

Summary:

Still trapped in the body of a boy on another world, and surrounded by those who would control her for their own purposes, Christine makes the ultimate decision to leave everything behind and to try to find anonymity in a new land. She finds her troubles impossible to leave behind, though, as her greatest enemy, the Dark King, moves to conquer all the lands and reclaim her for his own.

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

Shattered Fates

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Published by Bon Publishing Company in association with Produx House, Corp.

P. O. Box 3847

Ft. Myers, FL 33918

[www. bonpublishing.com](http://www.bonpublishing.com)

ISBN# 978-0-9744160-5-2

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

Shattered Fates

by
Kracken

Chapter One

(Into The Wilderness)

Rolling white clouds shot with gold. The description was purest simplicity and totally inadequate to describe the unearthly scene. The white was as perfectly white as snow. No, that wasn't it at all. The starched collar of a choir boy? No. Perhaps the perfect white hot part of a flame? Close. The clouds? Gold. The shimmering gold of oriental silk? The center of the Sun? It was too much like an attempt to describe color to the blind.

Jhan seemed to be standing on nothing, suspended in that mesmerizing cloud of indescribable gold and white. Smiling with quiet joy, it never occurred to Jhan to wonder where he was, how he had arrived there, or about anything else, for that matter. Contentment ruled him.

'He will find you here. You mustn't stay.'

The voice emanated from the clouds as if it had come from some celestial deity. Jhan waited with idle interest, but no one appeared to claim that voice. The words remained as if written there, though, hanging against the clouds like the crudeness of graffiti spray painted on a temple. Those words slowly caused a ripple in Jhan's contentment and pricked at memories that he had purposely forgotten.

Jhan squirmed. A malignant, dark spot had suddenly appeared on the defaced clouds. At first, it was so small that Jhan mistook it for something in his eyes, but, to his dismay, it swiftly grew larger. Dismay turned into terror as it overtook the gold and white clouds looking like ink shot into a glass of water. Darkness swiftly fell as complete as the space between stars.

It was too much like being born, Jhan thought, as he wept, railed, and begged the gold and the white clouds to return. One moment, safe and secure, the next squeezed out into disorienting circumstances. Now Jhan began to wonder where he was. Now he began to wonder if there was someone else in that place beside himself. Where was the owner of that voice?

Stumbling forward, hands outstretched and flailing, for what seemed like hours, Jhan felt as if he were drowning in the increasingly loud beat of his own panicked heart. It became his world, his only focus in that total absence of light or form.

When iron hard hands suddenly grabbed Jhan by the wrists, it was both a horror and a relief. Here at last was something concrete and warm other than himself. Horror overtook the relief and killed it utterly in one agonizing instant, as those hands pulled Jhan close in what seemed like an embrace. That embrace kept tightening, brutally, until Jhan cried out.

“Breakfast, Your Highness!” Such a simple phrase, yet it catapulted Jhan from his dream, heart hammering and visions shattering into a million, glittering pieces. Those pieces traveled outward into infinity and then came crashing back, rearranging themselves into a room as unfamiliar as the man who was standing before him, tray of food balanced in one hand.

Jhan sat bolt upright, hands clawing at the world around him as he shrieked in panic, one word escaping from his lips and reverberating against the walls. “Where am I?”

The man jumped back, nearly upsetting the tray. Blonde and very young, the man wore the simple clothing of a servant, the left breast of his tunic embroidered with the emblem of a white feather, circled in gold. His mouth had formed an 'o' of surprise and his thoughts were clear on his face. He was as afraid of Jhan as Jhan was of him. Putting the tray of food on the floor, he beat a hasty retreat, slamming a firm, wooden door behind him. The rattle of a lock was clearly audible despite Jhan's screams.

Jhan shoved a hand into his mouth and bit down on it until he tasted blood. That sharp pain and the acrid taste jolted him, and woke him completely. His screams died, replaced by a lost, confused whimper.

Pain throbbed along Jhan's back, keeping time with his heartbeat and the newer pain in his hand. He became aware of it slowly, his jumble of thoughts coming together like a difficult puzzle. They formed a picture; his past. The shock was like ice water thrown into Jhan's face. He reached a hand to his back with difficulty and found bandages.

Jhan remembered the forest, Kile, King Torian Kevelt, Thaos, an assassin throwing a knife, and days recovering in the army barracks with a stern Healer Perazii keeping everyone away. Yes, Jhan remembered now. Fever had consumed him. He remembered burning as if he had been on fire, his last lucid recollection of Rehn Tarwallen holding his hand and calling his name, frantically.

Jhan shook his head to clear it, desperate to discover where he was. He was laying on a hard, spare cot with a scratchy blanket the only cover for his naked body. The small, windowless room was bare except for a hanging lantern. It lit the stark room with a gloomy, yellow glow that picked out cracks in the walls and a buckling stone floor.

How long he had lain there, Jhan couldn't say, but he felt weak and his ribs were standing out. Salt crusted his skin as if from long days and nights sweating the fever out. He smelled awful and he put a hand to his own nose to cover it in disgust as he swung legs over the side of the bed and started to stand. Metal jingled. An iron cuff had been locked to one of Jhan's ankles and a long length of chain

had been attached to a bolt in the floor.

The iron of the cuff seemed like claws crawling up Jhan's leg with rapacious memories. He shuddered, mind frantically trying to understand. Had they blamed him for trying to kill King Torian? Had that been the last straw for Tekhal? Jhan sprang to his feet to shout a protest.

“Ah!” Jhan exclaimed as he felt a wave of dizziness. He sat back down on the cot until the room stopped spinning and his blood had a chance to circulate. Taking a deep breath, Jhan straightened again, with determination, and began looking for clothing. He needed their security. He needed there to be that difference between this place and a cell of dark memory before he began to panic completely.

Jhan didn't have to search far. At the end of the bed, someone had placed a neat pile of clothes. There was a pair of red boots, brown leather pants, a white wool shirt, and a rich blue cape. Jhan flung them from the bed with a furious, incoherent shout, and snatched the blanket up, wrapping it about himself like a toga.

Jhan turned to the door, abusing it with his fear and anger as he shouted, “This isn't going to work! I want to speak to the king at once! Do you hear me?” Jhan paused. The complete silence was deafening. “Then tell that bastard, Tekhal, that he can shove -”

The door opened explosively, as if rushing towards Jhan to punish him for his words. Jhan staggered back, heart leaping to his throat as a young man strode through, face twisted in a scowl. “Be silent!” he commanded. Dressed in deep blue, he had the same feather emblem on his shoulder as the servant. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties, his hair as black as a raven's wing and his face thin and hawkish. His blue eyes were full of bitterness, anger, and obvious dislike for Jhan.

Jhan stepped back again, tripped on the chain, and sat awkwardly on the cot. He asked, in a small fearful voice, “Who are you?”

“I am your brother, Thaos Jai Kevelt. Don't you recall me from our meeting in the forest? I suppose that I shouldn't expect you to. It wasn't a good place for introductions, especially since you were busy trying to kill my- *our* father, and myself, at the time.”

“That wasn't me,” Jhan protested weakly. Misery filled him like slow poison and his words didn't even convince himself. Of course it had been him, Jhan knew, he had tried to kill again! “King Tekhal must have explained to you what happened? Why I did it?”

Thaos nodded and crossed muscled arms over his chest as if he could barely keep from doing violence. He was like a black lion, Jhan thought. The man's hair sprang from his forehead like a mane. Jhan half expected his teeth to have fangs when he gritted them, his jaw clenching as he swore under his breath and then said tightly, “That for your king and his explanations! He doesn't know you. I do. You were always a schemer, Jhanian. Is this yet another scheme?”

Jhan was confused, not certain how to reply. The man's words alluded to a long history of enmity between them. Jhan felt himself judged and awaiting execution for something that he knew nothing about. He tried to retreat to familiar ground and attempted to convince Thaos that he was looking, not at a hated brother, but at a stranger.

"I don't have any memory of you," Jhan began, paused, saw no reaction except for Thaos's disbelieving scowl, and then plowed on. "The person who was your brother is dead. There isn't anything left of him inside of this body. I am an entirely different person." Jhan swallowed hard. Thaos scowled even more. "I just want to be allowed to go home."

"Home? To Karana?"

"My room. Here, in Pekarín."

"Never to see us again?"

"Never."

Thaos rubbed his chin thoughtfully, but his anger and disgust were still apparent. "You were our father's darling, even though I was first born. He would have given you the throne, you know? Might, still, if you give over this madness and return home to Karana."

"I don't want a throne," Jhan responded, begging for understanding and reason. "I only want to be left alone!"

"To pretend to be a lady?"

"I'm not pretending."

Thaos shrugged as if it were all a waste of time. "I would like nothing better than to leave you to this madness. Unfortunately, our Father wants it otherwise. He thinks that he can remove your compulsion to kill. The Pekaríns have told us that they accomplished this feat when you attempted to kill their soldiers." Thaos shook his head contemptuously. "I don't think much of their abilities. If we hadn't kidnapped you and treated you properly, you would have died from a simple fever under their care!"

"You kidnapped me?" Jhan's outrage overcame enough of his fear for him to ask, angrily, "Where is this place? Where have you taken me?"

"This is Dejarín Fortress, a few miles from Pekarín Fortress. King Tekhal gave us permission to house our troops here." Thaos was clearly insulted. "We came as allies, but Tekhal treats us like poor, unwanted relations. This place is near collapse!"

"He'll find me here," It burst from Jhan, a threat that he hoped carried some truth.

Thaos gave an ugly laugh. "They believe that you have run away. No one looks for you. We are preparing for war! Men can't be spared to search for theklings."

"I'm not a thekling!" Jhan screamed back, hands raised, longing to grab Thaos and shake him, force him to see sense and what was before his own eyes. "Please bring your Father here. Let me try to persuade him that I am not his son!"

"He will come in time," Thaos assured him, "but I don't expect that he will let you go."

"Why won't he?"

"I don't relish the tale," Thaos growled and half turned as if to go.

"Wait!" Jhan's hands unclenched and reached out in desperate entreaty. "Please explain all of this to me. I need to know."

Thaos glared and then made a decision all at once, turning to face Jhan squarely. "Torian Kevelt, our father, married a beautiful woman. Small and gray eyed, she had hair as black as midnight and as long as a running stream." His voice caught on emotion, but he went on, voice turning harsh to cover it. "Torian loved her with all that was in him. I was born first and I looked like him, but you, his second son, looked much like her. He loved you all the more for it."

Jhan shook his head, confused. This wasn't what he had expected to hear. "Why does this matter?"

"It matters because our mother died in childbirth having you!" Thaos turned his back and opened the door. "Don't you see?" he said over his shoulder. "He won't let you go because you are all that is left that reminds him of her." Jhan could see the man's jaw clench, as hard as granite as he added. "If you continue to refuse to be Torian's son, then you had best get used to living in here."

The door closed and Jhan was alone, left to digest Thaos' words along with his meal. When Torian Kevelt entered the room a few hours later, he was better prepared. "Your Majesty," Jhan greeted the man icily.

Jhan noticed a mark on the floor. Torian stopped with his booted toes just behind it. Jhan remembered the King better than he had Thaos. The haggard look was gone and the man seemed straighter and more sane. He wasn't wearing black now, but a green colored tunic, pants, and boots.

"It is good that you have come out of your fever dreams," Torian's voice was rich and rolling, but it held hints of his anxiety and concern. "A few days in the sun and some good food will set you on the path of healing."

The king had longing in every tense muscle. He wanted Jhan to recognize him. He wanted his beloved son back. Anger warred with sympathy in Jhan. In the end, he decided that he couldn't afford the sympathy. "Your son is dead."

Pain. It was so acute in the man. He flinched from the invisible dagger Jhan had planted in his heart. If there had been a chair, he would have sat in it. Instead, he went to lean against the wall nearest the door, sighing heavily. "I thought... I thought that time would bring back your memory. You still see

nothing in me that you recognize?"

"I am not Jhanian Kevelt, Your Majesty."

"Why did you go?" The king hadn't heard him. He didn't want to. He groaned with his inner pain, shaking his head as he tried to understand the cruel past. "The border patrol hadn't needed you that night. Why go, my son?"

"I am not Jhanian Kevelt, Your Majesty," Jhan repeated, feeling tears in his eyes as he tried to cut through the man's despair and be heard. "I don't know why your son decided to go anywhere."

"All we found was your imala, dead, with a note pinned to its carcass. The note said that you had been taken hostage. It said other, terrible things."

Jhan had no choice but to be even crueler, hating himself for it. "It was terrible. So terrible Jhanian tried to kill himself; did kill himself. The Dark King used his Power to bring him back to life. Unfortunately, he lost Jhanian's mind in the process. Everything that was your son is dead. Jhanian, and everything that made him Jhanian, will never return no matter what you do. You must believe me."

The man was looking at him now, brows drawn down sharply. He mouthed the word *suicide*, as if it were the most disgusting, shameful word that he knew. Jhan held up his wrists and showed the man the long scars there. The Dark King had left them, perhaps as a reminder that there was no escaping his Power, even in death. The king recoiled as if Jhan had slapped him.

Jhan hadn't expected this response. Horror, yes, and great sorrow, but disgust and shame? He felt almost defensive of the dead Jhanian. "You can't know what it was like there." Jhan swallowed and felt himself going pale. "If I had been given the chance, I would have done the same." He couldn't go on, trembling and withdrawing as the darkness licked at the edges of sight.

The man closed his eyes tightly and bowed his head. Silence fell between them. Jhan was reluctant to break it. "He wanted my wife," the king said at last, as if dragging the words out of some deep part of his being. "He sent couriers with gifts and long letters of endearments, urging her to leave me and go to him. I wasn't aware that he used Power then. He was only some vagabond king trespassing near my lands."

"The Dark King?"

Torian nodded jerkily, continuing as if he were reciting a scene in a painful play that he had seen a thousand times. "Of course, she wouldn't. My little Marissa truly loved me. When she died... I blamed him even then, though I didn't know why I should or how he could have hurt her."

The king looked up and his eyes were red and threatening tears. "He changed you to look like her. You did before, but as a man should. This," he motioned to Jhan's body with shaking hands. "You are not her twin, but I can see what he has done! He has changed you, broken you, shamed you, and sent

you back to kill me and my family! This is his revenge on me and on poor Marissa!”

Jhan felt like weeping along with the king. It was all so horrible, so truly horrible! Jhan wanted to crawl under the blankets and hide from it all. Would this never end, this long parade of tragedy? “I’m sorry for your loss.” It sounded weak and like so much wasted breath.

The king was straightening and standing away from the wall. He pulled his tunic to order and nodded as if coming to some decision. “Loss? I’ve lost everything,” his last words as he began to draw a knife, stepping forward deliberately to cross the marked line on the floor.

Did he mean to kill what was left of his son or did he think to end it all and die fighting? Jhan would never know. He never gave Torian the chance. Jhan’s muscles tightened in an instant and his unchained foot came up and swung around in a move that intended to break the old man’s neck.

A hand grabbed hold of the king at the last moment and pulled him backwards. The deadly kick swished through air and Jhan landed lightly on both feet, chain clinking.

“Father!” It was Thaos, face red with outrage and horror. “What foolishness is this? You know the line is as far as you can go without the murderous rage coming on Jhanian!”

The king said nothing, dazed and distracted. Thaos took control, shooting a look at Jhan that promised something unpleasant, before he shepherded the king out of the room. He locked the door behind them.

Jhan’s eyes cleared slowly. He sat down on the stone floor, half collapsing there. He pulled the discarded blanket to himself and huddled within it, weeping in long drawn out sobs. In his anguish, Jhan almost wished that Torian had killed him.

