but I see that you are. Think on it during the audience. You know that the only thing that you can do for all of them is to kill everyone now instead of letting Dagara do it, slowly, later."

Gyven took a position behind Jhan and stood idly with arms crossed over his chest. His words had been like clubs and Jhan trembled, trying to come to terms with them. He knew that Gyven was right,

but to use the Power might kill more than everyone in that room. Jhan remembered Whitefur's words and Gregory's fear that Jhan might destroy the world entirely. Gyven either knew and didn't care or couldn't conceive of that much destruction.

The doors swung open and Dagara swept in with ten soldiers. The soldiers lined up against the walls, and Dagara strode the fine carpet up to the throne and settled there with the false casualness of a panther ready to spring. He looked at Jhan appreciatively and nodded to Gyven.

"I think we are ready," Dagara said with an anticipatory smile and motioned to a guard by the doors. The guard went out and they waited.

After long moments, the guard returned, escorting Kile, Jaross, Bheni, Rehn, and Thaos. They all looked grim and determined except for Kile, who was looking uncertain and embarrassed.

Thaos stepped forward with Kile at his side. "Your Majesty," Thaos said with a short bow and a dark look at Jhan. "I regret that my Father was not able to come, but he took ill and died a month ago." Thaos's jaw clenched and then released as he bit out. "I am now King of Karana."

"I am honored by the presence of his son, nonetheless," Dagara replied sulkily. "But what of King Tekhal? How are we to work out a plan for peace when he is not here?"

"King Tekhal has offered to meet with you outside of Althan," Thaos replied, "He has made camp in a clearing a mile from here and asks that you attend talks in a position where neither has strength of numbers."

"Ah, he distrusts me," Dagara said with a seemingly hurt expression. "Lord Kile? Didn't you deliver my assurances that I had moved my troops far to the South? I am only attended by a handful of soldiers. I fail to see how he can feel threatened."

Kile bowed low, distressed as he looked from Dagara to Jhan. "Lord Jaross reported that Jhan-Jhanian had been ill treated, your Majesty. He said that you had..." Kile swallowed hard.

"I saw it!" Jaross stepped forward, face red with disgust and anger. "I saw that you cut him! Your assurances mean nothing when you are capable -"

Dagara raised a hand and Jaross fell silent as if his throat had been grabbed. Dagara's eyes slitted. "Be very careful, Lord Jaross Nava, before you accuse a King of such an atrocity. Prince Jhanian Kevelt took a knife to himself. My healer tells me that he was screaming that he truly wished to be a woman."

Gyven nodded from behind Dagara's shoulder. "He is mad, my lords. Even my skill was unable to repair the damage."

Dagara's face smoothed out and he looked sympathetic. "It must have been a shock to see it, Lord Jaross. I can understand your anger and distress. For Jhanian to have committed an act every man has nightmares about... you can see that he will never recover." Dagara motioned to Jhan's appearance. "We've decided to indulge him, instead, out of kindness."

Jhan watched their faces, knowing how easily Dagara was going to make them believe him. It was far easier to comprehend that Jhan could do such a thing in madness, rather than that a man could be so evil to have committed it. And so, Dagara drew them in, tugging at their minds with his Power.

It surprised Jhan when Thaos resisted. He had his hand on his sword hilt, black eyes intense under his scowling brows. "Is this true, Jhan? Did you do such a thing?"

Rehn wasn't about to believe it either. He knew Jhan too well and he knew more of the horror Jhan had lived through than anyone else. The man was searching Jhan's blank eyes, wanting Jhan to speak and deny it.

Bheni was looking straight at Dagara and her eyes never left the man. Jhan could see that every muscle in her body was tense and her hand was white knuckled on the hilt of her sword. Jhan could imagine the protests she must have voiced, knowing men so well and suspecting the trap. Still, she had come anyway, for Jhan's sake, and with the futile belief that her presence could somehow make a difference.

Jaross was nodding. Foolish man! Jhan thought. He was so easily controlled! "That could be," Jaross was saying and his words stunned Jhan, "and I might have believed it if I hadn't spent a great deal of time traveling with Jhan. I know how strong he- she can be. If she had been of a mind to do such a thing, she would never have waited until she was in the worst of places to do it."

"Jhan?" Thaos prompted again. "Speak. Confirm or deny this."

"You insult me!" Dagara exploded and stood up like a loaded spring. He looked down at Jhan and Jhan could see that he was both confused and outraged that his plan was falling apart around him. Dagara couldn't understand why no one was bending under his Power. His game was being ruined. "Tell them," Dagara ordered.

The diamonds in Jhan's ears and hair sparkled and shimmered as she trembled. The Power within her was gathering along with her panic. She looked at all of their faces and imagined them melting and

turning to slag, remembering the face of the bandit outside of Pekarín. All Jhan had to do was to exhale, to relax and let it go. It waited, expectant, searing along Jhan's veins and centering around her heart.

Dagara's eyes were beginning to glow. At any moment he would order his men to imprison everyone. The torture and the torment was about to begin. Jhan turned her face away, squeezing tight her eyes. "No."

A simple word from stiff lips and a throat that had long ago been turned raw from screaming. It sent Dagara into a rage. He grabbed Jhan by the pretty white bow at her neck and lifted her off of the ground in one, powerful hand. He let her dangle as he transfixed everyone in the room with his glowing eyes. He seemed to be searching and, suddenly, he found what he was looking for. Dagara's glowing eyes locked on Gyven.

"You have betrayed me somehow," Dagara snarled. "You have blocked my control over my little pet and kept me from bending the minds of these others. It can only be you, Gyven."

Gyven laughed and held out his hands, madness glittering from his eyes. "What will you do, your Majesty? Kill me? I am the other half of your Power! You can do almost anything to a body, but heal what you have split asunder and transformed! You need me!"

Dagara barred his fangs and nodded to a soldier. "No, I do not need you any longer, Gyven. I've grown tired of my sport. I think that I will put it aside at last and turn to more destructive pursuits. After all, Jhanian is my masterpiece! I could not do any better."

The soldier drew his sword and ran Gyven through, neat and clean. Gyven looked surprised and then he was very dead, falling to the dais and staring up at the ceiling. Jhan was almost happy for him, but she found that the only emotion that she had left was fear.

"As for you, Jhanian Kevelt..." Dagara shook Jhan hard and Jhan began to choke. "You and Gyven ruined my game! You'll pay dearly for that! Tasis! Take my little general to my rooms to await my pleasure. I'll take her maiden head and then you and the men can teach her all the tricks a good whore should know!"

The soldier, a short, dark brutish man, leered and caught Jhan when Dagara suddenly released her and let her drop. "My pleasure, Your Majesty."

"I'm sure it will be," Dagara said off handedly, and then turned back to his stunned guests. "Put down your weapons. This game is at an end and there is no escape."

In a splatter of stilted images, Jhan saw everyone draw swords. Bheni, Kile, Thaos, and Rehn moved back to back as the soldiers along the walls advanced, but Dagara was raising his hands and he was crackling with Power.

The soldier holding Jhan wasn't concerned about who was going to win. He was dragging Jhan from the room through a side door. Jhan had a last look of Kile's face. The man was looking directly at her as the last of Dagara's lies and compulsion fell away to leave horror and helplessness in their wake.

"Jhan!" Kile shouted desperately, but he couldn't help Jhan. Jhan knew Kile wasn't going to be able to help himself.

The soldier dragged Jhan down steps and down corridors to Dagara's rooms, sneaking crude touches and pausing often to give Jhan long devouring kisses. At one point, he buried his face into Jhan's cleavage and his mouth worked there in a manner that sent a horrified shock through Jhan. The world crystallized and Jhan began to scream, knowing that she was about to face Dagara's worst torture without a place to hide. Her own mind had cast her out and there would be no returning to that safe oblivion no matter what happened.

"Silence!" the soldier shook Jhan roughly, raising his head from his pleasure and scowling into Jhan's face. He raised a fist, but then lowered it, knowing better than to strike Jhan and face Dagara's wrath. He covered Jhan's nose and mouth with his great hand instead and Jhan was suffocated for a full minute before he lowered it.

Gasping and silent, Jhan saw the soldier nod. "Soon we'll have you again, General Kevelt!" the soldier growled. "And we won't have Dagara's orders stopping us from doing *everything* that we want!"

The soldier opened the door to Dagara's room and shoved Jhan inside. Jhan stumbled, regained her balance and stood stiffly as the door thudded closed behind her. She knew the man would be standing guard. Escape, as always, was impossible.

The dark room and the flickering candles drew about Jhan. Time ticked slowly by, but she refused to think about what was happening to Kile and the others. Another cell had opened in the endless prison of horror and torture and Dagara, their master, presided over all. There was nothing left and never anything to do other than brace for pain and endure.

The door opened and Dagara swept in, smiling, a great shadow among shadows and eyes glowing and seeping Power. "All too easy!" he laughed. "I could almost forgive you your rebellion for the

pleasure I felt in watching them beaten, defeated, and so very frightened. Almost.”

Dagara was on Jhan in one spring, sending them both to the carpeted floor with Dagara on top. Jhan’s breath was knocked out of her at the impact and the string of diamonds in her hair broke and scattered like sparkling rain all over the carpet. Dagara jerked Jhan’s dress up and smoothed arms over her bare legs. Grabbing cruelly tight, he pulled her further under him and ground himself against her pelvis.

“Are you ready, my Lady Jhanian?” Dagara hissed in her ear. “We’ll have to be careful plucking your virginity. Gyven isn’t with us any longer to put the pieces back together. I’ve worked diligently, but you never know until you put it to the test. You may feel the greatest of pleasures, writhing and hating yourself under me, or you may bleed to death and die in pain. Shall we find out?”

Dagara’s power was beginning to burn Jhan’s skin. As Jhan’s terror rose, her own Power began building. Soon, the choice was going to be taken away from her. Her Power would strike Dagara’s and everything would end. Jhan could feel the same longing that Gyven had felt. To never feel pain again, to not endure what Dagara was about to do, to not suffer when she was handed over to the soldiers... how much would she be willing to destroy?

Dagara was loosening his trousers. Everything in Jhan flinched and cowered, yet she couldn’t stop thinking about Kile and the others. Could she destroy them to save herself? Could she consign silly Falala, all of her relatives, and the dear children to death. Could she allow Hana, Gruna, Reva, and baby Keva to die? How much was too much to save herself from pain?

Too confident, Jhan thought as Dagara took his time soaking in Jhan’s terror. Burning hands caressed Jhan intimately, wanting Jhan to know ultimate degradation and complete hopelessness. A warm tongue traced a line down Jhan’s belly and Jhan closed her eyes tightly, biting on her bottom lip until it ran with blood. That caught Dagara’s attention, as Jhan had hoped, and the man left his play to come back up and lick the blood from Jhan’s face.