Jhan was left alone to heal and grow stronger. Neither Torian nor Thaos visited him, leaving Jhan a great deal of time to wonder what they meant to do with him. They had intended to make him remember and break his killing compulsion, but now, after attempting once again to murder King Torian, perhaps they had decided not to bother? Perhaps they might even have decided to return him home? Jhan waited hopefully, but no one came to set him free.

Interrupted only by silent servants bringing food or taking away emptied trays, Jhan’s mind played out one scenario after another. As the days turned into weeks and the walls began to close in on him, those scenarios became darker and darker. What if they thought that he deserved to die? What if they intended to keep him chained up and hidden away for the rest of his life? Better to die, Jhan thought

When the door opened suddenly and servants poured into the small room, Jhan panicked, huddling

on his bed with hands held up as if he could fend them off. “What do you want?” he demanded.

One of the servants wrinkled a nose. “We bring a bath, Prince Jhanian.”

Jhan clutched his blanket tight against him, wondering what they intended to do. He watched them drag in a metal tub and fill it with water. Towels hit the floor in a soft pile and someone placed a bar of soap on top of that. To a man they bowed and then turned and left, locking the door behind them.

“A person should be allowed to bathe more than once a month!” Jhan shouted after them in frightened outrage. “And blankets should be changed more than once a year!”

Jhan wanted to be angry and defiant. He glared at the door, waiting for someone to come through it that he could shout at. When no one appeared, and time ticked slowly by, he gave in all at once, rushing eagerly to the tub and dropping his blanket as he went.

The tub was made for a person to wash standing up. The narrow sides of the tub were only high enough to hold enough water that servants could manage to carry. That water was freezing, whether out of general practice or spite, Jhan couldn't know, but it wasn't enough to deter him.

Jhan smelled the soap. It had a strong scent, like lye, but Jhan wasn't about to be particular. He scrubbed with it hard and felt its delicious tingle all over his body as it washed away sickness and maddening boredom all at once. Jhan's hair was more of a challenge. The cold water shocked him to his bones as he was forced to plunge his head into the tub to wash it.

Picking up the towels to dry off, Jhan discovered something hidden beneath them. Jhan wrapped a towel about himself and then unfolded a dress. It was plain gray with a white underskirt touched with embroidered flowers at the hem. It tied with laces at the front bodice and could be pulled tight at the waist with a black, leather belt. There was also a pair of black boots with socks, but they were tough walking boots, not a lady's boot at all. Lastly, there was a big, brown, thick coat and lined leather gloves. Jhan put on the dress and underskirt, smiling with quiet joy. Clean and clothed as he wanted, he felt like a human being again.

What did it all mean? Maybe it was atonement for treating him so poorly? Or were they trying something more subtle? It was possible that they were attempting to win his trust and gratitude for reasons of their own. Even knowing that it might be manipulation, Jhan still couldn't help feeling better about his situation. He wasn't about to let his guard down, though, despite his change in fortune. The Dark King had been a master at manipulation with Jhan as his horrified victim. Jhan knew all of the tricks.

Feeling the cold of his wet hair acutely, Jhan put on the coat, shoving his hands into the generous pockets. Each hand encountered an object. He flinched uncertainly, surprised, and then reached back in to pull the objects out. In one hand Jhan held two keys on an old ring. In the other, he held a leather

pouch that jingled promisingly. When he looked inside he saw a large amount of coins.

“What the -?”

Attached to the keys was a little slip of paper. A hand had been drawn with a finger pointing out. Someone wasn't taking for granted that Jhan could read. The meaning of the drawing was clear. It meant, *go*. Next to the hand was a drawing of a fortress with a line and a dagger drawn over it. Again it was clear to Jhan. *Go to Pekarín and you will die*. The last drawing was a road and an arrow. “Go far away from here,” Jhan guessed aloud.

Jhan shivered with anger as he crumpled up the note and tossed it aside. Someone wanted him to escape. He supposed that someone was Thaós. Who, but a prince, could afford to hand off a bag of money to convince someone to leave?

Jhan unlocked the manacle from around his ankle. The skin was raw and worn. He washed it thoroughly before slipping on his thick socks and boots. It rankled that he was being paid to run, Jhan thought, but he wasn't going to be foolish enough to turn down a chance at escape. Pulling up the hood of his coat, he used his second key to unlock the door.

Thaós had been right. The stone building was falling down. Cold wind whistled through cracks and windows had broken shutters. Jhan huddled into his coat to keep warm as he carefully walked down the hallways. He didn't creep or act subversive in any way. That would have called attention to himself. In this manner, Jhan was able to pass by several soldiers who only gave him a cursory glance.

There, an unguarded door that sat half open, hinges rusted in one position. Jhan squeezed through and cautiously blinked against sunlight. Snow covered rolling hills and a few flakes drifted down to rest on Jhan's eyelashes, causing him to blink them away. A gravel road cut between the hills, running to meet the gray clouded sky in the distance. It looked very uninviting.

Which way should he go? Jhan tried to find the sun. It must have been early morning. He could barely see its dull glow on the horizon. Remembering how he had seen the sun rise through the window of his own room in Pekarín, Jhan was able to determine that the gravel road went away from the fortress. If he walked in the opposite direction, according to Thaós, Pekarín fortress was only a few miles away.

Jhan continued to stand. Well, he prodded himself, get going. Rehn must be worried sick and Kile... Well, Kile, shocked by Jhan's declaration of love, had probably been overjoyed to think that he had gone away. King Tekhal, likewise, would be happy to be rid of Jhan's insolent nature and his disturbing mystery. Jhan tried to think of someone who might welcome his return, but, in the end, he couldn't think of anyone except for Rehn.

Why go back? Why not disappear and leave all of his troubles behind? He could blend into another

city, Jhan thought, and no one would ever know that he wasn't a woman. He could live somewhat of a normal life. The money that Thaos had given him could tide him over until he found other ways of making money.

Jhan thought of Rehn. The man had been a true friend, the truest one that Jhan had ever had, even as Christine. Jhan's throat tightened and his eyes stung as he imagined never seeing that good man ever again. And Kile. He loved Kile so strongly that it shook him to the bottom of his soul at the thought of never seeing him again. Though he would miss Rehn, it was Kile that Jhan would mourn the most. Could he really leave and never see either of them again?

Jhan saw people beginning to move about, some exercising horses far to the right while others took up tools and looked as if they were preparing to shore up the falling stonework of the old fortress. Make a decision, Jhan urged himself. There wasn't much time. There couldn't be many women in that place. Someone was bound to notice him despite his hood. They would come and ask him his business and all would be lost.

Lost. That single word encompassed the totality of Jhan's life in that place. Lost home, lost body, and lost life. If he stayed, he would always be surrounded by people who knew that he was a lie. Jhan was a man trying to be a woman. A joke. Rehn could only protect him for so long. Jhan was certain that the King of Pekarín had tired of it already. How long would people continue to tolerate him? Jhan could think of many reasons to go, danger to himself first and foremost.

Jhan shivered at the knowledge that, soon, the Dark King would be riding to Pekarín. There would be a war that Jhan wasn't certain that Pekarín would win. The very chance, even if slight, of falling into that evil man's grasp again, was something that Jhan couldn't bear to contemplate. That fear wrapped itself about him and seemed to compel his feet forward. Jhan took to the road, without a conscious decision to do so, boots crunching in the gravel as he walked away from Pekarín fortress and all that he knew.

Chapter Two

(Thunderbolt)

Jhan wasn't alone on the road. He was passed by men and women, strange livestock, carts of goods, carriages of nobles, and the odd soldier on imala back. The soldiers worried Jhan the most. When he saw them coming, he stepped off of the road and hid in the bushes until they had passed. They didn't appear to be searching for him, but they knew his face well enough to recognize him. It was possible that they would not only ask questions, but might attempt to take him back to Pekarín.

Jhan kept up a brisk walk despite still being a little weak. Even when his feet began to ache, he kept up the pace, afraid to slow down and be caught out in the wilderness after dark. Sarvoy wasn't far. A little pain and weariness were easy payment for a warm bed in an inn, especially when the penalty was a cold, shivering night on the rocky ground.

The road soon left the rolling hills and cut along the edge of a deep, dark forest. The trees towered up to the sky with huge trunks and evergreen leaves. Snow lay heavily on its tier on tier branches like a white cloak. Ancient, Jhan thought, and forbidding. It repelled intrusion by its sheer massiveness and age.

Jhan looked up and down the road, suddenly apprehensive. The road had become empty in both directions as far as he could see. The forest made Jhan feel suddenly small and the enormity of what he was doing finally caught up with him. How foolish, he thought, to strike out on his own when he knew little about the world outside of Pekarín. The fortress wasn't perfect, but Jhan had found a precarious place there. Now, he had nothing but the money in his pocket and a wild dream of running away from all of his troubles. Wisdom said that couldn't be done. Should he believe wisdom and turn back?

"I'm just afraid," Jhan firmly told himself aloud, to bolster his courage. "Taking chances is a part of life. Sometimes, you have to jump without a net and hope that you make it to the other side. I know that I made the right decision. This is not the time to second guess."

It sounded good, but Jhan was hard pressed to convince himself with his own words. He forced himself to keep walking, deliberately making plans to silence his self-doubt. First, he thought, he would go to Sarvoy and rent a small, out of the way place. Once he learned more about the land, he would travel again until he felt safe enough to settle in anonymity. Perhaps, in time, he promised himself, to quiet his guilt, he would manage to get a letter to Rehn and explain what had happened.

Jhan's thoughts stopped as he came to an abrupt halt. A smiling, strongly built man was standing in his path. The smile was cruel, the grizzled beard, ragged, dirty clothes, and cold brown eyes a warning

to Jhan even without the man pulling out a long, wicked hunting blade. Jhan was a trained killer, one that even a veteran, like General Vek, Commander of Pekarín's forces, had been hard pressed to defeat. He should have been able to hold his ground and defend himself. It was the farthest thing from Jhan's mind.

Jhan's shriek of fear, and his sudden flight, gave him a few moments to put distance between himself and the startled man, who was obviously planning murder, robbery, or much worse. Those moments were Jhan's only advantage as the man bolted after him in swift pursuit.

Jhan's mind emptied of everything except the raw instinct of prey fleeing the predator. Dress hitched above his knees and adrenaline pumping, Jhan's legs forgot their weakness. Surprising him with their speed, he left the road and fled into the forest, in the desperate hope that its shadows and thick foliage could hide him.

Dodging in and out of spaces, between tree trunks, hardly large enough for himself to pass, let alone a larger man, Jhan almost dared to hope that he had outdistanced the man. He could hear nothing behind him over his own ragged breathing and the thud of his boots on the forest floor. Perhaps the man had given up and gone back to the road hoping for an easier victim?

Strong hands snagged the flying tail of Jhan's coat and pulled him down into the deep, freezing loam of the forest floor. Jhan kicked and struggled violently, but it was too late to retaliate with any of his training, even if he had managed the presence of mind to use it. He was pinned down by a heavy body, fetid breath filling his heaving lungs as the man bent close to his terrified face to leer at his beauty.

"I don't like skinny girls, so I was just going to rob and kill you," the man explained, as he tried to keep a tight hold on Jhan while he maneuvered him to best advantage. "I deserve more for my trouble, now. Don't struggle or I'll make it hurt."

"Stop!" Jhan whimpered, going as cold with fear as the ground beneath him. He couldn't think. He couldn't move. He could only lay immobile while the man's rough hands began pulling at his dress. "You don't know! I'm not a woman!" Jhan gave up his secret all too easily, willing to say or do anything to stop him.

The man laughed darkly. "I'll make one of you soon enough, little missy."

When Kile had attacked Jhan, he had only remembered ugly things and fainted. This time, it was different. Something sleeping inside of Jhan stirred and awakened, gathering itself like... he tried to understand it and failed. *Inner fire? A sun preparing to go nova? Burning lava?* They barely touched the surface of the power that Jhan sensed building deep inside of his mind.

Power. Yes, that was it. It was pure power inside of Jhan, burning and writhing like a live thing,

blinding him with pain that seemed to crawl through every vein in his body as if seeking escape. Jhan cried out, his body feeling as if it were being consumed from within.

Jhan had one last look at the bandit's surprised face, groping hands having discovered, quite suddenly, that Jhan was not a woman, before the power found its exit. It exploded out of Jhan's eyes in a fireball of energy that caught the bandit squarely in the chest.

Jhan lay, stunned as if struck by lightning, his eyes blinded and his body paralyzed. The stench of burning flesh and the sound of sizzling meat bombarded his senses and became his world. Time seemed suspended, a strange eerie stillness permeating everything in the forest. Snow began falling. One flake. Two. It turned into a light flurry, drifting down through the tree tops and settling on Jhan's prone body.

Bone chilling, melting snow roused Jhan at last. He blinked, blinked again, and then groaned as he rolled sideways out of a frigid, muddy puddle that had formed beneath him. The pain in his head pounded in time with his heart as he sat up and cradled his head in his hands. An insistent ringing in his inner ears was an added misery, making any thoughts incoherent until it finally receded after long, torturous minutes. Only then did Jhan begin to fearfully wonder what had happened to his attacker.

Jhan kept his head cradled in his hands as he looked through his fingers. Left. Right. Ahead. Yes, there. Jhan's mouth fell open and his stomach roiled as he identified his attacker by a boot that had been mended with old leather strips. Nothing else about the lump of burnt human was recognizable where it lay in a heap a few yards away, still hot enough to sizzle and spit as snowflakes fell gently on top of it. A stinking wisp of smoke trailed up from it into the canopy of the giant trees.

"God!" Jhan exclaimed in horror as he staggered to his feet, dress and coat heavy with snow melt, mud, and soggy leaves. Incomprehension forced him to go closer, despite his revulsion. Shaking in reaction, Jhan leaned over and peered closely, hoping and yet, not hoping, that the man might still be alive.

Jhan shoved a fist into his mouth and bit down to keep himself from screaming as he straightened, trembling even more from shock and cold. The man was definitely dead and Jhan knew, without a doubt, that he had been the one to kill him.

Jhan's hands wiped at the hot tears that blinded him and ran down his face. His one hand, bitten until it bled, smeared that blood along his cheek, making him look as terrified and as lunatic as he felt. "What am I?" Jhan shouted to the still forest, hands going wide as he spun about, longing for an answer.

The Dark King must be laughing, Jhan thought. This had to be his handy work. Another trap sprung. Another deadly secret revealed. Killer! Jhan called himself in utter anguish. He was as dangerous as a rabid dog.

At last, Jhan fully understood what Vek and King Tekhal had known all along. There was no place for him. He was too dangerous to be allowed to roam free. Hope for a normal life evaporated, a fantasy. He needed to be locked up and guarded. Going back to Pekarín and submitting to a prison cell was his only choice.

'No,' a voice said in his head.

Jhan started violently, spinning about and trying to see into the shadows of the forest. Jhan recognized the mind voice of Whitefur, the Sahvossa, but none of the patches of snow lying everywhere obliged by changing into a white, fox-like being.

Jhan tried to speak, choked, tried again. “No, what?” His voice grated, his words drowning in terror and guilt.

'Useless to return. The trail is cold there. The balance is tipping. Your Power must be removed from the world. A master is needed.' The voice was emotionless. Jhan infused his own interpretation, imagining that the Sahvossa was being accusing, judging him as harshly as he was judging himself.

“Power? Is that- I killed that man with Power?” Jhan was stunned, feeling his knees going weak. He shook his head in denial, but the smoking corpse before him was inescapable proof. “How?” Jhan's growing confusion and shock seemed to distort the mental voice of the Sahvossa's reply, like ripples on the surface of a pond.

'Always Light and Dark. The Dark created you. Gave you his Power. Light must not be extinguished by you.'

Jhan tried to grasp the meaning and failed miserably. “I don't understand!”

'Untruth. You know, young one. Learn to accept what is and go where I show you. Go, or the world will fall.'

Images flooded Jhan's mind, like water being poured into an empty vessel. A living map unrolled before his mind's eye and a shining path blazed through it, colors vibrant and surreal. A face appeared. A man's face topped by a patch of shocking white hair tied in crazy braids atop his head. Blue eyes glittered like the sun on chips of ice. It was a face carved as if from the rough, wrinkled bark of an old tree.

“What are you doing?” Jhan screamed at the forest, hands reaching for his head as if he thought to rip the mental map from his mind somehow. Jhan felt violated, totally, as if the Sahvossa had completed what the robber had started.

Silence. It was almost complete. The Sahvossa was gone.

Jhan became aware of a sound in that near silence. It crept up his spine, tapping at his shoulder and piercing his mental confusion. It reminded him of his crime; drew him back to his surroundings. It was

the sound of snow hissing and popping as it landed on something still hot. The dead man.

The body was still quite close to Jhan, the burning stench growing stronger. Jhan shuddered and turned away, sobbing. He had to get away! Now! Go back to the road? Yes, Jhan decided shakily. It was safe ground, out of the shadows and terror of the forest; far away from a burning corpse that accused him with sightless, smoking sockets where its eyes should have been.

Jhan took a few steps, and then stopped with a panicked frown. The forest looked silent and deep on every side. The churned up muddy loam should have given him a clear trail back to the road. Instead, there were only puddles of water, snow, and leaves covering an otherwise pristine forest floor. Jhan couldn't even find a broken branch to give him a clue in which direction to go.

"No, no, no!" Jhan shouted, voice escalating in volume with each word. "Whitefur!" he shouted, wild with alarm. "You did this! Answer me! Show me how to get back!"

Jhan's hysterical plea went unanswered. Creature of the wild, Whitefur was denying him a way to return to Pekarín, not understanding, perhaps, that she was endangering Jhan's life in the process. Shivering from cold, wet, and trauma, Jhan began to be aware of that danger. Hypothermia was beginning to seep into his bones. If he didn't find a place to get warm soon, he knew, he would soon freeze to death in his wet clothing.

"I need to go back to Pekarín!" Jhan shouted to the forest, words competing with sobs. "They'll keep me from hurting anyone else!"

The sound of Jhan's voice fell like a heavy stone among the trees, sucked out of existence as if it had never been. Still no reply. Jhan knew why. He doubted his own words. What could anyone in Pekarín do? Lock him up, they might, but stop the raw energy within him? How could they? They wouldn't even have the option of killing him. Threatened, he might deal with them as he had with the dead man.

Jhan fled into the forest, nearly running in his panic to get away from the corpse and to find the road. The first goal was easy to accomplish, the latter quickly proved impossible. Like a house of mirrors in an amusement park, every direction that Jhan turned looked exactly like the former.

As weariness and cold took their toll, Jhan slowed to a walk and then began to stumble. He felt ready to give up, imagining that he was walking in circles and certain that he had seen the same tree several times now. When Jhan's feet found smoother ground, he looked down and discovered that he was on a narrow forest track.

Hope was a stranger to Jhan. He didn't bother with it. Only a deep streak of stubbornness kept his feet moving down the trail, despite the rising guilt that, deep down, thought that he deserved an end like this. Just stop, it told him, accept your punishment. It made Jhan angry, as if his mind were divided

against itself.

He hadn't meant to kill his attacker, Jhan reasoned, desperate to believe it. He'd been given Power and the ability to kill without his consent. He'd been forced into another body without his consent. He'd been tortured and used without his consent. To blame himself, Jhan felt, was as ridiculous as blaming the knife and not the hand that wields it. The Dark King had killed that man, not him!

Jhan sank gloved hands into his pockets and huddled into his wet coat. Anger at himself and the Dark King sustained him a little further, but the coat was freezing now and becoming even heavier. Jhan longed to just cast it off, but he knew that would be a mistake. If he could find a warm place he would need it. Where he thought that warm place would appear, Jhan couldn't imagine.

After two, bitterly cold hours and the forest still stretching ahead without any signs of thinning or emptying out into civilization, Jhan admitted defeat. He knew that he had to stop and do something before he froze to death.

In the fortress there had always been lit candles and lanterns to light a fireplace. When that hadn't been available, flint and steel had always been close to hand. Without any of that, Jhan was left to comb through his deepest memories of Christine camping with her father when she'd been five years old. The man, an avid backwoodsman, had always prided himself on roughing it. The memory had been unpleasant enough for most of it to stick in Jhan's mind. Whether he remembered enough to save his life, was questionable.

Stones. Jhan gathered them with numb hands and placed them in a rough circle. He dug out the middle until he thought that it was dry enough and then filled the hole with as much dry tinder as he could manage to find. That was very little. With shaking hands, Jhan pulled out strands of his own hair and tore pieces of cloth from parts of his clothing that had managed to stay dry. He hoped that something out of that mix would sustain a fire long enough to catch on logs.

Searching for those logs proved to be the hardest part. Everything in that forest was dripping wet from the snow and Jhan was too fearful of wandering far and losing his camp. He managed one armload of wood before his legs threatened to collapse underneath him. With heart laboring and blood feeling as if it were freezing in his veins, Jhan placed the logs over the tinder.

Everything was ready. Jhan sank on his heels and tried to figure out how he was going to light it. A fog seemed to be obscuring his sight and making the forest spin. Weariness begged Jhan to lie down and sleep; a siren singing him to his death. Blinking rapidly and taking a deep breath, Jhan denied it victory, forcing himself to think.

Metal on stone? A lens to focus the sun? Two sticks rubbed together? Jhan knew that he had to decide quickly. There wouldn't be time for a mistake. Jhan's fingers felt the buckle on his belt, rough,

heavy iron, and the clasp on his coat, also rough made iron. He took both off, ripping the clasp from his coat with desperate strength.

He needed a stone.... quartz, flint, jasper... Jhan's shaking hands found the large buttons on his coat. They were clear and rough like quartz but Jhan wasn't certain if they were. After removing one of them from his coat, Jhan held both it and the flint as close to the tinder as possible. Whispering a small prayer, he then struck them together. Tiny sparks flew. Jhan allowed himself a faint breath of optimism and struck them again. The tinder smoldered, a spark catching fitfully. Jhan blew on it carefully, coaxing and babying the spark as he fed it bits of the tinder.

The time between the tinder catching fire and the logs lighting seemed an eternity. Jhan nearly succumbed to the cold, eyes drooping and legs going numb. When heat blasted him in the face, he sat quickly backwards in surprise, realizing, all at once, that the fire was blazing.

Jhan stretched his hands out to the heat and they defrosted in several, excruciating moments. The rest of him stayed stubbornly frozen, Jhan's wet clothes deflecting the heat. He knew that he had to undress if he was to survive. That meant being totally nude. For one ridiculous moment, Jhan's bleary mind wondered if freezing to death might be better. Common sense berated him in the next moment. He was lost in a forest. There wouldn't be any one to see him.

Jhan undressed, suppressing twinges of unease, and pulled down long, supple branches from the trees hanging over the fire. He hung his clothes on them. Doubling as a makeshift shelter, Jhan crouched inside, letting his frozen body soak up the trapped heat.

Jhan smiled grimly. It hurt his frozen face, but his own surprise and pride at his own ingenuity bubbled up, not to be denied. Jhan had always relied on others. To find out that he was capable, all on his own, to out smart death was empowering. It loosened the hard fist of fear that had been wrapped around his heart for far too long.

What now? There wasn't time to recover from his close call with death. Jhan knew that death still waited outside of his crude shelter, ready to spring and finish the job the next moment that he faltered. Jhan rallied his flagging mind and tried to shake off the languid stupor the heat of the fire was instilling in him. The wood would run out, he knew. His clothes might dry before then, but Jhan would be back where he had started, lost and facing death, if not from exposure, then from starvation.

He had chosen a road by the direction of the sun, Jhan recalled, trying to think logically. It might be possible to find it again if he discovered in which direction the sun lay. The darkened forest, with its thick canopy, made that difficult. Jhan knew that he needed to climb a tree or find a clearing to see the sun. A vantage point in a high tree might even help him spot the road. For all that he knew, he thought ruefully, the road might be only a few yards away.

Jhan was eager to get going, but drying out his clothes proved to be a long and difficult task. He had to turn his clothes again and again, fending off snow that threatened to fall on them and get them wet all over again. That, combined with the frequent blasts of cold that Jhan endured as he rearranged his shelter, made him feel miserable and ill. Jhan feared that the smoke from the fire was contributing to that as well. He was forced to open his shelter to let in fresher air.

When Jhan was finally able to put his clothes back on and wrap a warm coat about him, his spirits lifted and his circumstances became less intimidating. Even discovering that his gloves, stiff and shrunken from being wet and dried, couldn't be worn, did little to dampen Jhan's sudden belief that he might yet survive his ordeal.

Sticking freezing hands into his pockets, Jhan wondered what to do about the fire. Put it out? Every instinct said no. He decided, in the end, to leave it burning as he searched for a tree that he could climb.

Eyes raised to look up at the canopy of branches, Jhan failed to see the woman standing before him. He bumped squarely into her, briefly smelling an exotic, spicy perfume mingled with leather, before pushing wildly away from her, screaming in alarm, and turning to run.

"Easy!" the woman barked with a voice a drill instructor would have envied. "I mean you no harm!"

Jhan stopped, heart hammering. It *was* a woman. Without any shadowy memories or recent traumas caused by any women, Jhan was able to stand still, reacting like a wild deer who suddenly discovers that an imagined hunter is one of its own kind. Swallowing hard and regaining his wits, Jhan managed to ask, "Who-Who are you?"

"Bheni of Alatha." The woman was easily over six feet tall. Her skin was a dark, mahogany and her hair, tied in hundreds of tight braids down her back, was a brick red color. She wore thick leather pants, boots, and a leather shirt decorated in tiny mother-of-pearl beads. Slung over one shoulder, she wore a quiver of green arrows and a curved horn bow. At her side hung a straight sword in a well worn leather sheathe.

"Jhan of, well, Pekarín, I suppose," Jhan stammered back. It was too much like a dream, Jhan thought. The lonely forest, the smoky smell of the campfire, the dark, exotic warrior before him. It was hard to refrain from the tried and true pinch on the arm to test reality, so he clasped his hands together nervously and then twisted them into his dress to still them.

"You are afraid?" Bheni's words rolled richly around her vowels, her accent pleasing and cultured. Her chin had a haughty tilt to it and her eyes, a mottled green Jhan had never seen before, were thoughtful and considering. "Do not be. I've told you that I mean you no harm."

Her voice invited trust and Jhan found himself beginning to believe that he might have found someone to rescue him. His words came out in a tumbling rush, anxious to confirm that belief. "I'm lost. I was chased by a man into the forest and now I can't find my way back to the road to Sarvoy. Do you know the way?"

The woman nodded with a hand raised as if to calm him. "My sense of direction is infallible." Her other hand went to the hilt of her sword, eyes searching the trees about them. "Is the kunji still about?"

"The man? N-No, I killed him." Jhan blurted it out in his nervousness and then slapped hands to his mouth in shock, eyes going wide as he waited for her to draw her sword and recoil from him. Panicking, knowing that she was his only hope, Jhan rushed to explain, making no sense at all. "I-I, no! I didn't kill him! I meant..."

The hand Bheni had raised to calm Jhan touched his shoulder and gave a small squeeze to quiet him. "Silence. Shhh!"

Jhan stopped babbling. Bheni looked deep into his eyes as if measuring his honesty. She examined Jhan up and down, fingering his torn and muddy clothes. At last, she reached some sort of judgment. "You have killed. I can see it. You are sickened by it. You are terrified by it. He thought to despoil you, yes? He thought that you were small and helpless. He did not know that you had claws, eh? Stab him?"

Jhan swallowed hard, looking down and going pale. He didn't want to tell the truth, especially to a stranger. How could he explain that he had killed a man with Power? It was far too frightening and unbelievable to admit to. Jhan found himself, instead, nodding in agreement with her. It was a plausible story. Though it didn't change the fact that he had committed murder, he didn't have to reveal the weapon that had killed the man. Jhan let his real desperation color his voice to deflect any more questions. "I don't want to talk about it. I just want to get far away! Please, can you show me the road to Sarvoy?"

Bheni frowned in displeasure, not at Jhan, but at the difficulty that he had presented her. "My companions and I are traveling away from Sarvoy. I have no wish to lose a day returning there."

"I can pay you," Jhan offered, desperate.

Bheni shook her head. Small beads tied into her braids rattled and clinked together. "I have more than I need, Jhan of Pekarín."

"Then, what?" Jhan demanded, becoming both fearful and angry. "Are you going to leave me here?"

That mahogany chin came up and those green eyes looked down at Jhan from their great height, outraged. "I am the daughter of a warrior and my honor is not to be questioned! Of course I will not leave you here. You will accompany me and my companions until we find a reliable means to take you

to Sarvoy.”

“I only need to find the road! I don't need any one to return me,” Jhan insisted.

“Where you will, perhaps, be attacked by another man? I cannot allow it.”

“Cannot allow it?” Jhan repeated, anger burning him from head to toe against all reason. It was madness to argue, she was his only means of rescue, but he was still raw from the countless others before her who had tried to order his life. After all that he had suffered, her reasonable comment became the last straw. Jhan turned and began to walk away, not certain what he intended to do, but unable to bear yet another person trying to order and restrain him.

Bheni stepped in front of Jhan, her long legs more than a match for his shorter ones. Jhan stopped. Their eyes flashed back and forth and then Bheni broke the duel of wills with a laugh. “More than a match for a bandit, indeed! If you are so brave, then return yourself, as you wish. We will be meeting the road in the afternoon.”

Jhan's anger banked itself and he took a deep breath, relieved and shaking now, wondering what he would have done if she hadn't stopped him. “All right, that sounds fine,” was all Jhan could manage to say.

“It had best be,” Bheni responded firmly, her tone signaling that her indulgence was at an end.

Arrogant, Jhan thought as he followed her through the forest. Well, he admitted to himself, he would be too if he were built like her. Tall and strong, she looked capable of taking on any man and handing their asses to them in a sling.

“Why is a child, like yourself, traveling alone?” Bheni inquired over her shoulder.

“I'm not a child,” Jhan retorted, feeling just that as he was forced to hike up his dress and hurry his to keep up with Bheni.

“Not far into womanhood, surely?”

“I'm forty-one.”

Bheni said nothing to that and Jhan suddenly felt ashamed of his own rudeness. She was his savior. She was helping him. Why must he always allow his anger to get the best of him? The answer was simple and as childish as his body appeared to be. Half of it was not getting his way, Jhan knew, and the other half was envy.

“Sorry,” Jhan amended. “Eighteen. I'm eighteen.”

“Still young to be traveling alone,” Bheni persisted. “What of your mother and father?”

“I don't have any.”

“Kin of any kind?”

“No.”

“Alone, as I found you?”

“Yes,” Jhan replied, the faded anger almost kindling into hate for how empty and alone she was making him feel. Jhan thought of his mother, his father, and his sister. To them, Christine was dead, mangled in a car accident and buried long ago. He could never return to them. Never hold them in his arms. Jhan felt tears on his cheeks. He wiped them impatiently away. He had already cried enough for several lifetimes. It never did any good.

The forest opened into a little clearing where a massive tree had fallen over. Sunlight dappled the ground and lit up the rotting trunk, at least a story tall, and the broken roots that dangled. Looking up, Jhan could make out a patch of blue sky high overhead.

“It is I,” Bheni called out.

Jhan lowered his eyes just in time to see a group of women come out of the bushes, smiling in greeting and looking curiously at Jhan. One was very like Bheni, but her mahogany skin was wrinkled like leather and her braided hair and brows were pure white. She stooped over a walking stick and she was dressed in a red leather robe.