The blood seemed to drive Dagara to distraction. He growled like a beast and sucked on Jhan’s lip, drawing on the blood greedily. Hard hands forced Jhan’s bare legs and feet around him. “Hold tight, Moon Flower,” Dagara moaned. “This ride is going to be wild and rough.”

Jhan could feel Dagara tense to push himself up, readying for the final violation. It seemed to last forever. Jhan opened her eyes and saw the length of the man’s body atop hers, the sleek muscles under silk, the curve of his bared hip and Jhan’s own legs wrapped about the man’s waist.

Used to being under the control of Power, Jhan took a long moment to consider a startling idea. Dagara, used to having his victims trapped like flies in a spider web, didn't even guess at his mistake. When Jhan's arms and legs wrapped with the force of a vise about him, Dagara understood that mistake in an instant.

Dagara was a large man and Jhan felt himself rolled and clawed at, but Jhan brought every enhanced muscle and joint to bear. Dagara's masterpiece, his most perfect creation, was going to kill him, Jhan promised silently, no matter what happened to her.

Jhan felt a gathering of Power. Dagara was going to burn her, she realized, and everything else to escape. There was a second, maybe two, before Jhan was either dead or her own Power unleashed. She used that time to take a deep breath and squeeze.

Bones popped and blood flew from Dagara's mouth. Jhan was splattered, but she refused to relent, Dagara's ribs caving and lungs crushing as the light of Power continued to rage in his eyes.

'I have him,' Whitefur's voice throbbed in Jhan's panicked mind. 'Calm yourself, Young One. Calm the Power within you. We are the balance. This Dark One and the Sahvossa. Balance. We cancel each other out in this world. You cause unbalance. You threaten everything. Close the doors to your Power before it is too late.'

Jhan understood. She relaxed her grip and looked inward, searching for the 'doors' Gregory had shown her in that neat little cottage so far away. Yes, there. Jhan concentrated and closed them one by one. It was painful, the Power wanting release, but not as painful as the alternative. Finally, it was done.

"Stand aside!" Bheni's voice, deep and strident.

There was a loud thud of metal sticking into wood and the door to Dagara's chamber opened with the crude soldier pinned to it by Bheni's sword. She pulled it out again with a shove of her foot against the wood of the door and a hard yank, and strode through with Kile behind her, wide eyed.

"Son of a baku!" Bheni swore and her sword came crashing down on Dagara's back, narrowly missing Jhan's arms and legs. Jhan blinked up at Dagara's dead face. The Power had burned out his eyes. The sockets were smoking and black, blood charred all around the edges. He was very dead.

Bheni was insane with outrage. She dragged Dagara's body off of Jhan and kept hacking at it in a frenzy of grief, believing that they had been too late.

Kile was looking down at Jhan, dress still hiked up above her waist and blood staining everything.

The man saw the empty place where Dagara had cut her and then looked at Bheni and the mutilated mess she was making out of Dagara's half clothed body. He turned green, face shuddering, and then his eyes rolled up and he fainted, falling like a felled tree.

Jhan sat up, expressionless. She pushed her dress down, hands trembling, unable to comprehend that it was over. Dagara was dead. It was a concept she couldn't accept yet. He would stand up and laugh at them, she was certain, having played some master game of torment. When Bheni finally relented and stepped back, wiping at her face and lowering her bloody sword, not even the sight of Dagara's corpse could convince Jhan. She knew how nightmares worked. They were the worst just when you thought that they were over.

Jhan inched over to Kile's body. She looked down into his worn face and gently reached out to touch it as if it would blow away like some foolish hope. His sky blue eyes fluttered open and memory rushed into them, sick and full of horror. He reached up to Jhan in return and touched her face. He drew her down to him and held her tightly, murmuring apologies and beginning to sob; blaming himself for leaving her.

"We have to get out of here," Bheni was firm, a warrior putting aside everything to do her duty. "We tricked them neatly with our hidden soldiers, but they still have their forces outside the fortress walls. It won't take them long to figure out something is wrong."

Kile sat up shakily and wiped at his eyes to clear them of tears. His one arm was still about Jhan, but he too was switching off his feelings and thinking like a soldier. "Yes, we have to get out of here. The snowstorm will cloud our escape, but it will be difficult until we reach King Tekhal and his troops."

"Jhan needs heavier clothes." Bheni wiped her bloody sword on a fur blanket from the bed as she looked about, but she didn't sheathe the sword even when she began pulling furs and leathers out of a closet.

Kile managed to stand up, but he stumbled, still in shock, as he snatched the clothes up and began putting them on Jhan, over her velvet dress. Bheni stood guard as Kile fumbled to put double socks and boots too large on Jhan's feet. At last, he wrapped a thick cloak about Jhan and pulled her to her feet.

Kile was brutally honest. "You may not survive this, Jhan, but I won't leave you ever again."

They made their way back through the fortress and Jhan saw dead soldiers in orange and black sprawled here and there along their way. She recognized some of the faces and recalled their foul hands

and demonic tortures. She stopped and started as they passed each one, memories striking Jhan so harshly that it was like a jolt of lightning.

By the time they met up with Rehn, Thaos, and nearly thirty Pekarín soldiers, Jhan was weeping and unable to walk. Kile lifted her up into his arms and carried her from the fortress and into the teeth of a snowstorm.

CHAPTER NINE

(Awakenings)

“What is it you want?” Evian demanded in exasperation.

Jhan sat in a wooden chair staring out at the sun playing on the drifts of snow outside the barracks window. She was dressed in a simple gray dress and her hair was loose about her shoulders in soft, black curls. Her small hands were resting, folded together, in her lap and she acted oblivious to Evian, mouth set in an angry line.

“Not talking doesn’t punish anyone but yourself,” Evian pointed out as he turned to add a log to the large fireplace along one wall. He rubbed his hands briskly before the flaring flames of the fire and sighed, shaking his head. “You nearly died being brought back to Pekarín and you’ve been sick in bed for weeks. All of that time I’ve sensed that you are in your right mind and that you can understand everything being said to you. If you could explain to me what you’re angry about, it would make things easier.”

For who? Jhan wondered and her lips trembled. The long ordeal through the snow had been bearable. The isolation that had gone along with it had not. Everyone had shied from her, knowing what had been done to her and what exactly she had gone through. Kile especially had blamed himself. Jhan knew that she horrified him. He had turned her over to Bheni’s care as soon as they had found a wagon to place her in. Jhan had spent the trip with a near silent Bheni, who had been just as sickened by Jhan’s mutilation and unable to find any words of comfort adequate enough.

Once in Pekarín and recovering, King Tekhal had visited Jhan to declare that she was a hero and that she would be honored by all the people as soon as she was well enough. He claimed her for a ward of the crown and promised her some land and a generous stipend. Jhan had simply stared at him until he had fallen uncomfortably silent, thinking what every man thought, that he couldn’t have lived with what had been done to Jhan and that all the gold in his kingdom wouldn’t make up for that loss.

Thaos had been next to visit, face as dark and scowling as ever. He called Jhan ‘sister’, and declared her a ‘princess’ of Karana. He told her about Jhanian’s son, left behind with a wet nurse by Alaina in Yhenii’s fortress. He promised to raise the child himself, never even considering the prospect of someone like Jhan wanting to raise the child herself. It was a reflection of everyone’s attitude. Jhan was even more a freak than before. Someone to pity. Someone to avoid. Someone not to be trusted with

a child. When Thaos offered a place in Karana for Jhan, Jhan had turned away as if he had ceased to exist.

Bheni had been more vocal and more resilient. She had chosen to forget what she had seen in Dagara's chambers and approach Jhan as something new. She was the one to shout and to demand that Jhan go on with her life before someone mistook her for a corpse and buried her! Jhan had almost smiled, but the pain had still been too great and her blank stare had finally sent Bheni stomping away in disgust at Jhan's lack of will.

"You have what you have always wanted," Evian was saying. "Dagara is dead. His henchmen tried to carry on the battle, but King Tekhal and King Thaos routed them. Peace reigns for awhile longer and things are slowly edging back to normal. You have nothing to fear. You are a woman at long last. A princess. A hero. Even more beautiful than you were before."

Long ago, Evian had looked into Jhan's mind and told Jhan that he had seen the tortures Dagara had put her through. Jhan now knew that he had been lying. Evian had been too afraid and couldn't admit it. Though Evian owed his life to that fear, it kept him from understanding Jhan now. He couldn't know the horrors that continually played themselves out in Jhan's memory and the deep seated fear, held still, that this was all some mad dream and that she would awaken in Dagara's room.

As for being a woman... no one else considered Jhan to be one. Everyone, even the youngest servant, seemed to know that Jhan had been mutilated. Jhan had grown sick of the white pasty looks and the deep pity and horror everyone had for her. None of them could comprehend that Jhan, despite the torture that had accomplished it, could be glad and feel whole for the first time since waking as Jhanian Kevelt.

"Tell me what you want," Evian repeated, persistent.

"To be left alone, I'm sure," Rehn interrupted as he swept into the room. He dropped a cloak about Jhan's shoulders and bent to put on her boots. He patiently laced them up as Evian began to protest. Rehn cut him off with a hard look. The journey had changed him. The simple farm boy had been replaced by a more confident man.

"You've had Jhan long enough," Rehn was saying firmly. He gave Jhan his arm and they both stood, Jhan looking up at Rehn distractedly. "She needs me now. I know how to take care of her. She doesn't need people demanding things and giving her terrible looks. She needs to have quiet and to think her way back to us. That's always been her way and it's not about to change now."

“It isn’t proper,” Evian protested. “Jhan’s a woman now. People will talk if you take her to your room.”

Rehn’s face went as dark as Thaos’s ever could and Jhan felt her heart clench. “Everyone knows what Jhan went through. I don’t think that she has a reputation left to worry about and I-I don’t care what anyone thinks of me!”

Evian took a deep breath and then let it out, nodding. “There’s nothing else that I can do... that she will allow me to do. Go ahead and take her, Rehn, but I warn you, it’s her own stubbornness and not any illness of the mind that is keeping her as still as stone. She’s judged us and judged us harshly. I don’t imagine that even you have escaped that judgment.”

“I’ll start paying my penance then, Lord Healer,” Rehn replied and led Jhan out of the barracks and back to his room in the fortress.

Once there, Rehn made Jhan comfortable on the bed. “Things will be a little different, of course,” Rehn said at last. “I’ll have Bheni in to see to your personal needs, but I’ll warn her against bothering you beforehand.”