Three other women were an odd assortment. Pale skinned, they were all dressed much like Jhan. One was very heavy. Her apple cheeks were red and her mussy, brown hair was caught up in a bun on top of her head. The thin woman next to her was a sharp contrast. Her nose was like a beak and her sour mouth said volumes about her irritation. She too had her brown hair tied on top of her head, but it gave her face a tight, emaciated look that was unpleasant to see. The third girl looked very young. She was a smiling woman with blonde hair and sparkling gray eyes. In her arms she held a bundled baby that cooed and gurgled nonsense.

“I found another to join our company for a short time,” Bheni introduced.

“Hana Yanina of Soeteuse,” said the heavy woman.

“Gruna Pertrana of Soeteuse,” said the thin woman.

“Reva Yavana of Soeteuse,” said the girl with the baby.

They had all spoken in soft, mild voices. The old woman was loud and booming by comparison. She straightened as much as her curved spine would allow and gave Jhan a mottled green, eagle eye. The other was white and blind. “I am Lhiddi of Alatha. I am Bheni's grandmother.” She, like Bheni, spoke in rich, rolling tones that seemed to resonate in one's ears.

“I am Jhan of Pekarín,” Jhan replied, feeling awkward. He looked to Bheni, nervously almost making a joke. “Did you find these people in the forest as well?”

Bheni smiled down from her great height. “No, I am their escort. I left them only briefly to investigate your fire.”

Jhan felt as if the freezing cold had come back to claim him, walking fingers up his spine and making him shiver. If he hadn't lit that fire, Jhan realized, and swallowed hard on the unfinished thought, not wanting to think of what might have been. He babbled, trying to recover, "That's unusual, a woman escort, I mean. I didn't think that women were allowed to do things like that."

"She's an adventurer from the islands!" The young girl, Reva, gushed excitedly. "In the islands, women are allowed to be warriors!"

The thin one, Gruna, sniffed and crossed arms over her boney chest. "If our women were built as they are, we would be allowed to fight as well."

"How did you meet?" Jhan wondered, looking at the odd group. He knew that women didn't travel alone. They weren't allowed to by men. That made their group that much stranger.

It was the old woman who explained, speaking in her rich tones as if she were telling a tale of a hero and not of herself. "I have fought many battles, lived a full life, and received my share of honors. In my last days, I looked about me, at family, friends, and Alatha, my beautiful home. It seemed riches beyond compare, yet, I looked to the waters about my island home and my eyes rested on the lands on the horizon that I have never seen. I longed to take ship and go, a last story that my grandchildren can tell about me at the hearth fire after I am gone." Her old head bowed a little and her long, white braids swung as she shook her head in regret. "When we reached Soeteuse, I tired. Beyond it is an endless forest and a mountain range. I knew that it was beyond my strength to continue."

Bheni nodded as if it were a painful admission on the old woman's part. "Now, we are returning home."

"Yes, home." Lhiddi sighed. "We have come far. The journey back is not easy. I may not live to see Alatha again."

Bheni's eyes flashed. "Of course you will, Granmam Lhiddi!"

Lhiddi shrugged and spat aside. Jhan was startled by this crude gesture from a seemingly cultured person. "God has his own plan, I am certain."

Hana stepped forward. She looked uncertain of Jhan's rank and couldn't decide whether to curtsy or face him as an equal. She compromised and gave a little bob of her large body. "We three are weavers, Lady Jhan. Our skill is well known, but there is little market for fine weaving in these rural cities. We hoped to reach the rich, coastal countries and sell to shops there, but we couldn't find an escort that we could trust. When we heard that Mistress Bhenni and Venerable Lady Lhiddi were returning to the islands, we decided to pay for their escort."

"Weren't there enough people traveling from Pekarín?" Jhan asked worriedly and then winced, realizing how it sounded. "Not that Bhenni and Lhiddi aren't competent escorts, it's just that I will also

need an escort some time in the future and I wonder for my own sake.”

Bheni and Lhiddi had bristled, but his words quickly mollified them. Bheni shrugged. “It would seem that everyone is afraid to travel the roads. They are expecting warriors from some distant province.”

So, they knew about the Dark King and his army. Looking at the three weavers, Jhan didn't think that they appeared particularly brave or from a different mold than the meek, home bound women that he had met so far. “You aren't frightened?”

Gruna's beak of a nose thinned and her sour mouth grew even sourer, if that were possible. “Bheni and Lhiddi have a plan. Once we reach Rhenwall, we'll purchase supplies and keep off of the main road. The wild country is full of mud and snow this time of year. An army wouldn't dare get mired in it. They'll stay on the road and we'll be safe off of it. We won't have anything to fear.”

Naive, Jhan thought. They didn't have any idea what they were getting themselves into. Jhan could see Bheni's frown and Lhiddi's head shake of disagreement. They knew the danger. “You should have stopped them,” Jhan accused the islanders, voice tinged with his all encompassing fear. Mere mention of the Dark King's army had brought the shadows of dread and memory hovering close.

“I informed them of all the dangers that we may face,” Bheni flung back at Jhan, affronted. “They refused to be dissuaded. They want to arrive in time for the mid-winter festivals, so that they will be certain to get good coin for their weaving.”

“Then you should have left them.”

“To wander about on their own?” Lhiddi replied acidly. “Are you so cold that you suggest that we should have left them to die?”

Jhan refused to allow that. “I don't believe any of these women would have been brave enough to try this without you. They bluffed you and won.”

Lhiddi thumped her cane on the ground angrily. “What matters this? Who are you to appear and question us? Bheni and I are going to the islands. We can protect three more. We are both warriors trained. They are better protected than if they had traveled with men. At least we will not change our minds down the road, rob them, rape them, and then leave them destitute, if not dead!”

“Stop speaking as if we were not here to listen!” Reva shouted angrily. Her blonde hair was shoulder length and tied at the nape of the neck with a colorful scarf. It bobbed with the force of her words and her baby began to cry. She bounced it gently, holding it close, but her gentleness towards her baby did not diminish her anger. “We made a decision. In Soeteuse we had next to nothing, not even men at our hearths! This our chance to be secure. We are in no danger, Lady Jhan.” Again her eyes sparkled as she looked at the two island women with total confidence. “These women will protect us.”

“Who are you, anyway, to lecture us?” Gruna demanded crossly, pointing a boney finger at Jhan. “Why were you lost in this forest?”

“She was walking to Sarvoy from Pekarín, “Bheni explained, perhaps thinking that it would be too painful and upsetting for Jhan to recount. “She was attacked by a man and fled into the forest. Jhan managed to kill him, but she found herself lost. It was lucky that she lit the campfire when she did or we would have passed her by unnoticed.”

“You didn't have an escort?” Reva interjected hotly. “Gruna was right. Who are you to criticize us?”

Jhan grimaced. He couldn't explain. He had to keep his secret. “I had to,” was all that Jhan could find to say. When the inevitable *why?* surfaced immediately, he shrugged lamely, his temper washed away by the cold reality of his own foolish situation.

“Enough!” Lhiddi pounded her cane again.

“Yes, enough!” Bheni agreed, irritably. “Daylight is being wasted! We must continue.”

“Lady Jhan is going with us?” Hana wondered.

“Only until we join the road out of Sarvoy,” Bheni explained. “Then she will be walking back to Sarvoy from there.”

“Alone, again?” Reva cut in with a raised eyebrow that implied volumes.

Bheni nodded. “Unless we find a kind soul to go with her, yes, she will be alone. It is her choice.”

“Then I hope, for her sake, that her claim of having killed a man wasn't idle boasting,” Gruna remarked as she looked Jhan's small body up and down with patent skepticism.

Jhan kept silent, biting the inside of his mouth to stop a reply. If they only knew what he could do! It made him shake. What would those opinionated, naive women say if they knew that he could kill without even touching a man? They'd probably run screaming to the four corners. The picture of it in Jhan's mind wasn't comforting. If he could have, he would have run screaming, too, leaving it all behind him.

“Enough!” Bheni barked. “We are going! Get the baku moving!”

Gruna revealed a leather wrapped switch. She stepped back into the forest and emerged a moment later with five baku and two imala walking single file. The baku were all black with white feet and the imala were both unprepossessing brown. All were loaded down with leather wrapped bundles and tied, end to end, with ingenious strips of rope that kept them from getting tangled together.

Jhan would have been thankful to ride, even though he had learned to dislike the beasts, but the forest was too overgrown to allow it. Instead, aching with weariness, Jhan was forced to walk last in line behind weavers, warriors, and beasts of burden. It saved him from having to answer any more

questions. He was glad to think about nothing for awhile and only worry about putting one foot in front of the other.

His lack of thoughts became a trigger, though, and Jhan suddenly found the mental map, that the Sahvossa had planted into his mind, taking shape. Clear, detailed, and seemingly as real as a solid map, Jhan could study it carefully. It was both disconcerting, a violation, and a tool that Jhan needed desperately. Unfortunately, like any map, Jhan needed to know where he was. It didn't point out, *you are here*, and it only showed him where the Sahvossa wished him to go.

Making the map go away was harder. It took concentration, as if Jhan was trying to dissipate a thick fog. Finally, the forest was about him again and he was stumbling over a tree root and nearly stepping into fresh baku dung.

Bheni called back, "I see that you have not been about beasts much, Jhan of the Pekarín! Do not walk behind the baku."

Jhan didn't point out that the other women had not been inclined for him to join them. They had made a point of standing together close enough to dissuade Jhan from insinuating himself between them and the beasts. As if Bheni's words were a rebuke, the women, now, grudgingly moved forward to give Jhan room. He took a place just in front of the lead imala and endured the beasts' continuous efforts to eat his long hair.

Jhan returned to his thoughts. It was time for him to think like a knowledgeable forty-one year old woman and not an impulsive eighteen year old boy. Time to decide, once and for all, what course of action he should take.

Jhan had killed. He might kill again. The Sahvossa had warned him that he was a danger to everyone with his uncontrolled power. They had demanded that he follow a map and find a man who, he supposed, would help him. The last thing that Jhan wanted to do was to follow that advice. The Sahvossa were alien creatures. How could they know what was best for him? Better to return to Pekarín, Jhan knew, even though they might lock him up for the rest of his life.

Jhan imagined what it would be like to live his life in a cell. He felt rebellion and revulsion almost at once. Jhan's heart tried to overrule his head. It begged to run away and escape everyone who wanted to control him. If he found a safe city and some safe work, where no one knew him, his heart reasoned, the Power inside of him wouldn't have an occasion to hurt anyone.

Jhan pondered his options for long hours, head battling heart, until they exited the forest and gathered on a road. The baku and imala milled together uncertainly in the sudden sunlight. Bheni pointed to their right and raised a red eyebrow at Jhan.

Sarvoy lay that way, Jhan understood, feeling a crawling trepidation. The road was empty, a

shadowy stretch of gravel and grass that curved out of sight into the unknown.

"I guess that I will be going," Jhan's voice sounded small and unsure in his own ears. His new found confidence was evaporating, replaced by a prickle of unease and a sense that death was still lurking nearby, waiting to reclaim its victim.

The three women were ignoring Jhan, blind to his difficulty, pushing and pulling the beasts until they were lined up again. They mounted the baku and old Lhiddi mounted an imala, her gnarled hands sure on the reins. They began moving down the road away from Sarvoy. Jhan wasn't offended. He was only a chance meeting after all and, in his brief time with them, he had chosen to irritate and insult them.

Bheni saw more clearly. She picked up the reins of her imala and faced Jhan with a serious expression. "You seem confused. Do you know what you want?"

Jhan swallowed hard, looking down the road to Sarvoy. He was going pale, his mind swirling with confusion, still not certain what was the right choice to make. Jhan spoke with more confidence than he felt. "It's not what I want, but what I must do."

"For whom?" Bheni wondered.

"Never for me," Jhan responded darkly.

"Perhaps, now, it should be for you, Jhan."

Jhan's eyes were pulled from the road by his surprise. Bheni was looking down at him, impatience to get going in every line of her mahogany body, yet concern holding her there. Concern for him.

Jhan replied, trying to convince himself more than Bheni. "I can't be selfish about this decision."

Bheni shook her head and turned her imala away from Sarvoy. "Sometimes, it isn't a bad thing to think only of yourself. It is your life, after all."

No, it wasn't. Jhan felt anger and resentment boil up. This was someone else's life. Jhanian Kevelt's life. Jhan had been forced to usurp it. The man should have been peacefully dead. They both should have been. Still, Jhan's heart argued, it was all that he had. Didn't he deserve a little peace? A life of some sort? There was nothing to say that the Power would show itself again. There was nothing to say that, once away from Jhanian's kin and Pekarín turmoil, other compulsions might not go away as well. Perhaps distance would be a cure for all ills? Wasn't it worth a try?

Jhan shivered, feeling uncomfortably scared and impulsive, but the heart had won. "I want to go with you. I want to go as far as you can take me, even to those islands of yours."

"No one will worry? You are so young," Bheni played devil's advocate only momentarily, as if asking Jhan to be certain.

"No. There isn't anyone," Jhan replied. He faced Bheni squarely, head conceding defeat, yet

sending twinges of fear along with the guilt, wondering if he was doing something terribly wrong.

“May I go with you, Bheni?”

“You will have to tell me your tale, eventually,” Bheni warned as she reached down and grabbed Jhan's hand. She pulled him up onto the saddle behind her. “A dark story moves behind your eyes, but I can see that you are not yet ready to tell it.”

“No,” Jhan agreed, knowing that he would probably never tell it.

Bheni trotted her imala up to the last baku and dropped Jhan onto the top of the packs. Jhan was so light that the beast barely noticed the extra weight. It flicked long ears at him in annoyance and blew hot breath into the cold air.

Jhan refused to look back, but the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. He wondered if the Sahvossa were watching him from the forest. Would they try to stop him for not doing as they wished? If they could plant a map into his mind, what else could they do to him to punish him for his disobedience?”

Nothing happened. Jhan watched the forest fall away to be replaced by rolling hills full of afternoon sunshine and gently falling snow. His spirits lifted and fear blew away like so much mist. Jhan straightened, even smiling slightly. He allowed himself the same foolish confidence that he had berated the other women for. In sunlight, it seemed as if nothing could stand in the way of two giant, sword carrying women. An adventure was beginning and he had chosen it for himself.

CHAPTER THREE

(Companions)

“Where will we stay tonight?” Jhan asked after a long, silent hour. After weeks of being alone in a cell, and then alone in the forest, he longed to talk to anyone about anything, even the obvious.

No one replied. Jhan saw the women exchange looks between themselves, uniting against him. They hadn't complained out loud about his presence, but Jhan supposed that they were too much in awe of Lhiddi and Bheni to contradict their choices. Their silence hurt, though Jhan couldn't argue against it. He had been bordering on obnoxious at their first meeting. He didn't have to wonder what they thought about him.

Bheni dropped back in the line to ride even with Jhan. “We will avoid inns,” she explained. “There might be many there who would be interested in women traveling alone.”

“So...” Jhan prompted, not wanting the conversation to lapse back into silence.

“So, we will sleep in the wilds and the fresh air.”

“The freezing air,” Jhan muttered and huddled deeper into his coat, pulling up the collar to protect his neck.

Bheni gave him a hard look. “I will tell you the same thing that I told the other women.”

Jhan sighed, not having bargained on a lecture and afraid that his abrasive moods had alienated Bheni now. “Which was?”

“My word is law. Lhiddi's word is law. No arguments. We know the way. We know the dangers.” Bheni grew harsher. “We will bring you to your destination alive, if you do as we say.”

“I wasn't arguing,” Jhan countered, defensive, yet contrite as well. “I hope that I'm allowed to grumble once in awhile?”

Bheni stared and then laughed when she realized that Jhan was joking. “Yes, young one, you may complain, but softly.”

Jhan pulled at his clothes dejectedly. He had hoped to stop at one of the cities and purchase more clothes. He needed new gloves for his freezing hands and a few more dresses. Now, Jhan wondered what he was going to do, caked from head to foot in forest loam and dried mud. He didn't relish the thought of standing about in the nude while he washed his one garment.

Bheni discerned his difficulty. “The women are weavers, Jhan. They have pack after pack of clothing, carpets, tapestries, and blankets. I am certain that I could convince them,” and she stressed the word *'convince'*, “to sell to you at a reasonable cost.”

Jhan smiled now, relieved to have escaped a problem that might have revealed his secret. "Thank you." Jhan plucked at his filthy clothing, ruefully. "I was wondering if I would have to go all the way in this."

"I know and that troubles me," Bheni replied more seriously. "You expect cruelty. Where have you been, and how have you lived, that you expect such treatment?"

Jhan twisted his long, black braid in his hands and kept his eyes in his lap, trying desperately to quell the images of the cruel past triggered by Bheni's words. It was a long moment before he could respond, knowing that Bheni's kindness demanded that he be at least a little forthcoming with the truth. "I really don't want to talk about it, but I should tell you that I've left trouble behind. People might be looking for me."

Bheni wore several silver bracelets. They jingled together as she touched the pommel of her sword. "Have you broken a law? I will not be any easier than your pursuers if you have. Did you lie about the man who attacked you?"

Jhan shook his head, quick to stop that train of thought. "I didn't lie. I haven't broken a law. They want me for who I am, not for anything that I've done."

Bheni saw his pain and tried to spare him the rest of the story. She guessed the end, wrongly. "Where you being forced into a marriage? I saw several of those in Soeteuse. Barbaric that people in these lands have such customs. I do not blame you for running away, if that were the case."

Jhan didn't respond with a nod or say yes, but he still felt as if he were lying in his omission to correct her. The truth was far too ugly to admit to. If Bheni knew, the horror of it would be in her eyes, in all of their eyes. They would leave him, Jhan was certain, and the road back to Sarvoy was long. Fear kept Jhan silent, letting Bheni think what she would.

"We will have to travel through Rhenwall. It is two days hence," Bheni told him. "There, if you are still of a mind to come with us, we will allow you to purchase what you will need to make the journey. I will guide you, if you are ignorant of what is necessary. The road will be long and rough."

"I'll let you get everything. I trust in your judgment," Jhan replied, not letting her see his inner frustration as his words cost him some of his pride and confidence. It was hard to admit that, without Bheni's knowledge and guidance, Jhan would be lost again, an easy target for death.

Bheni, unaware of his turmoil, was pleased. Her hand fell from her sword as if she had forgotten that it was there. "Good. I thought that you might be unreasonable and make some trouble, but you have sense." Her voice lowered so that only Jhan would hear her next words. "Have more sense and become friends with these women. They are not bad people and will change their attitude towards you, if you would only sweeten your disposition."

Jhan felt an ache down deep inside of him. It was the ache of alienation, as familiar as his own face and just as accepted. He believed that nothing he could say would matter to those women. His charade, at least to himself, was as thin as smoke. Jhan secretly felt that their rejection had to do with more than his abrasiveness at their first meeting. Jhan feared that they could instinctively sense, somehow, his true nature, and that they were rejecting him outright because of that sensed strangeness.

"I think they've made up their minds about me already," was all Jhan could find to say as he picked his way through a minefield of self doubt.

"Then change it. It is a long ride."

"I didn't mean to make them angry by insulting them. I was afraid for them. They seem so... innocent," Jhan attempted to explain.

"Then tell them so." Bheni sighed, impatient. "You were right that they are three silly women, who do not know the dangers that might lie ahead, but their lives in Soeteuse were very hard. The poor girl with the baby lost her man in an accident. The two women are her aunt and her cousin. It is all the family she has and all the family that they have. For some reason, or no reason at all, a woman with a baby is not marriageable. Even less understandable is that the two women are too old to be marriageable. Without men and family, they are outcast. To take this journey is their only hope for something better. You also are looking for something better. I will not deny it to you. Please do not deny it to them."

Jhan looked up at last and let his hair swing back. He had judged the women harshly for something that he might have done himself to escape the shackles of custom and poverty. They didn't have to sense that he was a man dressed as a woman to shun him. Jhan's remembered words at their first meeting seemed arrogant and patronizing now, colored by the cloud of his own fears and uncertainties about the road ahead.

Jhan felt new respect for the women. In a society that allowed women to do only menial work, domestic chores, and tend the family hearth, having a weaving business must have seemed over the top to their little city of Soeteuse. To suddenly decide to cast away all convention and take that business across the land to expand it, had to have been explosive.

Jhan frowned, realizing something that he hadn't considered before. If he pretended to be a woman, then he too was bound by strict custom. He wouldn't be allowed work in jobs other than cooking, cleaning, or laying on his back in the crudest job of all. He felt himself go white in consternation. When his money ran out, what would he do?

"What's it like on the coast?" Jhan wondered, trying to grasp back his confidence with knowledge.

"The weather is warmer. Hot breezes are carried in on the surf." Bheni smiled and shrugged, eyes

on memory. "The people are very foppish. They like to dress outlandishly and they seem very free and easy. The islands, now, we have a rugged life, but it is even warmer there, and we strive for harmony and perfection in training and physique. We do not bother with silly coastal folk except to trade."

"What's it like for women on the coast?" Jhan was more pointed.

"Ah, starting to plan what you shall do?" Bheni surmised with a firm nod of approval.

"I should."

"If you weave, you might ask to join the other women."

Jhan winced. "I'm afraid that my fingers are too awkward to weave or stitch well." He remembered all too well the long hours trying to sew with Margeritte's women.

"Cook?"

"Not really."

"Clean?"

Jhan couldn't help feeling offended, though he knew Bheni was only listing the jobs that she knew would be available to a woman. "I used to do paperwork. Records," Jhan tried to explain. "Are women allowed to do that on the coast?"

Bheni was amazed. "You were a chronicler? Truly? I thought that only scholars did such work."

"It isn't difficult work, just meticulous," Jhan replied, but at the same time, he felt his spirits sink, remembering that he couldn't read or write in the local dialect. What was he going to do?

"Where are you from where women are taught such wonders?" Bheni inquired, eyes wide in wonder. "Even in my land such skills are possessed by only a few. It takes long study."

He'd said too much again. Jhan worried his bottom lip and then let it go "I had a permissive father," he amended at last.

"Until marriage was to be decided upon?" Bheni guessed sympathetically.

Jhan nodded. "Yes. " It was an unfortunate lie with a stinging penalty. It caused him to think of his real father, Christine's father. The man had left when she was very young. Jhan felt tears gather behind his eyes and he rubbed at them, feeling foolish. It was an old wound that had the nasty habit of opening up when, as Christine, she had least expected it. Did the man even know that his daughter was dead?

Bheni saw his anguish and relented. "No matter, Jhan," she said soothingly.

Jhan was through talking. Bheni was merciful. She rode ahead, leaving him with his thoughts. Thoughts of Christine's father had only been the catalyst. Now he thought of her family. Christine had tried to run away from them. She had belittled their small town ways and their small town speech. She had even called them losers in life; people who would never amount to anything.

Jhan wished, with all of his heart, that he could go back home. He wished that he could be

Christine again, find her father, hug her mother, and play with her sister's children. She longed to apologize for every terrible thing that she had said to them and her arms longed to hold them close. Denied her. Denied her forever.

Jhan realized that finding work was the least of his problems. His life was always going to be more than a lie and less than the truth, without possibility for family or even friends. There was no other way to keep his secret and to keep his Power and compulsions sleeping. Jhan had to find a way to have a life and he knew the solution wasn't going to come easily.

The baku had a surprisingly gentle gait. Jhan hardly felt stiff or sore when, at the end of the day, they pulled off of the road and walked them a quarter of a mile into the rocky hills.

"These hills will hide our campfire from the road," Lhiddi explained to put a stop to their weary grumbling. She dismounted and began unsaddling her imala as if she hadn't just spent a grueling day walking and riding. Using the saddle blanket, she briskly rubbed the animal down and hobbled its feet. Bheni did the same.

"I'll help," Jhan offered the other three women, fully expecting to be rebuffed and braced for it.

The women paused in their task of taking the baggage off of the baku. They glanced at each other and then Gruna shrugged, relenting. "Certainly, Lady Jhan."

"Just Jhan," Jhan corrected awkwardly and attempted a nervous, friendly smile as he started undoing pack straps.

Reva sat on one of the packs already on the ground and began breast feeding with ease of practice. She looked about them with wide eyes. "I've never been out of the deep forest. I feel almost naked out in these bare hills."

"We are naked," Lhiddi replied, sitting down next to her. "But, then, so are any enemies who might try and take us by surprise."

"Mutual nakedness," Jhan chuckled, but no one else seemed amused.

It was if they stood in a circle holding hands tightly and Jhan was attempting to break their grip and enter into it. They weren't yet ready to allow it.

Jhan finished rubbing down the baku. They were given a handful of dried grain chunks and a pan of water, which they fought over greedily. Jhan felt sorry for them, but they were sleek and fat and, he supposed, they really didn't need much yet.

Turning as he wiped his dirty hands on his dress, Jhan saw that a pile of dried dung had been

emptied out of a bag along with some sticks of wood. Bheni arranged these items into a pile and then revealed a little, iron box perforated by small holes. She held it gingerly in her gloved hand. Jhan moved closer as Bheni opened it and Jhan saw that it contained some smoldering material. Bheni used this smoldering material to light the campfire with quick confidence.

Jhan recalled the fearfully long time that it had taken him to make a fire. He watched appreciatively as the flames ignited the dung and the wood. A rich, pungent smell wafted up into Jhan's nostrils and he sneezed as Bheni placed a grate over the fire and began pulling out wrapped provisions and pots and pans.

Jhan watched the women arrange the packs to make windbreaks and lay out blankets and carpets to soften and separate themselves from the frozen ground. The campsite became warm and comfortable, filling with the smell of sizzling meats and vegetables that, thankfully, drowned out the smell of dung fuel.

Jhan felt painfully awkward and useless. After standing by uncertainly for some time, he sat down, unable to think how to help. These women were used to cooking over hearths and warming themselves by fires. Being outside accomplishing these tasks didn't bother them at all.

The sun dipped down behind the hills and total darkness blanketed the land. The night was moonless and even the stars did little to lift the inky blackness. Suddenly, their fire was a tremendous comfort. It was also a tremendous beacon to strangers and Jhan was glad that they had left the road to hide in the hills.

There wasn't much talk as they ate and drank snow melt water. When Hana winked and passed around a jug of wine, tongues loosened and everyone became very comfortable and at ease. The tension that had been between Jhan and the women lifted and Gruna even nodded a little as she handed the jug to Jhan. Jhan took a brief sip and passed it along.

"You are a lady," Reva announced with conviction. Her baby was asleep in a bundle of blankets beside her. The firelight illuminated the delicate curve of the baby's cheek and the downy hair on top of its head.

"No," Jhan replied shortly. Reva's tone sounded as if she were accusing him of something unpleasant.

"Maid to a lady, then?"

"Once, yes."

"Ah," Reva nodded. "A bower woman."

"How do you know?" Jhan felt that he was being misjudged, wondering how a small time as a maid could show.

“You stood as if you expected us to do everything for you.”

Jhan felt the heat of anger warm his cold face. He *was* being misjudged. “That isn't true! I'm just not very skilled at lighting fires or cooking. I've camped outside only once in my life. I was at a loss, that's all!”

Reva smiled, not the least bit shaken in her belief. “You have a noble lady's temper. You speak as if we should fear -”

“Now stop right there!” Jhan stood up and faced them, hands on hips, determined to set the record straight. “I am not a lady! I have a temper, that's true, but I can't believe that none of you do as well! You're purposely making something out of nothing. Just tell me what to do next time and I will help, I promise. Please don't ask me to cook, though,” Jhan amended. “I'm really not very good at it.”

Reva had wide eyes, but Gruna was chuckling and Hana was looking relieved. “I'll be sure to order you about in the morning,” Gruna responded seriously. “You won't escape your share of the work again.”

“I don't expect to,” Jhan replied quietly, calming down and sitting once more.

Talk turned to lighter matters and the wine bottle passed around again. There was laughter and warm smiles and Jhan found himself being drawn into that warmth, forgetting anger and alienation. None asked him any more questions about who he was and they didn't seem to want to relive days in Soeteuse. A new road and a new life was opening up ahead of them. That's what they wanted to talk about.

The women had a dream. It was a sunny dream of the cities on the coast. They thought that they were progressive places with progressive ideas. Women could own property there and run businesses. Opportunity was a golden ideal and their faces glowed in the reflection of it. Jhan, stung to his core by what a horror life could be, believed none of it. He kept silent, though, leaving them their dream.

Bheni and Lhiddi were silent as well, but their faces were wise and closed mouthed. The women would find out the truth in the end and they would adjust to that reality. Right now, they wouldn't listen to anyone who tried to change their dream. It was a comfort to them. A comfort they would need to carry them through the long arduous journey.

At last, weary of talk and too much wine, Jhan wrapped his coat and borrowed blanket around himself, and lay with his head resting on one of the packs.

Lhiddi began to sing a low song in her own tongue, a soft counterpoint to the rise and fall of conversation. Her old hands mended a harness with deft fingers. The firelight shimmered on her gray hair. She seemed an ancient spirit at that moment. Jhan felt the strength of that spirit, and the camaraderie of the women, gather about him as close as his coat and blanket, drawing him in like a

secret only they shared.

Jhan could have rested there for ever, fighting sleep, to enjoy every second of that evening, but his eyes blinked, blinked again, and then closed as he fell off of the edge of consciousness into dreams.

Jhan awoke to an overcast morning covered in falling snow. Stiff and cold, he moved closer to the coals of the fire that Bheni was stirring up. Jhan warmed himself there while he ate the thick porridge of coarse grains that Bheni had handed him in a wooden bowl. It seemed heavy and indigestible, but Jhan felt it giving him the energy to rise and cast off his blanket.

Jhan was forced to walk a long way out of camp before he felt safe enough from discovery to tend to his bodily needs. The women had sold him a few changes of clothes at a reasonable price, all gray and pale blue and much like what he had been wearing. Jhan changed into a pale blue dress, never removing the filthy underskirt until he had it on, in case one of the women should see him. Feeling a little better, but still wanting a bath, Jhan returned to the women and offered his help.

“Get the baku in line so that we can harness them,” Hana ordered briskly. “Keep them still.”

That seemed easy enough, Jhan thought, until he saw that the hobbled baku were gathered in a tight group for warmth. They weren't willing to separate and endure the cold. Jhan tugged on halters, cursed, and fumed to no avail. Turning towards the women to ask for help, he saw all of them, even Bheni and Lhiddi, laughing at his antics.

Hana relented and went to help, shaking her head at Jhan's ineptitude. She simply grabbed a baku's lip and tugged gently. The animal snorted, as if that lip were very tender, and it moved with alacrity to follow Hana to where the women waited with the harnesses. Jhan attempted the same feat and was pleased when his baku responded just as sprightly. He soon had the animals lined up and standing as orderly as soldiers to be harnessed.

Gruna patiently showed Jhan the complicated buckles and straps of the harnesses. Jhan fumbled along beside her until it was done and then struggled to help load the packs. They were held on by another set of complicated straps and Jhan began to despair of the job ever getting done.

Bheni and Lhiddi watched all of this crouched by the cooling coals of the fire, not offering to help. Jhan, like the other women, didn't expect their help, and it took Jhan a moment to analyze why he felt that way. They had their own jobs, he decided at last. They were their guards and guides. Ready, Jhan was certain, to give their lives in defense of their charges. It felt wrong to demand that they burden

themselves further by doing anything else.