Jhan looked about the small room, lingering over all the details. The floors were as polished and shining as ever. The little nick-knacks on their shelf above the writing desk were as familiar as Rehn’s face. The smell of the tanned leather clothes in the closet drifted out and mingled with a lemony scent of wood polish and wood smoke from the small fireplace.

Jhan shuddered and took a sharp breath. At last, it was real. At last she believed that Dagara was truly dead and that she was free of him. The room was proof. The room was comfort, security, a haven against horrors and nightmares. The simple room of a good natured farm boy, not a cold barracks with a healer who reminded Jhan too sharply of Gyven. This, strangely, felt like home.

Rehn had been turning away, but he froze when Jhan began to sob and then to cry, curling up on the bed and hiding her face against the thick quilt there. Rehn knew better than to intrude. He busied himself about the room, making things presentable and putting things in easy reach that she might need. A cold, wet rag to wash her face when she was done weeping and a cup of water to soothe a raw throat. Without saying anything or offering a touch of comfort, Jhan felt as if Rehn had embraced her and soothed her. Still, for all of his knowledge of her, Rehn couldn’t offer her the one thing that she really needed to make her well and truly whole again. Only Kile could do that and he had refused to.

“I need to speak to the Sahvossa.”

“What?” Rehn started and looked about, writing something on a slip of paper at the writing desk and clutching a silver necklace in one hand. His eyes were wide as Jhan stood up from a chair and smoothed down her dress with nervous hands.

Rehn decided to be casual and sensible. “It’s snowing outside. It will be too cold. You’ve gained weight, more than you ever have, but you still are thinner than I like.”

“Then you must like heavy women, Rehn,” Jhan replied acidly and went to gather up her boots. She sat again and began putting them on.

Rehn shook his head as if to clear it. Jhan had maintained perfect silence and disinterest for a week and he had begun to lose the hope he had nursed since Jhan had broken down and cried. Now, this unexpected change had him off balance. Jhan was acting as if nothing had happened and Rehn wasn’t certain if he should play along.

“I just don’t like skinny rails,” Rehn retorted softly as he stood up, putting down his quill. “If you were to turn sideways you would disappear from sight.”

Jhan stood and walked to the closet. She searched inside and pulled out a thick, fur cloak. Settling it about her shoulders, she snapped the clasp closed and turned to face Rehn with a lifted, stubborn chin. “Are you coming or not?”

“Answer a question first,” Rehn demanded.

“All right.” Jhan impatiently motioned for Rehn to proceed.

“Do you blame me?”

“No. Evian was wrong about that. He’s been wrong about a lot of things,” Jhan replied angrily. “I’ve been outraged, horrified, and abused. You don’t ever recover from that, you just find a way to go on despite it. I think I’ve found a way, Rehn, I just have to explore it. To do that, I need to talk to the Sahvossa. I need answers of my own.”

Rehn accepted that, putting on his own cloak. “I have to warn you..”

“I know,” Jhan cut him off, eyes shadowed. “I know what they all think of me. I have to find a way to live with that too.”

Rehn folded up the letter he'd been writing and pocketed it along with the necklace. "Maybe we'll run into Bheni on the way."

That caught Jhan off guard and she blinked, remembering an unfocused time of Rehn and Bheni moving about the peripheral of her thoughts. Jhan recalled long conversations and muted laughter and more visits by Bheni than Jhan's care could account for.

"You're so different..." Jhan began and then shook her head. "I suppose that I should be the last to talk about being different."

"Attraction makes up for differences, Jhan. I am," Rehn paused and blushed. "I am very attracted to Bheni."

Jhan almost lost her nerve. Everything that Dagara had done to her came crashing down on her head. He might be dead, but his tortures were going to go on for the rest of Jhan's life. What Rehn was so casual about, between himself and Bheni, Jhan could never have with anyone. Rehn must have seen it on her face.

"Kile loves you, Jhan." Rehn tried to comfort her. "You have to give him time."

"Time?" Jhan's face twisted in pain and disbelief as she opened the door. "How much time does Kile need to stop feeling guilty about leaving me to be mutilated? How much time will he need to start thinking of me as a woman and not- not as a man who's had his manhood cut off!"

Rehn went pale and flinched as they left his room and began winding their way through the fortress. He looked ready to drop the whole conversation, but Jhan wouldn't allow it.

"You can't forget what happened to me either, can you?" Jhan demanded harshly, making Rehn face the same truth that she had.

"No," Rehn admitted in a small voice.

"Then don't pretend that anything is ever going to be normal for me!" Jhan bit back and remained angrily silent until they left the fortress and entered the deep forest.

"I've talked to Kile," Rehn said finally. "He's been drunk most of the time, demanding to be sent on border patrols no matter what the weather, and frequenting every dive in Sarvoy. He's a man bent on punishing himself. I can see how his love for you is tearing him up inside. He doesn't know what to do. He can barely speak about it. I even saw him trying to talk to Tevar Narin, but Kile seemed even more wild afterward."

“Like Jaross,” Jhan replied grimly, breaking her silence at last. “Kile believes that he’s a thekling because he loves me.”

“No,” Rehn disagreed with a shake of his head. “He won’t allow himself to go that far. He won’t accept you as a man and he can’t find it in himself to think of you as a woman, yet he can’t stop loving you. He needs time, Jhan. I know that makes you angry, but it is the truth of the matter. You have become something in between man and woman and Kile needs to come to terms with that. You can’t expect it in a day, or a week, or perhaps even a year.”

“Or maybe ever,” Jhan added with a sigh and felt her heart ache. “Life is never going to be easy for me, Rehn.”

“No,” Rehn agreed. “You’ll have to fight and fight hard for everything... maybe even Kile.”

“Why would I want to fight for him if he doesn’t want me?” Jhan replied bleakly.

“Because he does!” Rehn shot back impatiently. “And you know he does! Kile is very hard headed, just like you! Sometimes, you have to force a man to do what he really wants, Jhan. You have to make him see past pride, honor, and yes, his fear of embarrassment to the happiness that’s within his grasp.”

They walked deeper into the forest, Jhan silent and both of them huddled in their cloaks against the cold. Rehn went on doggedly. “When we were in the audience chamber in Althan, and Kile saw you being taken away, he had a terrible look of desperation. When Dagara left us to his soldiers and followed after you, I thought that Kile would go insane. He waded through Dagara’s soldiers with his sword and Bheni at his side, not even waiting for the Pekarín soldiers we had left in the courtyard to fight their way in to help us. Kile was determined to save you or die trying.”

Rehn took three quick strides and was suddenly standing in front of Jhan, forcing Jhan to stop and listen. “You don’t do that for just anyone, Jhan. A man doesn’t risk his life, his comrades, or even a mission given to him by a king for simple guilt. A man does it for love.”

Jhan crossed arms over her breast and hugged herself against the cold and Rehn’s assertions. “I think you’re right. I know I’ve never felt anything as strongly as what I feel for Kile. I’ve seen the same feeling in his eyes.” Jhan shook her head and pushed past Rehn to continue walking. “All of that matters, but not as much as what I have to do now.”

“What do you have to do?” Rehn wondered. “Why talk to the Sahvossa? They tried to have you killed.”

“I need their insight,” Jhan replied.

“They aren’t human, Jhan,” Rehn pointed out. “Asking them to sort out your life is just as foolish as Kile having gone to Tevar Narin for advice about you. Tevar only knows about men, not women trapped in men’s bodies, and the Sahvossa only know about nature.”

“I’m not asking them to sort out my life,” Jhan replied testily. “I have to do that myself. What I need from them is some confirmation that I’m going to be allowed to. Whitefur helped me kill Dagara, Rehn. She held his Power from destroying me and everything else until I crushed him.” Jhan shuddered and not from cold. “I don’t think any of you realize how close your world came to ending that day.”

Rehn was more practical, brushing aside ‘what ifs’. “Are you going to thank her?” he sounded skeptical.

“How do you thank a thunderstorm for not raining on you?” Jhan replied. “Or striking you with lightning?”

“I’m glad you realize,” Rehn said. “I’m not sure what moves them to do the things they do. I don’t know what they care about. They’re free and easy enough with me, but I always feel as if they’re indulging me as if I were one of their cubs.”

“Or studying you,” Jhan added thoughtfully.

Rehn nodded, going thoughtful as well. “They do like to talk to me about what goes on in my life.”

‘May the sun shine on you, Young Ones,’ Whitefur was sitting in dappled sunlight and her crystal eyes sparkled as if she were amused. It was hard to see her against the snow and she seemed to be moving in and out of sight like an optical illusion.

“Greetings,” Rehn returned, but stepped back to let Jhan approach first.

“I need to talk to you,” Jhan began and walked boldly right up to Whitefur. At close range, it was even more apparent that Whitefur had more in common with a wild animal than a human-like being. Whitefur’s pelt stood up and she growled at Jhan in warning.

‘Always so bold and so careless,’ Whitefur growled in Jhan’s mind. *‘And so strong. We did not consider that you would live.’*

“What does that mean?” Jhan demanded angrily. “Do you still want me dead?”

Whitefur growled again, but this time it was the frustration of speaking to Humans. *‘There is balance again. The Evil One is dead. There is the Sahvossa. There is you. Neither has... advantage.’*

Neither wants control. Neither wants harm. The world will go on.'

"Then you don't want to hurt me," Jhan understood with difficulty. "I can try and lead some sort of life without having to look over my shoulder for you or one of your helpers."

'Your life is your own,' Whitefur seemed to agree.

"I wish I knew what to do with it," Jhan sighed and turned away with hands clenched tightly. "You told me once that I had to learn to accept this body. I refused at the time, but now I know that you were right. I have to accept it. I am a woman in a man's body that someone tried to turn into a woman. I'm a half fashioned creature, neither one nor the other."

'A neuter,' Whitefur broke in suddenly. *'Life is making cubs or bearing cubs, but one can be outside of life and still live it, Young One.'*

"Neuter," Jhan repeated, hating the word. "What man would want that?"

'Why have a mate if there will be no cubs?' Whitefur was infinitely logical, but it was the logic of nature. *'Pack mates are plentiful for you. You are not alone, Young One.'*

"We like, uh, mates even when we can't have babies, Whitefur," Rehn replied, embarrassed. "It's how Humans are."

'You have found a mate, Young One,' Whitefur knew and her jaw split as if she were laughing at Rehn. *'I smell a female on you and you are -'*

"Whitefur!" Rehn protested and colored to his ears. "Humans don't talk like that to one another!"

'There will be cubs,' Whitefur insisted on continuing. *'The Sahvossa will be eager to see and understand them, Young One, as we try and understand you.'*

Jhan cut into their conversation. She knew that she would have to learn to bear with other people's happiness and their normal lives, but now she found it too painful. "Whitefur, you followed me all the way to Khor."

'Yes, I did, Young One,' Whitefur acknowledged.