When everything was finally ready to travel, Bheni and Lhiddi rose at last and kicked out the campfire. Mounting their imala, they both took the lead and led them at a hurried trot back to the road. Once there, they slowed to a steady mile eating walk.

“You would think that someone else would be on the road besides ourselves,” Jhan commented to Hana, trying to recapture the closeness of last night.

“It's early yet,” Hana replied, but she didn't sound as if she were convinced by her own words. Her eyes were constantly looking forward and back, as if she would have been comforted to see anyone at all.

As the day wore on, the road did become crowded, only with travelers that Jhan least hoped to see. They were Pekarín soldiers, galloping their imala at breakneck speed. Couriers and border patrols, Jhan guessed, not knowing enough about it to be certain. He hid from them, pulling the hood of his coat up and close to his face to hide his identity.

“Are you mad to travel at this time?” One young soldier paused long enough to ask. His imala was frothing as if from a long journey and his clothes were covered in mud and road dust. “It's war, ladies! Go back to your hearths and leave the roads to your defenders!” He was gone in the next instant, leaving them to stare after him with second thoughts clearly beginning to form in everyone's mind.

Bheni was dismissive. “After Rhenwall, we will leave the road. I promise that we will have little chance of meeting an army. A commander would have to be a fool to leave the road and bog down his supply wagons in snow and half frozen mud.”

“What if they reach Rhenwall before we do?” Jhan couldn't help the rising fear in his voice. The sun didn't seem to have any power to cut through the darkness that was wrapping itself about him, whispering in his ears doubts about Bheni's firm assurances. Jhan's face had turned so pale, and his eyes had grown so wide with fear, that Hana reached out and took his arm in concern.

“Calm down!” Bheni urged in a growling voice that brought all of their attention to her. “I have it on good authority that this enemy army is months away. We will be through Rhenwall and out of harms way in two days. Please do not stop trusting me now.”

The other women were nodding and relaxing as the baggage train started up again, but Jhan felt cold sweat run down his face. Bheni's words were powerless to quell the darkness that was beginning to engulf him. Panic was seizing his senses, his heart racing as his breath began to labor in and out; hyperventilating.

Cold water splashed into Jhan's face. The shock of it rocked him in his seat and only Lhiddi's quick grab saved him from a fall. Jhan blinked blindly, wiping at the water in his eyes with trembling hands.

“I did not think that you were so faint-hearted, Jhan,” Lhiddi remarked critically. “Perhaps we should give you to the next group of soldiers riding by? They could escort you back home.”

Jhan hugged himself tightly, as if to hold himself together, trying desperately to regain his composure. He couldn't help the shaking words that came tumbling from his lips, pulling at the threads in the small fabric of lies that he had told the women about himself. “I-I have good reason to be terrified of those enemy soldiers and you should be, too. Please, don't think lightly of them. They're horrible! Horrible!”

Bheni looked offended, confused, and puzzled all at once by Jhan's violent reaction. She chewed on her lip a moment and then carefully replied, as if she were choosing words to best reassure Jhan and to defend her own integrity, “Granmam Lhiddi and I are trained warriors, Jhan. Our islands are hard and vulnerable to attack from all sides. Do not imagine that we are not aware of how horrible soldiers can be. Trust in our knowledge. We know what they will do and what they must do. They are seeking to conquer countries, not a group of women with a few baku and imala.”

“I'm sorry,” Jhan said at last. “I-I know you're right. It's hard not to be afraid, though.” Jhan said the words to quiet Bheni's offense, but they hadn't any real meaning for him. Jhan knew that the Dark King might very well send his army after Jhan if he knew that he was close by. The man had Power. No one could predict what he would do, or what was possible, or impossible, for him to do.

Bheni sensed his insincerity, perhaps seeing the shadows in his eyes. “Will you go on?” Bheni asked. “It's not good that you are so afraid. I could do as Lhiddi suggests and find you an escort back to Sarvoy?”

Jhan used every ounce of his strength to stop his trembling and meet Bheni's eyes levelly. “I don't want to be here when the army invades. I want to be as far away as possible, even to those islands of yours.”

“They are not a haven, child,” Lhiddi replied with a shake of her old head.

Jhan disagreed, silently. Anything in the opposite direction of that army was a haven and he would do anything to reach it and escape the Dark King and his forces. Jhan's resolve must have been in his face. Bheni didn't argue further, riding to her place at the front of the line.

They continued onward. The women tried to break the mood by attempting light conversation. They giggled and talked about weaving patterns, the baby, and the road ahead, but the constant passing of soldiers, and the odd contingent of men, creating fortifications out of stones gathered from the rocky land around them, made them nervous. The conversations petered out and then ceased altogether, each beginning to think about their danger.

When night fell, Bheni drew them even farther away from the road than the previous night. She

kept the fire small, ignoring the grumbling of the cold women. They ate dried beef and half cooked porridge and went to bed exhausted.

Jhan sat up longer, crouched on the edge of the firelight, chin resting on his knees and eyes dark and moody. When Lhiddi came and crouched close by, Jhan hunched in on himself as if he expected her to strike blows at his already wounded and dying self assurance. Instead, she tossed a small stone absently from one rough hand to the other, watching the moon rise.

“Who are you?” Lhiddi wondered at last, breaking the silence like a rock through glass.

The chill of the night couldn't compare to the chill of trepidation that gripped Jhan. He was glad of the darkness, knowing that his face probably mirrored the shock and turmoil her words had caused. Licking dry lips to give himself a second longer, Jhan replied, as calmly as he could manage, and in a tone that questioned her aged memory, “Jhan of Pekarín.”

The old woman snorted, annoyed. “I see clearer than Bheni, or any of those silly weavers. You are not running from any marriage. You are running from that army.”

Jhan resolved not to reply, letting her think what she would and hope for the best, but Lhiddi's long fingers closed over his wrist and turned it over to show the scar there, thick and ugly. She rubbed it with her thumb and then released Jhan all in one motion before he could react. “You pretend to be some bower maid, but your eyes are as deep and dark as wells,” Lhiddi observed.

Jhan faced her squarely. More of the truth had to be revealed or she might look further. The secret of his true sex was much more important than the one about the Dark King. “I *am* running from that army. I fell into their hands once. I'll die before I let that happen again. Is that explanation enough for you?”

Lhiddi grunted and sat back on her heels. “It makes more sense than the tale you wove before. With your temper and moods, I cannot see anyone wanting to force you to wed!” She shrugged, self-deprecatingly. “I suppose that I should not make light of your troubles, but it would help if you told your story again, this time more truthfully. Who are you, really, Jhan of Pekarín?”

That was part of the larger secret and Jhan held it close as tightly as a miser clutches gold. “I'm no one,” Jhan replied. “That wasn't a lie. You may look at me and see a child, but I'm not! I've lived through the greatest terror that you can possibly imagine and I don't want to ever face it again. I want to run as far as I can. I want to go to a place where no one knows me and I can live quietly, safe from the army that is marching on Pekarín.”

Lhiddi was shaking her head, disturbed and comprehending only part of what Jhan was trying to say. He didn't blame her. He was only giving her the thin layer on the surface of his life. “In the islands,” Lhiddi was saying, “everyone wants their name shouted from the rooftops. They vie for

glorious deeds. To turn your back on an enemy, and wish to live quietly, is the same as wishing death.”

“This is my alternative to death, “ Jhan responded, “but it may come to that yet.”

“You don't sound like a child.”

“I'm not. I'm much older than I look.”

The old woman shook her head again, weary, and stood. Her stiff joints creaked and popped. “I don't trust you, Jhan of Pekarín. You have too many secrets.”

“I'm not asking you to trust me,” Jhan was quick to reply as he stood as well, brushing dirt from his clothes. “I just want to get away. That is the truth. Take me as far as you can and leave my life to me.”

Lhiddi looked as if she wanted to say more, and then shrugged, letting it pass unsaid. Jhan followed her back into camp. He watched Lhiddi go to say a few words to Bheni as he rolled up into his blankets. Jhan almost congratulated himself on deflecting Lhiddi's suspicions, but the last sight he had of them before he fell asleep was of Bheni looking his way and frowning.

CHAPTER FOUR

(Dancing Death)

The land rose up and mountains dominated the horizon. They were short peaks capped in snow, dark blue and gray against a sky dark with weather. Rhenwall sat blocking the one pass through them. Made from the same stone as the mountains, its towers and high walls blended until it was almost invisible. Only its flaming red banners, fluttering from every tall point, declared its presence in no uncertain terms.

“When we came through last time, the road was filled with traders, villagers, soldiers, and people of all sorts,” Bheni commented, surprised that the road was so empty and that the front gates of the city held only a few guards. “I thought that it was a fair, but a man told us that it was always like that.”

The hair on the back of Jhan's neck prickled, despite knowing that they were safe. Rhenwall was the last of the cities under King Tekhal's rule. Order and the law would operate until they exited the other side and entered the wild lands between it and the coastal countries. That would be the time to really be afraid.

The guards halted them. A tall one with red hair, stepped forward. He squinted down their line of baku and gave each woman a measuring stare. “Not much trading going on,” he told them. “Most have already fled along with their money.”

“So quickly?” Gruna was amazed. “I only heard the news a five day ago.”

“No one wants to stay here. We are the wall. The first defense. The first to stand or fall. The dam holding back the flood -”

“I understand,” Bheni cut him off impatiently. “We are not here to trade. We are going beyond Rhenwall.”

The guards eyes widened. “That may not be allowed.”

“I think that it will be,” Bheni shot back in her high, rolling tones.

The man stared and then seemed to rethink his position. “You will be staying the night?”

Jhan longed so strongly for her to say, yes, that it was almost painful. It was everything that he could do to keep himself from shouting at her to stay and allow him to rest and remove the filth that clung to his body. He was beginning to feel like a corpse that had escaped from a grave. Unfortunately, Bheni was unaware of his distress. “No,” was her short and final answer.

“Ride on,” the guard said. “I'll send to my commander. He may have you stopped at the opposite gate.”

“Why?”

“For your own good,” the guard replied as if she were stupid. “I don't think that women should be out riding the countryside when there is such danger.”

Bheni's jaw clenched until she looked as if she were going to break her teeth, so tightly were they clamped together to hold back her angry reply. Finally, her jaw relaxed and she let out a breath and was able to reply, almost civilly, “Tell your commander that I am from Alatha and a warrior trained. Tell him that there are two such in this caravan of women. I think that he will disagree with you about how much danger we are in.”

It meant nothing to him, Jhan could tell, but he let them pass, snickering something rude to the other guard as he stepped aside. Jhan felt himself flush uneasily. He kept his eyes straight ahead as another rude comment appeared to be about him. Jhan heard enough to know that their conversation had to do with the amount of dirt all over him and the odds that he was a woman that might be cheap to come by.

Bheni heard it as well and her look back at Jhan was full of sympathy as she seemed to notice Jhan's appearance for the first time.

Once inside the gates, they entered a wide, cobbled street lined with shops, some locked and darkened, but others open and hopeful. Bheni dismounted and handed the reins of her imala to Lhiddi. “Find a place for them. I think that we have time enough for a bath house. Besides, Jhan will need to purchase things for the journey.”

Jhan dismounted at Bheni's gesture, knees weak with gratitude. He had lived with his own filth and stink one day too long. Now he almost danced with joy as he followed the woman through the shops, eager to be done and to get to the promised bath.

Bheni did move quickly, picking out new gloves, boots, and a fur lined hat to keep Jhan's ears warm. She never considered style or fashion; her mind on functionality. Socks, woolen underthings, and a heavy cape with a fur lined hood were purchased next and then a quilt lined with down.

Provisions were important. Bheni had planned for five women. Jhan had to purchase enough to carry his added burden. He also had to purchase, not one, but two baku to help carry himself and his supplies. A pack saddle and a passenger saddle were expensive, almost more than the baku. When everything had been paid for, Jhan realized with a shock, that he still had a store of money left over. Thaos had been very generous.

Bheni led the way to a stable. The other animals were munching grains in a corner. Bheni tied up Jhan's two dune colored baku along with them. She helped Jhan saddle and load his gear, showing him knots that would hold tight, but could be yanked loose at a moment's notice. That was important in case

the animals tangled or one fell.

“Shouldn't we take the packs off of them and give them a rest?” Jhan wondered, feeling sorry for them when he was going, to what he hoped, was a hot bath and a warm room.

“We will not be staying long,” Bheni replied in a voice that allowed for no argument as she led the way across the street to a gray, stone building. Going inside, they were met by a woman in an apron. She had her hair up high on her head and she wore a white dress tied up above her knees. In her arms were a load of towels.

“Two copper for one hour. Only women,” the proprietress announced automatically. Bheni dropped the coins into her hand and the woman nodded and motioned to a narrow hallway. Steam floated out of it.

Bheni grinned. “I know that you are looking forward to this, but so am I.”

At the end of the hallway, Jhan came out of his happy anticipation as reality reasserted itself. The hallway opened out into a room filled with metal tubs overflowing with naked women in hot water. A huge fireplace in one corner was hung with pots of warming water. Two serving women stood ready to replenish the tubs with them.

“This is paradise!” Gruna shouted, uncharacteristically freed of her sullen moods. She was up to her old neck in a tub and lathering with soap.

Reva was washing her baby along with herself and the baby was giggling delightedly. For once freed of its thick swaddling clothing, Jhan could see that the baby was a boy. “I don't ever want to get out and I don't think little Keva does either!”

Hana was still wrapped in a towel, testing the hot water in her tub gingerly as she spoke to Lhiddi. Lhiddi had just washed her long braids. She stood without a towel, her body as wiry and as lean as the body of an athlete.

Jhan looked at the water longingly, hands twisting in his dress. At that moment he hated himself, hated his body, and hated the large tub of water before him that beckoned with delicious steam and a heady aroma of herbs and flowers. Jhan took a deliberate step back, turning his face away and clenching his jaw on a rage that had no one but himself to vent against.

“I-I can't,” Jhan forced the words out through clenched teeth.

Bheni was startled. She turned to Jhan as if she couldn't believe her ears. “What?” Her loud exclamation made everyone look.

“I -” Jhan felt tears rising and he choked. What could he say now? They were all going to find out.

“You are filthy and, forgive me, but you smell worse than my imala!” Bheni was even louder now, impatient and not accepting of Jhan's strange behavior. “I know you want to bathe! What is wrong?”

It was Lhiddi who came to Jhan's rescue. She wrapped a towel about herself and stepped towards them. She chided Bheni gently. "Grandchild, forebear! See? She is a shy one! Attendant?" One of the women tending the warming water pots stepped forward, wiping hands on her apron. "Do you have a private bath for our shy companion?"

Everyone was looking at Jhan in consternation. He could see the questions and the judgments in their faces. Did he think that he was too good to bathe with them? Was he really some high lady's maid who wasn't used to bathing like the lower folk? The small measure of camaraderie Jhan had built with them was slipping back a few notches, if not evaporating like the steam all around them.

"It costs more," the attendant announced, but nodded when another copper was pressed into her hand by Jhan. She led Jhan through a small doorway to a lone tub in a narrow room. The women filled it up and put soap and towels near to hand.

Lhiddi had followed Jhan inside. "I -" Jhan still couldn't think of an explanation.

"Are there many more scars to see, Jhan of Pekarín, than the ones on your wrists?" Lhiddi wondered. "Are you afraid to show them?"

Jhan swallowed and nodded. It was true enough, though they were inner scars and an exterior horror. "I don't want them to see, or to know."

"They will know," Lhiddi was insistent. "I will tell them. You cannot separate yourself this way and hope to make the long journey in peace. They will want an explanation other than the one that they think they know."

Jhan wanted to argue, feeling his half truths were piling up one on top of another. How many more would he have to tell? How many more situations could he avoid? Jhan had only escaped this one by Lhiddi's kindness. She deserved more than lies, but Jhan could only offer a heartfelt thank you. Lhiddi nodded in return and left him alone.

Jhan shut the door and slid the bolt. The bath beckoned him with enticing wisps of steam and he forgot about his troubles and his bruised emotions in an instant as he threw off his clothes and lowered himself into the tub. The all encompassing envelope of warmth, seeping into every pore straight down to Jhan's bones, made him feel nearly ready to pass out in euphoria.

Jhan floated in the water and steam for a good long while before he felt ready to move and wash off the dirt with the flower scented soap. Jhan scrubbed with it until his skin tingled with cleanliness, even unwinding his hair from its braid to wash and comb all of the dirt out with his fingers. When Jhan was through, the water was black with filth. It drove him to get out at last and he stared at the tub as he toweled off thoroughly. It seemed a metaphor for his life. Clean and pure at first, it always turned dark and spoiled in the end.

Jhan turned from it at last, shaking such thoughts away from him with a shrug of his shoulders. He put on the clean dress and the new underthings that he had brought along. Feeling warm, clean, and renewed, Jhan unbolted the door and found everyone dressed and waiting for him, looking very serious.

Jhan expected them to say something, but they were silent. He was drawn into their circle without comment or apology. Lhiddi had told them about the scars and they had chosen to bring him among themselves and comfort him. The moment would have been perfect if, Jhan realized, it had been the truth.

They dried their hair by the large hearth, the two women going about with combs and helping them tease out knots and tangles. Jhan's long hair was a nightmare. It was an hour before it combed straight and dried. Jhan could see Bheni's impatience to get going, but she knew, as well as everyone else, that no one could go out into the cold with wet hair.

Dried at last, Lhiddi braided Jhan's hair with sure fingers and tied it off at the bottom with a strip of leather. She looked ready to suggest cutting it short to save time and trouble, but didn't. No one else suggested it either. Jhan's hair was a conceit all of them envied.

Jhan fingered the long braid, seriously considering taking the drastic measure all on his own, but, in the end, he couldn't. Despite all of its trouble, it was beautiful, and it was the only thing about his body that truly felt feminine.

They were staring at him. Jhan looked down to make sure that his clothing was hiding everything. It was, so he looked up again and asked in confusion, "Is something wrong?"

"You are very beautiful," Gruna told him sourly. "I didn't expect you to clean up so well." The rest of them nodded in agreement.

Jhan blushed, uncomfortable, but eager for their reassurance. "Thank you."

"Come, now!" Lhiddi broke in irritably. "The day is half over! The only thing that we will be able to do, today, is find a good spot to set up camp."

"We could stay at an inn?" Reva's tone was pleading as she wrapped her baby up and slung him in a long scarf about her shoulders and waist. She did the neat cinching so quickly and easily that Jhan was impressed. Warm against his mother's body, the baby would never feel them entering the cold and wake up.

Bheni was unyielding. "No, and you know why, Reva. The less that we are observed, the less likelihood that someone will follow us to do us harm."

Reva shrugged, not ashamed to have tried. They all gathered up their bags and trudged out of the womb-like warmth of the baths with slow and reluctant steps. The cold that met them outside sent them all shivering and ducking into their capes and coats.

The baku and imala were just as reluctant. The women had to subject them to a great deal of lip pulling before they relented and allowed themselves to be led from the stables. Jhan's beasts were the most docile. Bheni had chosen the mild mannered animals for him, knowing his lack of experience. Jhan was able to tie them to the train of other animals and mount without much trouble.

They took the main road and followed its steep downward slope towards a large, closed rear gate. Ten soldiers stood guard there and they seemed to be expecting them. Bheni rode forward to speak to them. Jhan, at the rear of the line, couldn't hear what she was saying, so he let his attention wander, taking a last look at the city of Rhenwall.

It was lost in gloom and almost as quiet as a ghost town. Jhan's eyes picked out locked store fronts and houses blinded by closed shutters, their occupants long gone. It was a city preparing for a siege. Only those who could cater to soldiers, and were either too brave or too greedy, remained. Jhan placed the five men, lounging in the shadows of an overhanging building, in the latter category.

The men had hard, emotionless faces and unkempt bodies in dirty, pieced together outfits of leather and fur. They all wore wicked knives at their hips and short swords in old, ragged scabbards. Glittering eyes watched the women. Like hyenas, Jhan thought, and looked away. Hyenas stayed away when there were lions about and Jhan's caravan had two, Bheni and Lhiddi.

The baku started forward through the gate. Bheni had been persuasive. The guards had allowed them to pass. After seeing those men, a little corner of Jhan's mind almost wished that they hadn't. He found himself looking back as they turned on the road, but the gate and Rhenwall were blocked from sight.

The road sliced through the mountains, half carved from some old snow melt course and half from hard labor. Rock walls, surprisingly smooth, rose up on each side of the road. Even though it was three baku wide, Jhan still felt claustrophobic. He wondered what would happen if it began to snow hard or how they would escape if there was a rock fall from high above them. They might be trapped completely or even killed.

Jhan felt his nerves becoming frayed and he caught himself hoping that they wouldn't stop to make camp and would, instead, ride down the mountain as quickly as possible. Jhan was even glad to discover that Lhiddi had been exaggerating and that they weren't going to stop right away.

Five long hours of riding cured Jhan's nervousness. When the sun slanted down behind the mountains and long shadows began to make traveling difficult, he was the first one off of his baku after Bheni had led them up a dark side road, no bigger than a crack in the wall of rock, to make camp.

"It is narrow, but defensible with the animals blocking the entrance," Bheni explained to them. "They will warn us of anyone's approach. By the time that an enemy can get past them, we will be

awake and prepared to meet them with steel.”

They huddled on a shelf of rock as Bheni built a cairn of stone. Filling it with dried dung, she lit it. It burned fitfully, but it soon had the stones warm. They ate cold jerky and dried fruit cakes and then fell asleep huddled around the warm stones, longing for the baths of Rhenwall.

When dawn came, they all rose stiffly, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands to try and get their blood circulating. Lhiddi surprised them with a baked slab of grain that she had kept overnight among the stones. It tasted almost like a crispy corn meal patty, full of the melted lard and herbs that Lhiddi had stuffed it with for flavor. Jhan ate his appreciatively and his spirits rose with his body temperature.

Reva tended to her baby, changing cloth diapers and breast feeding him. He cried when exposed to the cold, but she was quick in wrapping him back up again. When she looked up and saw Jhan watching wistfully, she smiled. “You can tend him, if you like. I could use a break.”

Without further ceremony, Reva placed little Keva into Jhan's arms. He held the baby awkwardly, frightened, but Reva was patient. She carefully arranged his arms until he was cradling the baby properly. When Keva smiled up at him and cooed, Jhan relaxed and found himself smiling as well.

Reva went to help with the baku. Jhan could have held the baby forever, a tenderness that he had not thought that he had possessed, overwhelming him for the little baby in his arms. As Christine, she had run from the thought of marriage and children. Christine had wanted a big career in a big city. Power. Money. Prestige. Now it all faded in importance compared to the little life that snuggled against him and smiled trustingly up into his face.

“Give him here!” Reva snatched the baby back and Jhan let his cold, empty arms fall, surprised and hurt. “Someone's down there!”

“What?” Bheni and Lhiddi both drew their swords.

“Get everything packed and ready to move!” Lhiddi commanded and Jhan sprang into motion with the other women, not questioning her orders.

Lhiddi and Bheni left them to it and crept cautiously down the trail, pushing past the baku who were now becoming alert and wagging long ears at something they were hearing.

When everything was packed and slung onto the baku, Jhan and the women stood fearfully, trying to hear what was going on. Reva was still holding her baby tightly and the women had formed a protective wall in front of her. Jhan stood in front of them, imagining all sorts of horrible things. He wondered if he could scale the sides of the trail, if he had to, in order to get away from the worst of what he was imagining.

The baku began to move down the trail, backing slowly. Lhiddi pushed past, motioning the women

to be silent and to follow. When they had the baku lined up on the main trail, Lhiddi bent close to the women to explain. "Men are on the trail behind us. Sound funnels down these trails and is deceptive. They are still far behind us. Bheni has gone to see what sort of men they are. Until she returns, we must not make any noise that could travel back up to those men. Understand?"

Everyone nodded, but Jhan was looking at the baby and the baku. They were uncontrollable should they decide to make noise. They couldn't hope to go silently for long.

Jhan fretted as he mounted his baku and the line of women and beasts started down the trail. He tried to convince himself that it was probably nothing and that they were safe. Those men were probably just soldiers intent on scouting or relieving border patrols, he thought. They might even be travelers like themselves, brave enough or foolish enough to travel on the verge of war.

Still, Jhan couldn't help glancing back, all of his senses straining for sight or sound of the two islanders. When both happened at once, Jhan jumped in his saddle, nearly letting out a scream of fright.

Bheni was running, sword in hand. "Go! Go!" she shouted. "They are pursuing me!" She turned, sheathed her sword, and took her bow and quiver of arrows off of her back. She shot arrows down the trail in three quick moves.

Baku were not to be hurried. They balked and honked in protest when the women kicked and shouted at them to move. Lines snarled and the riderless imala began to rear and thrash. It tangled with Reva's baku. Flint hard hooves flailed the air near her head while she screamed and tried to protect the baby with her body.

Jhan was terrified, irrationally imagining the Dark King's army behind them, Bheni's frail defense only a momentary stop gap before he was captured and torn apart by tortures once again. It should have driven Jhan mad, spurred him to clamber even up an unscalable rock wall to get away, but the sight of Reva and the baby in danger made Jhan forget all of that in an instant. He had to save them.

It was another kind of madness to think that he could stop a half ton of imala with his small, hundred pound body, but Jhan never paused to consider it. He dismounted swiftly and managed to push his way through the milling baku, ducking under tangled lines and sidestepping vicious bites. At last, Jhan reached the imala and grabbed the beast's halter just as it was coming down from a rear. Hooking his fingers into the leather tightly, Jhan managed to bring the surprised imala's small head down despite his light weight.

The imala panicked, thinking that it was being attacked. It tried to bolt sideways and crashed into the wall with Jhan between it and the stone. Something in Jhan's side tore and he cried out from a sharp, burning pain. His fingers came free of the halter and he fell down, almost under the beast's hooves. Jhan had a frightening view of churning legs, before the beast was dragged down the trail by

the lead still attached to the baku. Someone, probably Lhiddi, had finally forced them to run.

Jhan watched the animals and the women disappear down the trail, leaving him behind. Gripping his aching side, he stood up, tasting blood in his mouth from a busted lip. Jhan felt scrapes and bruises all along one side of him and, when he tried to take a step, the pain in his side raged. Jhan found it difficult to even breathe.

A bowstring hummed. Bheni came running up and hooked an arm through Jhan's, nearly lifting him off of the ground as she sprinted down the trail with Jhan in tow. Jhan cried out in protest, the pain slicing through his senses like a bolt of lightning. He tried to pull away, but Bheni shook him roughly and shouted a curse in his ear. When Jhan stumbled, she did lift him up, slinging him over one shoulder and carrying him as easily as if he had been a doll.

Jhan watched the ground pass beneath them, upside down over Bheni's shoulder, face pressed harshly into the bow and quiver she had slung over her shoulder. Jhan noticed, through his white haze of pain, that the quiver was almost empty. It reminded him of the real danger like a slap in the face and he began to struggle, panicking.

Bheni put Jhan down abruptly. She was breathing hard, mottled green eyes filled with anxiety and the rush of danger. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes," Jhan moaned, hands pressing his side with a sick, grimace of pain. "My side -"

"They are very close behind me." Bheni cut Jhan off and pulled him by an arm as she began walking again. Jhan hugged his side with his free arm, hissing through his clenched teeth with every step. "Ten to begin with," Bheni continued breathlessly. "I think I cut them down by four. Perhaps they will lose their stomach and return to Rhenwall?"

"Who are they?" Jhan demanded with such fear and anxiety that Bheni's eyes went wide despite her preoccupation with escape.

"Bandits," Bheni replied and tried to hurry him.

Bandits? It was like a string breaking until only a thread remained, only the thread was Jhan's sanity. Jhan's fear washed away until it was a shadow of itself. The Dark King wasn't behind them. Bandits were to be feared, but they didn't carry the all encompassing horror that made Jhan want to curl up and wish for death before he was captured.

Jhan stumbled. More blood was coming into his mouth and he began to wonder if it was all from his cut lip. He coughed and blood splattered the ground. Bheni's frightened look at the sight of it made Jhan's legs shake. She was almost dragging him now, expression turning heartless.

"Walk!" Bheni demanded. "I will not leave you! I do not think that you want us both to die, do you?"

Jhan gritted his teeth and forced his legs to move. Just pain, he told his mind. Shut it off and keep walking. It worked, for a few yards, until Jhan realized that he was sobbing in pain and that Bheni had lowered him to the ground. She stood over him, staring at the trail behind them. Her face set in hard lines as she notched her bow with another arrow.

Jhan tried to catch his breath, the pain making it almost impossible. He blinked to clear the sweat from his eyes and was in time to see six men walking down the trail, swords drawn and ragged imala bringing up the rear. They were cautious, ducking behind rock outcroppings just as Bheni shot her arrow. It sailed past without finding a mark. They grinned and threw taunts at them.

"I was never the best archer," Bheni muttered self-deprecatingly. She took careful aim and spent every arrow. None found a mark. Dropping her bow and quiver, she drew her sword and stood defiantly.

Laughing now, the men began to leave their rock shields and slowly advance. Jhan sat up, took a deep breath, and forced himself to stand. He stood at Bheni's back, knowing that they were about to be killed, or worse.

"Give me your belt," Jhan ordered.

Bheni scowled at him, but complied in a flash, not knowing what he was about, but out of options. She watched Jhan wrap the thick belt around his ribs, pull it tight with a hiss of pain, and buckle it there. "What are you doing?"

Breathing was easier at once with Jhan's belt support and the pain lessened. Jhan nodded at Bheni, straightening and feeling a chill settle in to where his fear usually resided. "I know how to fight."

Bheni laughed, almost hysterically, as she turned to face their attackers. "I doubt that skill, Jhan, but I do not doubt your bravery. Let us die in honor, fighting, little friend."

Jhan didn't blame her doubt. He barely reached her chest and he must have seemed a child to her. As he watched the men come, Jhan wondered at his own decision not to be taken without a fight. Under the Dark King's compulsion, he knew, few men were his equal. Without that compulsion, he had only Vek's training and it was meager training at that. Would it be enough? Could he bring himself to use it to kill?

"Stay behind me," Bheni ordered. "Stay clear of my right arm. My sword may catch you unintentionally. I will kill as many as I can before they bring me down. Then it will be up to you, Jhan. We cannot allow them to reach the other women. Lhiddi is older and more fragile than she appears. She might not be able to protect them."

Jhan thought of Reva and the baby. His blood boiled when he imagined these men touching either of them. It hardened his resolve and he sank into a crouch, determined to do his best. Jhan had come to

terms with dying long ago. Being left alive for these men to handle was the horror and he knew that he would do anything, even kill, maybe, to save the baby.

The men fanned out as much as they could on the narrow trail. They too sank into crouches, knives and swords held ready. Like wolves, Jhan thought, the morning light catching their eyes and making them seem to glow yellow like rabid beasts.

Most of the men broke off to circle and kill Jhan first, while a few kept the more dangerous Bheni occupied. Pull down the weak first, was the obvious plan, and then tire out the stronger and kill at their leisure.

Jhan took a breath, braced himself for pain, and quelled the last of his doubt and fear. Vek's words came back to him. Take the battle to the enemy, Vek had taught, never let them have time to carry out plans. Keep them off balance. Jhan let out an ear piercing shriek to rattle them and rushed forward, thinking that he was surely about to die.