"You watched me suffer. You watched all those things that Dagara did to me," Jhan persisted.

'Yes.' Whitefur was as blank as the snow beneath her feet.

"What did you think about it?"

'Predators play with prey. Mates dominate females,' Whitefur replied. *'Humans do not seem to*

differ greatly. ' Meaning that nature could be just as cruel if it chose and she had not been disturbed by it. To her it had probably been like a Human watching insects fight and devour one another. Her voice had that calm dispassion even though it was only in the mind.

"I just wanted to know where I stood in your thoughts," Jhan explained. "I didn't want to make the same mistake Rehn makes, thinking that you actually cared about us."

'I have my path and you have yours,' Whitefur intoned. *'We cannot be other than what we are.'*

Which said nothing. Jhan knew she had to settle for it. She began walking back to the fortress without another word. Rehn followed reluctantly, as if he feared to be rude to Whitefur.

"Did that help or hurt?" Rehn finally asked.

Jhan shivered, knowing that she had stayed in the cold far too long. Her bones ached to be back in the warmth of the fortress, but she denied herself. "I need to be alone for this, Rehn. Thank you for taking me to the Sahvossa."

"Jhan," Rehn protested. "Tell me what is going on in that head of yours. What brought you out of a complete stupor to go out into the snow dragging me behind you?"

Jhan stopped walking, but she continued to stamp her feet and hug her cloak about her tightly. "I didn't die, Rehn. I suddenly realized that while I sat in your rooms staring at the dust in the corners. I didn't die and I'm not going to. Dagara is dead. I can go anywhere and do anything and that bastard will never be there, waiting to spring when I least expect it. Knowing that put a burden on me. I have a life, as Whitefur said, and I have to find a way to live it. I have to understand what I am and I have to know what other people think I am."

"What are you going to do?" Rehn wondered, worried.

"I'm going to discover just how hard my life is going to be," Jhan replied grimly. "And I'm going to see if I'm hard headed and stubborn enough to deal with it!"

Jhan left Rehn standing in the snow. She trudged out of the forest and around the fortress to the barracks. She walked right up to a cleared, muddy space lined with red coated Pekarín soldiers. They were watching two other soldiers, in the center of a ring, spar with each other with blunted swords. Jhan was surprised to see that it was Kile and Jaross practicing together, both of them bare to the waist despite the cold.

Jaross howled and danced backwards, wagging a bruised arm and scowling fiercely at Kile. "You

almost broke it!” he shouted. “This is not practice, Lord Kile, I think that you’re trying to draw my blood!”

“If this were real, you would be dead, Lord Jaross!” Kile spat back. He looked too lean and too worn, Jhan thought. His blue eyes were red and his mouth was set in a hard line that Jhan had never seen before. “I’m here to train you to survive a fight!”

Jhan was almost drawn into the battle, but she had more pressing needs. She edged up to Tevar Narin and tugged on his sleeve. The man looked back impatiently and then down at Jhan in surprise. He was as handsome as ever, dark and impeccably perfect in his red uniform. Like a hawk, Jhan thought, and nerved herself for what she knew she had to do.

“Lady- Princess -” Narin stumbled and stammered, hands pushing other soldiers away from Jhan as if he feared they would get dirt on her or do something crude to offend her.“

I need to speak with you... alone,” Jhan asked softly so that no one else heard.

Narin became even more flustered. “Alone, but why?”

“Where can we go?” Jhan asked without elaborating.

Narin looked about and then made a decision. He gently took Jhan by the elbow and led her to a supply shed. Going inside, Jhan was struck by the smell of oil from the stacked plates of armor and the racks of swords, axes, and pikes. The rich aroma of tanned leather uniforms and practice shields was almost overwhelming.

Narin had left the door open, but Jhan closed it and put her back to it to prevent him from leaving. He stared at her with raised eyebrows. “What is it you wanted, Princess Jhanian?”

Jhan swallowed and moved away from the door. Her hands trembled as she began to unlace the front of her dress. “You, Tevar. I know that you like men. You’ve always excited me and it’s been a long time... too long since I’ve been close that way with anyone.”

Tevar stared, mouth open, and then he closed it and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Your Highness, I don’t think you have ever been with anyone but one murdering, sadistic monster. Because of that, I find it hard to believe that you could ‘*want*’ anyone. What game are you playing?”

Jhan stopped unlacing her dress and clenched her hands instead, embarrassed and uncertain. “I want... I know you wanted me once.”

“When you were a complete man, yes,” Tevar admitted. “But it became obvious to me, then, that

you never considered yourself one. I don't like women, Princess Jhanian. I only like men who know they're men."

"Is that what you told Kile?" Jhan wondered quietly.

"Ah, Kile!" Tevar nodded as if Jhan had confirmed his thoughts. "I see what this is about! You want to know about more than my preferences, Princess Jhanian."

"Stop calling me that!" Jhan snapped, annoyed now, but still nervous and needing answers.

"This is so absurd!" Tevar paced the floor, head shaking. "I thought Kile was propositioning me as well! I thought that I would die of happiness when he cornered me in the tack shed and demanded to know what loving men was all about." Tevar couldn't help but smile at the memory. "He's such a large, golden, strong... well, you know all of that, don't you?"

"What did you tell him?" Jhan prompted anxiously.

Tevar shrugged. "A few things, but he wasn't really listening. He finally asked if I thought of you as a man and if I had ever desired you."

"And you said?" Jhan prompted again.

"The same thing that I said to you just now," Tevar admitted with an irritated sigh. "You were born a man, Lady Jhan, but what I see before me is not one and I'm not attracted to you." He paused and then dared, curious. "If I had taken you up on your patently false offer, would you have broken my neck with your deadly skill?"

"Probably," Jhan admitted and left it up to Tevar to guess whether she was joking or not. She went on hurriedly. "So, you don't see a man when you look at me. I needed to know that. I needed to gain some confidence before..."

"Before you approach Kile and proposition him?" Tevar wondered with an arched eyebrow. "You are going to have some other problems beside his reluctance, Lady Jhan."

"Such as?" Jhan wondered.

Tevar was uncomfortable, but he decided to be honest and blunt. "It's not easy being a thekling in an army, Lady Jhan. I don't wish to be indelicate, but men can be very cruel and brutal when they have a notion to dislike someone. Things happen. I've been lucky to be skilled and feared. I've known others not so lucky. They were unable to let anyone touch them or stand a pace away without reacting in a terrified manner. I don't know how, after all that was done to you, that you are ever going to let anyone

be intimate with you.”

“If it were someone else I would agree with you,” Jhan replied. “Men terrify me. Kile doesn’t. I don’t know if I can explain it to you, but he glows like sunlight in the darkness and he chases the fear away from me. I feel safe with him. I feel that nothing can ever hurt me when he’s with me. I love him. I will always love him, even though I can hate him too, for the things he’s done. Hardheaded, stubborn, and so sure that he’s right. We’re too alike in many ways.”

“He may be too stubborn in his belief that you are a man to ever be with you, Lady Jhan.” Tevar was realistic.

“I still have to try,” Jhan replied. “He’s the only man who can touch me at this point. I’ll never have anyone if I can’t have him.”

Tevar stepped around Jhan to open the door. “I certainly won’t be the one to attempt your lethal embrace, Lady Jhan. Your reputation proceeds you in that area.”

Kile rushed through the door with Jaross hanging onto him in a futile attempt to stop him. Kile’s fist lashed out and Tevar ducked it with stunning agility. He danced backwards and crouched defensively as Kile came piling into the room, face red and full of disgust and jealousy.

“What are you doing to Jhan?” Kile shouted and his voice seemed to boom off of the walls. “You sick pervert!”

Jhan grabbed Kile by one of his great arms and threw her light weight against another attempted charge at Tevar. “I came here willingly, Kile!”

Kile looked down at Jhan in angry confusion and saw the laces of Jhan’s dress loose. He stopped cold and then turned his shouting on Jhan. “You slut! You little pleasure house whore! You were going to -! Oh, Gods! This is too much! I can’t take this any more! I don’t know what is going on! After everything that happened to you, that you can try and... and with Tevar of all people!”

Jhan was horrified, face going white and stunned. She released Kile and backed away, hands going to her loose laces defensively. “I was only- I was,” but she couldn’t defend herself. Jhan pushed past Kile and Jaross and fled back into the snow, stumbling and cloak flowing out and away to let the freezing fingers of the wind steal her warmth.

“Jhan!” That was Jaross, slogging through the snow after her. “Stop! Where are you going? You’ll freeze!”

“Who cares if a whore freezes?” Jhan shot back, but Jaross had hold of her arm and he stopped her forcibly. With a tight jaw, he redid the laces of Jhan’s dress and wrapped the cloak about her as if she were an invalid.

Jaross made an impatient sound, face going dark. “Kile is half drunk on weariness and his own confusion. I know what that’s like, remember? You never bring out the best in people, Jhan. You drag people down to their deepest selves and make them confront all of their shortcomings. It isn’t anything less than maddening.”

“I wanted to see- I wanted to see if Tevar thought of me as a man. It seemed important at the time,” Jhan explained, biting back a sob.

“Did he?” Jaross wondered as he dropped his hands and shrugged into his own coat.

“No,” Jhan replied. “He told me that he definitely considered me a woman and that he had told Kile that too.”

“What does it matter what Tevar thinks?” Jaross was mystified and Jhan saw that Jaross didn’t know about Tevar’s inclinations.

“Nothing. Everything. I guess I just needed someone to say it,” Jhan said softly. “I needed it to give me strength when I go talk to Kile.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” Jaross warned. “He’s very angry right now and he might do something he’ll regret later, like use me to exorcise his anger in the practice ring! I don’t need any broken bones, thank you!”

“We have to resolve this, even more now,” Jhan insisted stubbornly.

“I know he said some terrible things back there, Jhan, but you know that he didn’t -”

“He did mean it, Jaross!” Jhan shot back. “He did think that Tevar and I had... well, I’ve been called those kind of words and much worse. It was uglier coming from Kile, but not anything that I can’t bear.”

“Jhan, it’s hopeless!” Jaross growled. “You are only going to make him angrier!”

Jhan narrowed eyes at Jaross. “Are you saying that because you know or because you’re jealous?”

Jaross actually flinched, as if Jhan had cut him to the quick. “I think we need to resolve some things as well, Jhan.”

Jhan was shivering now and wondering if she really wanted to hear what Jaross had to say. “Will it

take long? I don't want to freeze to death and interrupt you."

Jaross flinched again. Putting an arm about Jhan's waist, he led her back around the fortress and in through the main entrance. "Where to?" he wondered.

"My room," Jhan replied. "I haven't been to them in some time, but if you want to talk, and you aren't afraid Kile might interrupt and tear you apart..."

Jaross merely nodded, but his face was tight, as if he were actually afraid that Kile might find out. Jhan showed him the way and Jaross only paused long enough to buy a jug of wine. "To ward off the chill and to dull the bruises Kile's already given me," Jaross explained.

Jhan looked at the suspicious eyes of the vendor, but didn't reply until they were walking down the corridor into the bachelor's wing. "Aren't you afraid what people will think?"

"Why should I be?" Jaross wondered as Jhan opened the door to her room.

That reply surprised Jhan and she turned at the threshold. "Maybe I care what they think and maybe I shouldn't let you in."

"Princess Jhanian Kevelt can do whatever she wishes," Jaross pointed out with a sigh of impatience.

Jhan sighed too and relented, letting Jaross in. "I wish people would stop calling me that!"

Jaross gave the room a cursory look. The light through the window shone on dust covered surfaces, but it was all just as Jhan had left it, neat and simple. Jhan was relieved, glad that Rehn had kept it rented for her during her absence.

Jaross lit the fireplace himself. Once the fire was crackling warmly, he sat in the one chair and pulled the cork out of the jug. "Cups?" he wondered. Jhan handed him one and he poured the wine. He began to hand it to Jhan, but Jhan shook her head in refusal.

"Are you certain?" Jaross asked. "It's the last of the money that I brought with me and a good wine."

"That means something, I suppose?" Jhan said as she settled by the fire and reached out her frozen fingers to its warmth.

Jaross took a long sip appreciatively and then nodded. "I've been disowned by my father. He sent a notice to Nangia by way of courier. The messenger heard that I was here and delivered it without apology. It seems my Father doesn't forgive sons who don't go home to fight. He could care less about

Pekarin and defeating Dagara was of no interest to him if the man was marching away from Petrath.”

“Short sighted,” Jhan said softly.

“He’s always been that,” Jaross agreed. He took another long drink. “I’m not here to talk about him or my problems, Jhan.”

“Then I’m amazed.” Jhan was sarcastic.

“I deserve that,” Jaross agreed and put away jug and cup on a side table. “I’ve been honorable and decent, but I made the mistake of thinking that was all a man needed to be. I’ve also been selfish, self-centered... what else did you call me?”

“I don’t think I need to repeat it,” Jhan replied with a slight smile.

“Hmm, anyway, I think that I will sum it all up by saying that I have never been a man until now.” Jaross clenched his hands together and his look was intense. “I did terrible things to you, Jhan, and called it love and concern. When you failed to be what I wanted, what I imagined you to be, I beat you and thought that I was owed revenge. There isn’t any excuse for what I did or the way that I acted. I can’t expect forgiveness -”

Jhan’s smile had dropped. “Good, because you are never going to get it.”

Jaross swallowed. “Do you- Do you remember when I found you in Althan?”

Jhan stared into the flames. “I remember everything that happened there, Jaross. If you want to know what I thought about it, I couldn’t tell you. I was trying very hard not to think.”

“You know I had to leave you. King Tekhal had to be warned,” Jaross explained uncomfortably.

“You still haven’t changed, Jaross!” Jhan sat back from the fire, finally warm, but angry now.

“You’re still only thinking about yourself. You want to bring up my pain to make yourself feel better!”

“That isn’t true!” Jaross snapped back and then calmed himself with an effort. “Just listen to what I have to say and maybe it will make up for- for abandoning you.”

Jhan waited and then turned to look at Jaross when he said nothing. “Well?”

“Marry me,” Jaross said suddenly.

Jhan blinked and then sighed, standing and going to sit on the bed. “How is that supposed to make me feel better about being left in the clutches of a monster?”

That wasn’t the response that Jaross had expected. He licked nervous lips and then tried to explain.

“You’re going to be alone. I know you hope for something from Kile, but I know, Jhan, that he won’t ever accept you or forget his guilt. I don’t have a reputation to worry about and I still love you, in my way. We can make a life together.”

“That sounds very grand and noble, but you just don’t understand, Jaross,” Jhan replied. “I’m not blaming you for leaving me! I’m not blaming Kile for it either. Dagara used his Power and his persuasion very effectively.” Jhan shook her head, hating that what she felt was too complex to put into words. “I’m trying to live with what Dagara did to me, but the end result is exactly what I have always wanted since waking up in this crazy situation! It isn’t perfect, but I have to accept it as if it were. Things are just not going to get any better for me.”

It was obvious that Jaross was confused. Jhan tried again, trying to pierce Jaross’ obstinate grip on his own reality. “You look at me and see a man who’s been horribly mutilated. You’re probably thinking that you couldn’t live if that had been done to you.” Jaross looked away, jaw working. Jhan had hit a very sore spot. “You probably can’t even be near me without your skin crawling in horror, can you?”

Jaross trembled. “No,” he replied quietly.

“Then how, Jaross Nava, can you think of marrying me?” Jhan wondered. “What could there ever be between us but this horror you feel?”

Jaross stood, arms wrapping about himself. He looked very pale. “I can’t,” he admitted. “And now you know that neither can Kile or, probably, any man. I don’t know what you are going to do, Lady Jhan.”

Jhan felt tears rolling down her face. “Stop blaming yourself, and, if you see Kile, tell him to stop blaming himself. I have what I have always wanted. I’m a woman, of some sort. It came through torture and the worst possible degradation, but I wouldn’t take back what Dagara took away for anything!”

Jaross looked amazed. “You really mean that?”

“I do,” Jhan replied and her chin was lifted and firm in her resolve. “You can take your pity and go away, Jaross. I don’t need it and I don’t need you. Go, grow up, and become a Pekarín soldier. I’m not going to settle for less than the man that I truly love, even if that means spending my life alone.”

“I’ll tell Kile that, but I don’t think it will help you,” Jaross promised.

“I know and it doesn’t matter,” Jhan rose to open the door. Jaross paused halfway out, almost

colliding with a page bearing a wrapped package. The page bowed low and apologized.

Jaross turned to Jhan for a last word, face roiling with conflicting emotions. “If you had said yes, I would have married you, dear lady.”

Jhan nodded, but she couldn’t find a smile. “I know, Jaross, but it wouldn’t have ever been right.”

Jaross nodded in return and left. The page stepped forward, eyes lowered and face flushed. He held the package out to Jhan and Jhan took it awkwardly. “A gift from King Tekhal, your Highness. He bids you attend a noon gathering of Lords and Ladies in your honor tomorrow, and would be pleased to see you wearing his gift.”

“I don’t know,” Jhan stammered, but found herself talking to thin air. No, wasn’t the expected response when a king bid you come to a party. The page had known that and hadn’t waited for a reply. Jhan watched him striding down the hall as if he couldn’t get away from Jhan’s strangeness fast enough.

Jhan took the package into her room and closed the door behind her. Rehn must be wondering where she was by now, she thought. He had probably gone looking for her already and had surely discovered the fiasco by the barracks. Jhan was certain Kile must have given Rehn an earful. Jhan put it from her concerns as she opened the package and pulled out a beautiful white gown.

The gown sparkled at neck and sleeve with tiny, clear blue jewels. The hem had been embroidered with white flowers clinging to a vine that wound its way all the way up to the tight waistline. Jhan’s hand trembled on the rich fabric as she lifted it up and pressed it to her. It was the most beautiful thing that she had ever seen.

White. White gowns. White wedding gowns. White weddings. The images swirled in Jhan’s mind and a pain settled in her heart. If she could have picked the most perfect wedding gown, this dress would have been it, she realized. It dropped from her nerveless fingers and flowed like a rippling, sparkling waterfall from the bed to the floor. Jhan strode over it and reached for the wine bottle Jaross had left. She uncorked it and took a long drink, not bothering with the cup. It stung and burned, but not as much as Jhan’s heart.

At last, the sight of the gown became too much. Jhan wrapped her cloak about her and left her room, carrying the wine bottle in one hand, searching for a quiet spot to get drunk enough to make the pain go away.

CHAPTER TEN

(Into the Light)

There was a garden high up in Pekarín fortress that was small and hardly frequented by anyone. Jhan had discovered it long ago and she had cultivated its intimacy as a place to get some air and cry her tears. Growing dark as the sun set behind the trees of the forest, it was full of dead plants and drifting snow; a fit place to drown sorrows in.

Jhan was very drunk at that point. Not being a drinker, half the wine bottle had sufficed to accomplish it. She felt hot and dizzy from the alcohol as she searched about for a place to sit and cool off in the freezing air. Stumbling and uncertain where the path was, she made a weaving pattern through the snow as she made her way to the center of the garden.

A hidden object under the snow finally tripped Jhan up. She tried to catch her balance and failed, falling onto her back in the snow. She lay there and marveled that she hadn't spilled the wine. The jug was still safe in one tight fist. It made her laugh and it was her giggling that brought Kile to her.

Kile had his own jug of stronger drink and he looked twice as drunk. He was staggering too, red uniform askew and open at the collar. His gold hair was a shaggy disordered mane and his eyes were wide and rheumy. He looked down at Jhan blearily and Jhan stopped laughing, amazed.

"Good idea," Kile slurred and threw himself into the snow on his back beside Jhan. "It's sooo hot! I need to cool off!"

Jhan stared and then began to laugh again. "You're a fool, Kile!"

"I'm not the one wearing the dress, Little Lady!" Kile retorted.

"What should a lady wear then?" Jhan wondered and began giggling again, unable to be angry.

"Peerffferably... nothing," Kile replied and giggled too.

They lay there in the snow, staring up at the stars, and then Kile stirred. "Soooo cold! Why are we in the snow? We'll freeze to death! Must be veery drunk. Veery drunk."

"You just said that!" Jhan giggled inanely.

"Said what?" Kile wondered blearily as he levered himself up and staggered on his feet. Regaining his balance, he reached down and pulled Jhan up. Jhan staggered against him and they leaned together for support.

“You’re all wet!” Kile noticed and then, angrily. “You’re drunk! You’re a slut and a drunk!”

“So are you!” Jhan retorted and giggled again.

“I’m a slut?” Kile was confused.

“And drunk,” Jhan repeated.

Kile led the way back into the fortress, still half supporting Jhan. “I certainly don’t know how to say no to the ladies. And...” Kile shook the almost empty bottle he held. It was uncorked and he had spilled most of it falling into the snow. “I’m certainly... certainly drunk!”

“When we’re married, you’ll have to change your ways.” Jhan was suddenly serious, with the exaggerated frown of a drunk trying to make a point.

“Can’t do anything lately with them though,” Kile went on, not even hearing Jhan. His good humor evaporated. “Try my best, I can’t get you out of my mind! It stops me cold every time I try to- Is there anything left in that jug of yours?”

Jhan hugged the jug to her breast, scowling. “Yes, and it’s mine!”

Kile pried the jug out of Jhan’s hands easily and had the look of a man admonishing a child; finger pointing at Jhan sternly. “You shouldn’t be drinking annny more! I’ll have to put this under my protection.”

Kile uncorked the bottle and tipped it back, drinking a great gulp before he lowered it with a disappointed frown. “Wine! A lady drink!”

“It’s supposed to be veery expensive,” Jhan slurred. “You’re too much of a great big idiot to appreciate it!”

Kile shook his head and opened a door into the fortress. He turned left almost at once and headed away from Jhan’s room, tugging Jhan behind him. “Where are we going?” Jhan wondered.

“My room,” Kile explained. “You’re too drunk to be alone and I’m too drunk to find your room.”

Jhan giggled again, feeling ridiculous, but unable to stop herself. “I think I’m too drunk to find anything!”

“Exxxxactly!” Kile agreed.

The way was confusing. Jhan lost track of the corridors and it all seemed to shift and blur until they were at a door. Kile leaned against it for a moment, getting his breath and blinking, as if trying to

see through a fog. Finally, he opened the door and they staggered inside.

Kile's room was plain. A simple fireplace, a single bed with thick covers, and a writing table much like Rehn had. A door was open to a bathing tub and a toilet off to one side, but otherwise it was spare and empty.

Kile bent to stir the glowing embers in the fireplace with a poker. He caused them to flare and he added wood from a nearby bin until the fire was blazing warmly. He did all of that with exaggerated care and concentration, and then turned to Jhan.

"Get that stuff off!" Kile made it to the bed, just, and began pulling at Jhan's clothes. Jhan went wide eyed, drunk mind trying to switch gears and wonder what Kile intended. She wasn't afraid. What she had told Tevar Narin was true. She trusted Kile beyond all reason and he was as far, in her mind, from Dagara and his men as the sun was from the moon.

Kile yanked off Jhan's boots and socks and even pulled off her underthings. Jhan shivered and sat, completely naked, while Kile dropped her clothes and shoved them into a pile with his foot. "All wet. Catch cold in that stuff."

Jhan was confused. "Only my cloak was wet, Kile."

Kile motioned impatiently with both hands, waving them at Jhan as if he wasn't about to think anything through. "Don't argue! You alllllwaaays argue!"

Kile staggered and put a hand to his head. "Soooo tired," he complained. He began pulling off his own clothes, piling them on top of Jhan's. When he was completely nude, he slowly turned and began walking towards the bed.

Kile was as beautiful all over as his face, Jhan thought appreciatively. Bulging muscles and golden hair sprinkled everywhere; Kile looked as if he had been made out of sunshine. Jhan shivered even more now, but it was out of growing joy, nervousness, and a confusion of thoughts that couldn't quite make a decision if this was the right thing to allow to happen.

Kile made it to the bed and his hands reached out... to catch himself as he fell across the foot of it like a toppling tree. The bed bounced and Jhan started. Kile's eyes were closed and the jug of wine, he had stubbornly clung to during everything, tumbled from lax fingers and rolled across the floor. Kile had passed out!

Jhan stared stupidly for few, long moments and then she giggled again. The giggle turned into a sigh of resignation. She lay back on the bed alongside Kile and stared up at the ceiling, wondering if

anything was ever going to come easily in her life. It was the last thought that she had before she passed out as well.

A hand ran the length of Jhan's body, caressing. Jhan opened her eyes, still a little drunk, and tried to figure out where she was. The fire had died down again and it was very dim. She pieced things back together before imagination could turn the darkness into nightmare. Kile's room. She was in Kile's room and Kile was -

Beside her, Jhan realized, nuzzling her breasts with his mouth; eyes closed as if he were dreaming. Jhan's breath caught and she stared down at his golden head as he went even further, becoming aroused now and waking up enough from his drunken stupor to get interested in the body next to him.

He was loving her, Jhan knew, and felt a slow warmth spread through her. He wasn't possessing her, degrading her, or wanting her just because she was available. He was enjoying her soft skin, the curve of her waist, and the swell of her breasts. When his head slowly worked down her body and he hooked her leg over his shoulder, Jhan arched her back and choked on a cry. Nerves tingled and shot pleasure up her spine in an incredible wave she had never felt before. Dagara had succeeded! To Jhan, it was the ultimate revenge that, instead of being a tool for torture as Dagara had intended, it was instead the greatest of gifts.

Kile was more than ready now. He came back up to kiss Jhan's face and he mingled his tongue with hers as he made their bodies one in a gentle, stinging motion. Jhan gasped into his mouth, but he was careful despite still being drunk. Slowly, pain gave way to pleasure again, and they rocked on the heights of passion together.

Kile was groaning as if he were going to die. He broke away from Jhan's mouth and began to pant. Jhan could just make out his wide eyed face and the incredible expression of pleasure there. "Gods!" Kile groaned and then again and again until it was almost a scream. "I've never felt anything- oh, Gods!" He shouted the last and Jhan wrapped her legs about him as if she were trying to hold on in a fierce storm.

Jhan felt as if something were about to explode within her. Every nerve was suddenly set on fire with pleasure and her mind almost couldn't handle the powerful sensations. When the climax came,

every muscle clenched and Jhan screamed, back arching and hands pushing at Kile as if she couldn't bear it anymore. He held her determinedly and they rode it out together.

Exhausted, Kile rolled off of Jhan, still panting. He clung to her and tucked her into the curve of his arm lovingly as he mumbled something, falling unconscious once again. Jhan stared at him, lights flashing like lightning behind her eyes as her nerves and mind calmed down. Finally, she nuzzled against Kile, kissing his broad chest, and fell asleep wrapped in a happy glow.

There was an incoherent shout of surprise and Jhan was rudely awakened by being roughly rolled over. The bed bounced and someone ran to the toilet and was violently ill.

Jhan blinked as she slowly sat up, head throbbing so badly she moaned and dropped it into her hands. "I promise not to drink ever again," she whispered through the pain. "Just make it stop!"

Jhan heard water splashing and a deep groan of anguish. Feet came padding back into the room and Jhan heard someone putting on clothes. Her dress and her still wet cloak, slapped into Jhan.

"Get dressed!" That was Kile, sounding as if he could barely contain violence.

Jhan looked up from her hands, confused and blinking at the too bright sunlight coming through a window. Before her stood Kile, as pale as a sheet and trembling visibly. His eyes were bruised wells and his mouth was clenched.

"I said get dressed!" Kile shouted again.

"What's wrong?" Jhan wondered with a wince. "Please, stop shouting. My head's going to explode and yours can't feel much better!"

"You tricked me!" Kile showed no mercy, continuing to shout. "You took advantage of me while I was drunk! I would never have- have done that! I thought you were someone else!"

Jhan went very still, straightening and giving Kile the full force of her hurt blue eyes. "No, you didn't. You knew who I was."

"I thought that I was dreaming!" Kile amended furiously.

"I'll give you that one, but I was almost as drunk as you were, Kile." Jhan pointed out. "I think I can just as easily claim that you took advantage of me!"

Kile's hands fisted. "I said get dressed! Get out of my room and out of my sight! I don't want to remember this moment, ever! If anyone knew... If my Father found out, can you imagine what they would think of me? I'm not a thekling!"

"And I'm not a man any longer!" Jhan shot back and stood up. She shakily kept her balance as Kile looked away. "Look at me!" Jhan demanded. "Look!" when Kile refused, Jhan swore at him. "Coward!"

Jhan strode forward and stepped in front of Kile's vision. She twisted her hands into the front of his coat and shook at him. "*LOOK AT ME, YOU BASTARD!*"

Kile looked down at her, then, startled by her vehemence, but his eyes were flinching and haunted by guilt and shame. "What do you want from me?" Kile moaned. "More revenge?"

"Revenge?" Jhan was outraged, hardly containing her fury. "For what, Kile? For being like any other man? For not being able to stand up to the Power of ultimate evil? I failed that test too, remember? I let them do whatever they wanted to me, Kile, and I did whatever Dagara told me to do. Some of those things you'll never be able to imagine in your darkness dreams! How can I blame you? How can you blame yourself?"

Kile swallowed and looked away, his eyes watering as if he were going to weep. "I can't bear this. I can't! I have to go away! I'm going to ask General Vek to transfer me to Sarvoy as soon as he returns from patrol."

Jhan was persistent. "Look at me, Kile." This time her voice was soft.

Kile looked again, as if drawn against his will and better judgment. Jhan never relented in her grip. If he wanted to leave the room he would have to drag her, naked, after him.

"What do you see?" Jhan asked.

"A mutilated boy," Kile bit out, struggling inwardly against his horror.

Jhan went white, but held her ground. "How can you see that? Am I shaped like a boy? Do I talk like a boy? Is my face anything like a boy's? Does a boy have breasts and legs as fine as mine? Does a boy have a rear end that's soft and curves like -"

"Stop!" Kile shouted.

"Why?" Jhan wondered, eyebrows raised mockingly. "Are you getting excited again? Don't you remember anything from last night? It seemed to me that you were really enjoying yourself."

“You are a man!” Kile exploded and yanked Jhan’s hands off of his coat. “You are Jhanian Kevelt, Prince of Karana. Nothing that’s been done to you nor anything you can say will ever change that!”

Jhan released him abruptly, picking up her clothes and slowly putting them on. She sat and began putting on her socks and boots methodically, eyes never leaving Kile's. Hers were smoldering and his were full of pain and confusion, but there was a determination there too. He wasn’t going to give in. What he believed wasn’t going to be torn down.

“I’ll leave,” Jhan said at last and Kile looked relieved. “But I want to know a few things before I do.”

“I’ll leave,” Jhan said at last and Kile looked relieved. “But I want to know a few things before I do.”

Kile stiffened again. “Like what?”

“Do you still love me?” Jhan demanded.

Kile wasn’t about to lie at this point. “Yes, you know that I do.”

“More than anyone?” Jhan persisted. “More than anyone in your entire life?”

Kile paused, but it wasn’t to think about it. He was pausing to gather strength to answer. “Yes,” he admitted at last. “I’ve tried thinking about other women, but you keep coming into my mind. I can’t forget about you, as much as I want to. That’s why I’m determined to leave.”

“We’re a pair, aren’t we?” Jhan sighed, shaking her head and running hands through her black curls. “We’re both so stubborn. I’ll bet you any money, though, that I’m more stubborn than you.” “Are you through?” Kile wondered, pain seeping into his voice. “Are you done twisting my heart and my sensibilities?”

“Not just yet,” Jhan replied grimly. “A few more questions.”

“Quickly,” Kile was looking green and his head must have been throbbing the way he was gripping his forehead.

“Do you care that I can’t have any children?” The question was far more cruel to Jhan than to Kile and he knew it.

Kile replied gently enough. “No. A man doesn’t have children, Jhan. I am sorry that you can’t father any.”

“I have. A son,” Jhan replied. “Or at least Jhanian did before I was given his body.”

Kile tried to work through that revelation and Jhan saw that it was a hard hit against her. Still, she knew that it had to be faced. There couldn't be any secrets or regrets between them and they both needed to understand the other.

"I have two children," Kile revealed suddenly. "Twins. Jolenna and Damis. A boy and a girl. Their mother was a short acquaintance. She lives under my father's roof with the children and I am there whenever I am not training."

"So, it isn't children that you want," Jhan confirmed with a nod.

"What are you searching for?" Kile demanded in exasperation. "You are a man! I am a man! We are both fathers! What don't you understand?"

Jhan growled under her breath and stood. "I'm trying to understand why you are so obstinate! You keep repeating that mantra about me being a man, but I can see in your eyes that you don't really believe that! You remember last night too well! You know that what we did had nothing at all to do with two men together and drunk! We were a man and a woman and you, my dearest Kile, had the greatest sex you have ever had in your life!"

"Admit it!" Jhan continued unmercifully. "Admit that you would do anything to feel that again and again for the rest of your life! Admit that the only thing keeping you from grabbing me and making love to me is your damn pride, your guilt, and your fear of what everyone will think of you!"

"You!" Kile shook from head to foot. "You are a foul mouthed... If you were a woman I would mistake you for a low born creature from a pleasure house in the dives of Sarvoy!"

"And you know what they're like, do you?" Jhan dared. "I seem to remember Jaross telling me that you were drowning your sorrows there. I'd be careful who I was accusing of being foul and low born!"

Kile shook like a leaf and then he turned very green and ran for the toilet. He was very sick again. "Leave! Now!" Kile finally shouted.

"I will!" Jhan shouted, beginning to feel green herself, "but you'll find that I am very much a woman, Kile, and that I won't stop until I convince you that I am the woman that you want!"

Jhan went out of the door and slammed it behind her. It sent a wash of throbbing, searing pain, through her head and she held it in her hands, moaning, as she made her way slowly back to her room. She discovered Rehn waiting for her there, dressed in his best and thatch of unruly hair tamed for once under a stylish hat. He jumped to his feet at Jhan's entrance, very agitated.

“Where have you been?” Rehn demanded. “King Tekhal, King Thaos, and all the lords and ladies have been waiting for you, Jhan!” Rehn exploded.

“Oh, God, the party!” Jhan groaned and collapsed onto the bed full length. “I can’t, Rehn! Tell them I’m ill! It’s the truth!”

Rehn’s nostrils flared. “Ill from drinking, it smells like! What were you doing last night?”

“Drinking!” Jhan replied, short and evasive.

“I just said that!” Rehn snapped crossly. He reached out and pulled Jhan up from the bed. He picked up the white dress from the floor. “You must get dressed Jhan. You must come. You can’t insult so many people and live to tell about it!”

“Oh, Rehn, “Jhan groaned. “The way my head hurts, I know I won’t live if I do try and go!”

“I’ll call Bheni,” Rehn ignored her. “She’ll help you. She’ll carry you if she needs to, but you must go to the gathering!”

Everything crystallized for Jhan in an instant. She sat up and the pain receded as adrenaline suddenly kicked in. Her eyes sparkled and Rehn froze, suspicious and wary. “Everyone’s going to be there?” Jhan asked in a clear voice.

Rehn gave her a look. “What’s going on in that head of yours, Jhan?”

“*Everyone*, Rehn?” Jhan persisted.

“Yes, everyone,” Rehn replied slowly.

“Even Kile’s father?”

Rehn’s eyes went wide. “Of course he’ll be there, Jhan, but please don’t tell me that you’re planning some sort of revenge or -”

“You’ll see,” Jhan cut his protest short, standing up and taking the dress from Rehn’s reluctant grip. “Now, turn around so that I can get dressed.”

Jhan would have liked to do her hair and clean herself up, but she knew there wasn’t any time. She settled for brushing out her curls and cleaning her face in a bowl of water meant for washing. When Rehn turned about again, he gasped like a fish.

“Yo-you’re beautiful!” Rehn stammered. Swallowing hard, he struggled for composure. “Far more beautiful than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

Jhan didn't pause to bask in the compliment. She didn't want to stop moving, afraid that, if she did, she might give doubt, fear, and the effects of her hangover a foothold. She took advantage of Rehn's confusion, taking his hand firmly in hers and leading him out of her room.

Recovering at last, Rehn seemed to shake himself and realize that Jhan was actually doing exactly what he wanted. That made him suspicious again, but he slipped his hand out of Jhan's and suddenly took back his role of escort. Leading the way to the Upper Level of Pekarín, Rehn took on the important air of a page clearing the way for a princess.

"I've never seen you dressed up, Rehn. You aren't such a plain farm boy," Jhan remarked as they entered a corridor filled with beautifully decked lords and ladies. They were queued up to be announced, one at a time, as they entered the large ballroom. Jhan frowned. "You exaggerated, Rehn. We aren't late at all. In fact, we look early!"

Rehn hooked an arm in Jhan's, as if he were afraid she might run away, and smiled half heartedly. "It made you hurry to be on time. I just hope that I don't regret not telling them that I couldn't find you."

Rehn began to move forward. Jhan was royalty. She didn't have to wait in line. Jhan stopped him with a firm hand and pulled him towards a seat by a wall. Rehn frowned impatiently, but Jhan ignored him, watching the crowd file into the ballroom avidly.

"What are you waiting for, Jhan?" Rehn demanded at last in exasperation.

"For all the players," Jhan remarked cryptically. "The play never really ends, Rehn, but there are times when everyone must be on stage."

"I'm supposed to know what that means?" Rehn wondered irritably.

"You will," Jhan replied without taking her eyes off of the milling line of people.

Jhan waited until she saw all of the players enter the ballroom, and then she stood, smoothing down her dress with nervous hands and firming her resolve. This was either going to win her happiness or it was going to be the biggest mistake of her life. It was time to find out which.

"Bheni!" Rehn exclaimed.

Bheni had arrived dressed in a flowing red length of material. It had been wrapped about her tall body many times and set with a golden pin like a sunburst. Her hair was loose from its characteristic braids and it flowed like bronze cotton down to her waist. She smiled at Rehn, as he eagerly took her

hand, and Jhan saw the love between them. It stung Jhan to act and she drowned her fear in determination.

Jhan forced herself to cry, allowing the tears to run down her cheeks like a river, and twisted her face into an expression of shame and wild grief. Sobbing loudly, she ran into the ballroom with her beautiful dress flowing behind her.

“Brother!” Jhan shouted and rushed into Thaos’s surprised embrace.

Dressed in black from head to foot and dark hair crowned by a silver circlet, Thaos looked like a black lion; strong and fierce. He put his great arms around Jhan and looked for an enemy with hot blue eyes. “What is it?” he demanded. “Has someone harmed you?”

“Yes!” Jhan sobbed. She pointed a dramatic, accusing finger at Kile standing a short distance away and declared, as loudly as she could, “He defiled my honor!”

Thaos was stunned, as was everyone in the ballroom. He looked from Jhan to Kile with conflicting emotions running across his face; anger and disgust foremost. Finally, Thaos made a slow, deliberate attempt to clarify the situation, not wanting any mistakes or hoping that he had heard Jhan wrong. “Lord Kile... defiled you?”

The gawking lords and ladies parted and King Tekhal came striding up to them. Dressed in his customary blue and silver, he looked older, Jhan thought, and less like humoring anyone.

“What is going on here?” Tekhal demanded crossly. “Why are you disrupting a gathering in your honor with this nonsense? How can you be defiled by anyone, Jhanian Kevelt?”

“Didn’t you even bother asking Healer Perazii what Dagara had done to me, your Majesty?” Jhan was truly outraged now. “Do you think my brother gave me the title of ‘Princess’ as a joke? I can be defiled and I was defiled by Lord Kile! I demand justice!”

Tekhal turned to Kile, at his wits end and wanting sanity desperately. It was obvious that all of his hope for that lay with Kile. He spoke carefully and Jhan angrily heard an unspoken command for Kile to deny her charges. “Is this true, Lord Kile?”

Kile was dressed in uniform, red coat buttoned at the throat and face frozen in shock. His eyes were glassy, looking all about him at the staring faces. Everyone had heard Jhan’s shouts and Kile knew everyone was believing her. He looked ready to be very ill again or die of shame, but he seemed unable to give Tekhal the reply the King was commanding from him.

A man, who looked like an older version of Kile in red leathers, pushed his way through the crowd and did a double take at Jhan in her beautiful dress. He was white, fearful, and furiously angry at the same time. He reached out and grabbed Kile by the arm, propelling Kile, as if he were a little boy, to the King and Jhan. He then bowed very low and forced Kile to do the same.

“Tell them this isn’t so, Kile!” Kile’s father demanded.

Kile was still unable to speak, jaw working.

Thaos stood very tall and very dangerous as he goaded Kile in a snarling voice. “Speak, Lord Kile! Answer Duke Dor and the charges brought forward by my sister.”

Jhan kept her face turned away from Kile as if she feared him. She was beginning to feel anxious. She hated what she was putting Kile through, but Jhan remained determined in her belief that it was necessary if either of them was ever going to be happy.

“I can’t deny the charge,” Kile replied at last in a very low voice.

“Speak louder!” Tekhal demanded, furious.

“I can’t deny the charge!” Kile said again, shouting, and stepped away from his father. Kile’s head was bowed in embarrassment and shame. “I-I did defile Jhanian Kevelt.”

“What!” Duke Dor spun Kile away from everyone and spoke to him in low, disbelieving tones. “Are you mad? That’s not only a man, but a ward of the King of Pekar!” The Duke lowered his voice even more, but Jhan could still hear. “Are you perverted? A- a thekling? I’ll disown you! I won’t have a son who endangers his name, title, and family for a boy in a dress!”

Kile raised his chin and he shot a look at Jhan as Jhan finally gathered enough courage to turn and look at him. Kile’s eyes were angry, even hate filled, but all of that melted and passed away in an instant when he saw in Jhan’s eyes how much she loved him. It arced between them like electricity.

Kile shivered and firmed his shoulders as if he had suddenly been given a heavy weight to bear. He slowly looked about at all the staring faces. Everyone knew. No one would ever forget. Kile had always been brave to a fault. He wasn’t any less brave now. Jhan could see him make his decision and she would never love him more than she loved him right then as he addressed everyone in a clear, strong voice.

“She isn’t a boy in a dress.” Kile stepped towards Jhan, jerking his arm out of his father’s desperate grasp. “Jhan is a woman. I have defiled her and I have dishonored her. I will accept my

punishment.”

Jhan squeezed Thaos’s protective arm. The man wasn’t dense. He knew what to do. “My sister is spoiled!” Thaos declared in feigned outrage. “I will never be able to marry her to any lord! I demand satisfaction! I demand that Lord Kile do what is right and wed my sister! Her honor must be restored!”

Kile’s mouth dropped open and it was a perfect echo of his father. Jhan could have laughed if it wasn’t so serious. King Tekhal seemed unwilling to go along. He put hands on hips as muttering rose and swelled among the gathered lords and ladies. Unable to decide how to diffuse the situation, he finally gave over the decision to Kile, certain that Kile would chose anything but marriage.

“It is the customary punishment for defiling a woman’s honor,” Tekhal admitted with a weary growl of irritation. “Though it is not customary to apply the law to men... well, you have declared that Jhan is not a man before everyone and you must know more than any of us, I suppose, Lord Kile.” Tekhal ignored Kile’s sickly flush of embarrassment. “Failure to comply with the law is punishable by imprisonment or even death. I leave the decision to you, Lord Kile.”

Kile swallowed hard, but his eyes never left Jhan's. “I will marry Princess Jhanian Kevelt of Karana. There isn’t any other honorable decision.” Kile looked at his father apologetically. “Forgive me, Father. I may have been drunk, but you raised an honorable son. I can’t do less than what you have always expected of me.”

Duke Dor looked taken aback and then he blinked like an owl. “I- don’t- know- what- to- say,” he measured out each word and then went on in a rush. “You were drunk, you say?” Kile nodded. “I suppose you have no choice then. You say she is a woman?”

Kile paused, unwilling to lie, but willing to hedge the truth. “Enough to make no difference, yes,” Kile agreed evasively.

Duke Dor shook his head in confusion, recovered, and then bowed low to King Thaos. “My son has accepted responsibility. He will marry your sister, the Princess, and restore her honor.”

Thaos was suddenly annoyed, but his voice didn’t give any hint of it. “I will gladly accept the Dor into the family of Indri and Kevelt.”

It was clear that Thaos wasn’t glad, but he knew there wouldn’t be any Dor offspring joining with Kevelt or Indri. Duke Dor wasn’t so knowledgeable, and he was suddenly looking shocked, realizing that he was about to become related to royalty.

“When will the marriage take place?” Tekhal wondered acidly, hoping that the madness was over

with. “I will have the Chronicler take note of it as your sentencing date, Lord Kile, for your crime.”

Jhan stepped out of Thaos’s embrace and slowly walked to Kile. She held out her hand. Kile was scowling at her. Her hand remained hanging in mid air, alone, and then Kile relented with a defeated sigh and took hold of it.

“Now, your Majesty,” Jhan replied strongly, startling everyone. “I won’t be dishonored for another moment.”

Tekhal went wide eyed, face turning red with anger and fists clenching in outrage. “Now! How can it be now? You will need ladies to witness and all of your relations to attend. Preparations will take months because of the snow. The passes will have to clear. I don’t see how it will be possible.”

“Now,” Jhan repeated, talking over Kile’s beginning stammer of support for the King. “Now,” she repeated, yet again. “This minute. This instant. Now!”

Bheni stepped forward with a nervous smile and a bow to both kings. She snagged a bouquet of flowers from a vase at a table and pushed them into Jhan’s hair till they made a crown atop her head. Her calloused hands combed Jhan’s hair with her fingers and she straightened out Jhan’s gown with a few efficient jerks.

“She is ready for her wedding,” Bheni announced with another smile for Jhan and a wink. “I will witness.”

“And I am her relative.” Jaross stepped forward. Dressed in deep blue, he had a bemused smile on his lips. “I will stand and speak for all our relations and bless this union.”

Lastly, Thaos stepped forward and took hold of Jhan and Kile’s hands. “I will stand as Jhanian’s father and give her in marriage,” he announced officially. “Do you have a token, Lord Kile?”

Kile shook his head, bewildered and at a loss. Rehn stepped forward and fished out the necklace he had been going to give to Bheni. It had stayed in his pocket since the day before. He handed it to Kile. “Until you find a better one,” Rehn grinned and slapped Kile on the back good naturedly.

Kile could only nod shakily and Jhan could see that he was having second thoughts, becoming terrified. “Now!” she prompted Thaos.

Thaos gave a grim chuckle at Jhan’s boldness. Still holding Jhan and Kile’s locked hands, he carefully intoned a few words. “I give Jhanian Nor Kevelt to Kile Helarion Dor. All holdings, monies, and personal goods held by Lord Kile will be forthwith joined to holdings, monies, and personal goods

held by Princess Jhanian. Official papers, disclosures, and physical transfer of said holdings will come at an agreed upon later date. I give you Lord Kile Helarion Dor and his wife, Princess Jhanian Nor Kevelt Dor! You are joined until death.”

“How romantic,” Jhan grated sourly. “It’ll do for now, Thaos, but I really think we should do it again -”

“The marriage bed must be prepared!” Thaos intoned, interrupting.

“Now wait just a minute!” Jhan protested, but she found herself caught up in a swirl of women and separated from Kile. The women were laughing and teasing, leading Jhan into a room where they sat her down and began to undress her and clean her up without her consent.

“How clever!” one woman sighed. “You trapped Lord Kile neatly! I wish that I had thought of that, your Highness!”

“What?” Jhan was shocked, confused and off balance by all the helping hands. She still had enough presence of mind to be offended. “I don’t think that you understand what happened!”

“Pretending to be defiled! I’ll have to remember that one!” another girl giggled as she did Jhan’s hair quickly and efficiently.

“Men are so easily fooled,” yet another laughed as she began showing Jhan one gauzy dress after another.

Maid servants were used to reacting quickly to the whims of the nobles. They didn’t miss a beat or take any time at all in thinking about who or what they were preparing for Kile’s marriage bed. Jhan was just another highborn to be catered to and they did their job well, as excited as if they were the one’s going to meet Kile.

Jhan finally chose a white dress that was nothing but filmy gauze. They put it on Jhan as if she were a doll and Jhan grew so angry that she tried to make them go away. They protested, and made so much noise, that Jhan relented and sat still, seething with the aftereffects of alcohol and the wildness of the day.

At last, the women put a cloak about Jhan and led her to Kile’s room. They knocked and announced Jhan’s married name with a solemnity marred by nervous giggles. The door opened and Rehn stood there with Jaross.

“All is prepared,” Jaross said with all seriousness and bowed to Jhan. He and Rehn filed out of the

room and the women swept in.

“Prepared indeed,” one of the maids huffed and began flinging perfume everywhere and small flowers. That done, they removed Jhan’s cloak, placed Jhan on the bed, and arranged her gauzy dress to their satisfaction. Still giggling and whispering to themselves, they filed out of the room and closed the door behind them.

Jhan stood almost at once and went to the window. The room was warm, the fireplace stacked with wood and crackling cheerfully, but Jhan still felt chilled. She wrapped her arms about her and didn’t turn when male laughter rang outside the door. It opened and Kile was pushed in. They closed the door again in his face when he moved as if to flee.

Kile and Jhan stood in silence. It stretched uncomfortably.

“I think I’m regretting this,” Jhan said finally, without turning.

“Now?” Kile shouted in an echo of Jhan in the ballroom. “After humiliating me, angering my father, accusing me of-of raping you! You regret?”

“I remembered Rehn telling me that sometimes you have to force a man to do what he wants,” Jhan explained, turning at last as a tear shimmered on her cheek. “I told him that I didn’t do things like that. I should have remembered my own words. This doesn’t feel right now. I won’t hold you to this marriage, Kile.”

Kile let out a long gusting sigh and strode to Jhan in two steps. He wiped at the tear on her face and then took hold of her chin. Tilting her head up, he searched her face for something.

“What?” Jhan wondered after a long minute had passed.

“You are so beautiful,” Kile murmured. “With those moon flowers in your hair -”

Jhan choked and reached up to her crown of flowers. She pulled them out as if they were spiders, long dark stems and white, lily like petals. She began struggling away from Kile. “Get them out!”

Jhan sobbed as Kile caught her in his arms. He methodically pulled all of the flowers out, and then left her to open the window and toss them out of it. Closing the window again with a bang, he returned to Jhan and held her again.

“What is it?” Kile asked soothingly. “Why are you so frightened?”

“It’s what Dagara called me. Moon Flower. His Moon Flower,” Jhan sobbed and hid her face against Kile’s chest. “Only you have the strength that I need to make the memories go away, Kile! Only

you have the light to chase away the darkness that's within me. Without you, I think I'll die!"

Kile took a deep, shuddering breath and held Jhan tightly. Something, the last ounce of denial, lost its hold on him. "Without you, I think I'll die too," Kile admitted to himself as well as to Jhan. "I love you so much... it's an ache that never goes away."

Kile lifted Jhan up in his strong arms and sat on the bed with her in his lap. He caressed her face and looked into her deep blue eyes. "From the moment that I saw you," Kile revealed softly. "It's always, only been you. I've just been too stupid and hard headed to admit it. It was wrong to make a fool of me in front of everyone, but I did need to be shaken to make me see, to make me accept you, and to make me accept myself. I'm not very good with words, but, I think that you know what I mean."

"It won't be easy," Jhan warned. "You know my temper and you know some people will never see past what they know about me."

"I know," Kile replied. "But I am a Lord and you are a Princess. That gives us a great deal of latitude in being eccentric."

Jhan nodded, agreeing, but her mind was calming now and she was already thinking about their future. "I'm going to get rid of that title, you realize."

Kile was perplexed. "Why?"

"It's something that I will never believe in," Jhan explained seriously. "That anyone should be made to bow and obey someone because they were given a fancy title or were born into the right family... it just isn't right! I'm also going to talk to Tekhal about the lack of rights women have around here. I can't believe that you can force someone to marry you because no one else will have you if you've been defiled. That isn't right either, Kile -"

Kile suddenly kissed Jhan on the mouth. It was long and deep and, when he broke it, Jhan was staring at him with wide eyes. "Finally!" Kile exclaimed. "I've discovered a way to quiet your unrelenting temper!"

Jhan did relent, putting aside fears and future plans and turning to the here and now and the man, her husband, who was a warm and sensual presence about her. "I'll let you think that, for now." and she gave him a kiss to think about.

Very slowly, they fell back onto the bed and intertwined. It was sweet. Very sweet. Long after, in a warm glow of satisfaction, Jhan laughed. The laugh was clear and filled with joy. The darkness fled before it and Jhan stepped into the full glory of the light of happiness at last.

End of Book Three

Book Four coming Soon

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