Jhan was unarmed. It confused them. Perhaps they thought that he had lost his mind. Swords dropped uncertainly. Without thinking, Jhan automatically took advantage, his perfect, ingrained training taking control as he leaped up and kicked out. His boot caught a man under the chin. An ugly snap resounded and the man dropped like a felled tree, sword clattering from lifeless fingers.

Adrenalin pumping, the pain went unnoticed as Jhan landed lightly, flipped over, and came up holding the sword. His next target was coming to his senses. He began to raise his sword just as Jhan's caught him across the throat. Blood sprayed as Jhan sailed past, never slowing, to roll and come up near victim number three.

Victims, Jhan thought, horrified but unable to stop himself. They were victims. He was too quick. Too skilled. They were just drunken bandits who relied on their strength and the edge of their weapons. They were unprepared for a lithe target that never gave them a chance to think or to use what defenses they had.

Bandit number three took the sword in the heart. Jhan left it buried there, spun and took out number four with a blow of his hand that sent bone and cartilage into the brain. Number five was able to get his sword up and on target. Jhan felt it catch him in the side and rip his dress and flesh an inch deep. The belt that he had tied there caught the tip and deflected it before it could slice into his ribs.

Bheni was there. Her sword took the man's head clean off with a powerful sweep of her arm and robber number six had his chest sliced open like a slab of meat as she spun to take him out before he could stab her in the back.

Silence. Deafening silence. Jhan sank to his knees, gasping for breath as the adrenalin ran out of him. He had killed. He had killed on purpose. So easy, Jhan thought, chilled down to his bones. It had

been so easy. Flip, kick, twirl, chop. It had seemed as if someone else had moved his body, but Jhan knew that he had allowed it to happen, consciously connecting to that part of him that had been turned into a trained killer by the Dark King.

“They didn't have a chance,” Jhan managed to say thickly, realizing the awful truth with a shudder.

“No, not at all!” Bheni exclaimed in awe. “Where did you learn to fight like that? I have never seen anything like it! I would never have believed that one so small could kill so many men before I could blink thrice!”

Bheni kept on as if she were proud of Jhan's ability. Jhan began to feel sick, long waves of it riding in on the returning waves of pain. When he saw Bheni, still prattling on about his ability, wipe the blood from her sword on a headless corpse's shirt, Jhan noticed that the corpse was still twitching.

“Oh, God!” Jhan moaned and fainted.

Jhan didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but he awoke stiff and cold with Bheni bending over him. The first thing that Jhan noticed was that the woman had opened the front of his dress to tend his wounds. “You know,” Jhan choked out and it wasn't a question. He looked up into shocked, frowning eyes.

“You are a warrior in ten thousand,” Bheni responded in a clipped tone that spoke of lies and betrayal, yet swirled with confusion as well. Her hands were hard and hurting as she wiped off Jhan's blood and examined the cut there. “Are you running from the war? Are you a coward? Are you hiding as a woman until you are safely away?”

Jhan would have laughed if it wouldn't have hurt so much or sounded completely manic. “Not even close,” he replied, sickened and bitter. Jhan was tired of lies and dissembling. What did it matter? He recalled Healer Perazii warning him that, if he told the truth, they would kill him as one possessed. At that moment, Jhan was too weary and overwhelmed by pain to muster an ounce of concern for himself.

“I use to be a woman,” Jhan explained to Bheni, going straight to the heart of the truth.

Bheni's frown deepened, but she didn't stop in her ministering. She loosened the belt around his middle and touched the bruised ribs there and the great scratches from being dragged against a rock wall. “A woman?” she repeated it slowly, as if she feared he was delirious. “Sitting among corpses is not a good place to tell a tale, but I think that I need to hear this one before we rejoin the other women.”

Jhan could smell the dead and hear black flies starting to swarm. He wanted to leave that place as quickly as possible, feeling a nightmarish *déjà vu* as he recalled the same feeling when he had stood near the burned corpse of another bandit.

Shuddering and beginning to feel guilt and revulsion, Jhan spoke quickly, “When I was a woman, I

died in an accident. The Dark King captured my soul and put it into the body of this man, who had already committed suicide in his dungeons. He did a lot of terrible things to me. When I- When I was able to get away, I made my way to Pekarín. I never forgot that I was a woman. I can't. The people of Pekarín couldn't accept that, so I ran away."

"Hraro," Bheni said with a knowing nod.

"Hraro?" Jhan repeated blankly.

"A displaced spirit," Bheni explained. Her hands tore strips from the bottom of Jhan's already ruined dress and she bound Jhan's ribs and his wound with them. "We have tales of the displaced spirits of those who died before their time. God allows them to enter corpses and live out the rest of their allotted time."

"I am Hraro, Bheni."

Bheni froze, expression unreadable.

Jhan asked in a trembling voice, "Do you kill spirits like that?"

"I have never seen one, so I cannot say," Bheni replied as she went into motion again and finished with the bandages. She tied Jhan's laces back up deliberately and then met his eyes squarely. "Why are you frightened? You killed four men, Jhan of Pekarín. How am I a match for you?"

"The Dark King taught me to fight," Jhan admitted, swallowing hard at the memory and trying to explain the horror and disgust he was experiencing. "He tortured me until I learned. General Vek of Pekarín taught me to control it. I never thought- I never thought that I would use it. I didn't believe that I had it in me to- to..."

"Ah, your first kill," Bheni nodded gravely, understanding and a little more sympathetic. "When I first killed, I spent a year questioning it, agonizing over it, and then accepting it. It is not easy. It never should be. Even such as they, filthy bandits, are due remorse and guilt."

Jhan felt hot tears on his cheeks. "I don't want to do it again, ever. I thought... I thought that I was being brave, protecting Reva and the baby, but it doesn't feel right now. Can we go? Can we please go away from here?"

Whatever Bheni had been thinking up until then was discarded at that moment. Her hands softened even as she shook her head grimly. "They will follow you no matter where you go, Jhan. You have to face them now. You have to understand that, sometimes, it is us or them. Life is like that. It can be very harsh."

Bheni helped Jhan to stand, ignoring his weak attempt to turn away, and forced him to face the corpses. Jhan shuddered and cringed against Bheni's side. He felt she was being cruel, punishing him for his lies, but her arm held Jhan up and offered him a comforting shelter when he couldn't bear it any

longer and hid his face against her, weeping.

“I will keep your secret,” Bheni announced suddenly.

Jhan looked up, surprised and disbelieving, his face swollen and puffy from crying. “You will?”

Bheni nodded and made an admission that must have been difficult for her, knowing her pride in her own skill. “I would have died without you here today. Those women would have died. It was you who saved us, Jhan. We are in your debt. My silence is the least that I can do to repay you.”

Jhan wiped at the tears on his face, grateful but still miserable. “Repay me by making sure that this doesn't happen again. I don't want- I never want to- to kill again. Help me find a safe place where I won't have to and where I can live a normal life, as much as I can.”

“You are a gentle soul, not a warrior, despite your skill,” Bheni replied. “I can sense that plainly. I do not understand, though, why, even if you are Hraro, you cannot accept the body that you have been given. If you wish a normal life, you have only to be what you are and not pretend to be what you were,” Bheni pointed out logically.

“It wasn't given,” Jhan cut in, anger searing through the pain and anguish. “It was forced on me!” He bit his lip, took a slow breath, and then went on more quietly. “You don't have to understand, Bheni. I'm not asking anyone to understand. Just let me be what I want to be.”

Bheni nodded, but Jhan could see her thinking, considering something that she didn't like. He watched her slip her sword into its scabbard, but her tension didn't ease as she shouldered her bow and left Jhan briefly to collect her arrows. There weren't many to retrieve. Returning and putting a hand under Jhan's elbow, she was a steady brace as they made their way down the trail.

“I will have to impose rules,” Bheni said at last, uncomfortable.

“Rules?” Jhan panted as shocks of pain jolted him with every step.

“You are a man. I will have to ask that you keep space between yourself and the women.”

Jhan half sat down half collapsed on the cold stone of the trail and stared up at her, at the end of his emotional strength. “Leave me here.”

“What?” Bheni was confused.

“I can only tell you that I have no desire for women, but I can't expect you to believe me,” Jhan pointed out, the sickening, emotional embarrassment on top of everything else as heavy on his shoulders as a boulder ready to crush him.

“You do not have any desires?” Bheni asked, wearily skeptical.

“For men or women,” Jhan clarified. “I was...” he swallowed hard.

Bheni suddenly looked horror stricken. “You have not been.. you are a man... entire?”

Jhan squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep himself calm despite the emotions that threatened to

overwhelm him. He took a deep breath and opened them again, begging with them for Bheni to see reason. "I am entirely a man on the outside, yes, but inside I am entirely a woman. They war with one another. I am so confused that I can't feel anything, Bheni. I don't think that I ever will."

Jhan could see the battle in her face to square what she knew before her with what Jhan was telling her. "I cannot," she said at last. "No matter what you were before, you are a man now. I will not be unreasonable or obvious, but you cannot watch when the women are about their business or sleep near them at night."

Jhan felt the cold of the stone penetrating him to the bone. It helped him decide and that decision was hardly what he would have wanted. Jhan was forced to concede defeat, holding up a hand for Bheni to help him stand once again.

They started a slow hobble down the trail. Jhan didn't try to argue any more, but he had to calm some of Bheni's fears or she would inadvertently give away his secret. "I'm the shy one," Jhan said. "The poor girl who bathes by herself, walks a mile to the toilet, and won't change clothes unless there's something to hide behind. I have a secret to keep, remember? I've already been doing exactly what you want me to do."

Bheni nodded acknowledgment, but she was unwilling to relent. "I hear you, but you must hear me as well. You have to understand that I have pledged to protect these women, Jhan. I know nothing about you except what you have told me. I have seen that you are brave and that you care about them, but I must always be careful."

Jhan did understand her reasoning and respected it, but still it bit deep. Once again he had been exposed as a fraud, judged as a man, and regulated to that life of manhood. To Bheni, Jhan was a warrior without parallel and a man dressed as a woman. If Jhan wanted to stop that from going any further, it had to be now.

"Bheni? Please don't tell them that I killed those men."

Bheni started, astonished. "You must receive praise and honor for your battle," she told him, as if his wounds were making him delirious.

Jhan thought of the headless corpse, still twitching, and the flies gathering on the men that he had killed. His stomach tightened and churned. Killer, he called himself. They hadn't had a chance. It didn't help to think of them as the murdering scum that they were or that he had done it to save Reva and the others. It all boiled down to killing and Jhan didn't think that he could ever do it again. He would faint or become paralyzed by horror, seeing once again those men back there, stinking in the sun, dead, not by accident or compulsion, but by his choice.

"You take the honor and the praise," Jhan responded stiffly, explaining so that she would

understand, knowing that his disgust and horror at his own ability would be incomprehensible to her and only something to be overcome. "Tell them that I fainted, it won't be a lie. I don't want them to know. I don't want them asking questions. Women in Pekarín aren't trained to do anything more strenuous than needlepoint."

"As you will," Bheni agreed reluctantly, but there was an eagerness in her voice as well. Jhan recalled Lhiddi or Bheni telling him how important feats of arms and physical prowess were in their land. Jhan hadn't realized how much until that moment. Bheni didn't care that it wasn't the truth. She only cared about claiming the deed and adding it to her roster. It was an insight into her personality that Jhan might have chosen to never see, yet, he supposed, that everyone had such flaws. He certainly had more than most.

"How far ahead will the women have gone?" Jhan turned the subject, wanting to forget about dead bandits and uncomfortable truths.

Bheni scowled, perhaps having hoped that Jhan wouldn't ask that question. "Far," she replied in a monotone.

"They'll come back to look for us?" Jhan became anxious. The pain was fogging his sight, pounding in waves throughout his whole body. His legs were shaky and weak beneath him. Without Bheni's hand under his arm, Jhan knew, he would have fallen.

There was a long pause and then Bheni shook her head. "No."

"No?" Jhan repeated. The world narrowed down to Bheni's face and his worst fears were written there. Without help, he wasn't going to make it down the mountain. She knew it and Jhan knew it. Like a good leader she had tried to keep Jhan moving and his mind off of the obvious, purposely leading him about in conversation.

"Lhiddi will save the women. We both vowed to do that," Bheni explained simply, not even apologizing for sentencing Jhan to death. For her, doing one's duty required no apologies. "She won't jeopardize them by returning for me or you."

"Unless we order her to."

They both started at Reva's voice. She stood before them, holding her baby, and the others were lined up behind her with the baku. Lhiddi was looking chagrined. "They left me behind, cursing, and all I could do, in the end, was follow," the old woman ground out, deeply embarrassed..

"You've been hurt!" Reva exclaimed, seeing blood on them both..

Relief flooding through Jhan, but he still had the presence of mind to forestall anything Bheni was about to say. "Bheni killed all of the robbers. I was so frightened, that I fainted. If it hadn't been for her, they would have killed me."

There. Jhan had lied for Bheni. Her saw her open her mouth, close it, and then flush as she nodded, relieved. "They were drunk and not trained," Bheni explained, softening the lie as if conscience wouldn't allow her to take too much undeserved credit. "They were hardly a challenge at all."

"Did any of them escape?" Lhiddi demanded nervously, old hand going to the hilt of her sword.

"No. They are all dead."

Lhiddi crowed with joy, hands raised skyward in delight. "You are a granddaughter in ten thousand!"

Bheni grinned, basking in the praise from her grandmother and the other women as she led Jhan to his baku and helped him on. It didn't seem to trouble her much that the praise was only half earned. Jhan wasn't angry. The thought of anyone praising him for killing only sickened him and was beyond his understanding.

"How far will I have to ride?" Jhan asked anxiously, hands gripping the saddle with failing, desperate strength. The pain was becoming unbearable, every breath a small, panting moan of agony. Jhan didn't need to taste the blood in his mouth to tell him that something was terribly wrong.

"There is an open space an hour up ahead where we can camp safely," Bheni told him and pressed his hand with hers, lowering her voice so that only he could hear her. "There are private places there where I can tend to your wounds. Can you make it that far?"

Jhan didn't know, but he nodded anyway, having no choice. Falsely reassured, Bheni left him to get her imala.

Reva was riding just ahead of Jhan. As the train of baku started walking, he saw her through the red haze before his eyes, turn in the saddle and look back, curious. "Did you hurt yourself falling off of your baku?"

Falling off? Jhan realized, suddenly, that Reva didn't know that he had pulled that panicked imala away from her and her baby. She thought that Jhan had fallen off and been left behind. That did make Jhan a little angry and he almost corrected her. He stopped his tongue just as he drew breath to speak. No, don't let them know that he was anything other than a delicate maid, he thought to himself. If he showed them behavior totally unlike a Pekarín woman, they might get suspicious.

"Yes, I fell off." Jhan managed an embarrassed blush despite his sickly pallor.

"Good thing Bheni was there to save you." Reva looked ahead to where Bheni was riding, her face full of awe. "Isn't she the most wonderful..."

Reva said a lot more, all in tones of hero worship. Jhan let the words roll off of him as he bent over the agony of his ribs. The baku had a level, smooth gait, but the trail was rocky and the inevitable jerk and jar was more than Jhan's body could endure. The red mist before his eyes darkened to black and the

sound of his heart filled his ears, completely drowning out the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

(Snow Blind)

A baby was crying. Reva's baby, Jhan realized blearily, and managed to slowly open his eyes. He discovered Bheni looking down at him. It was disorienting. Had their walk away from the dead bandits and the meeting with Lhiddi and the women been a dream?

"We've stopped to tend to you," Bheni told him calmly. She had a cloth that she was wringing out over a wooden bowl full of water. Jhan saw, with alarm, that the water was stained with blood; his blood.

Jhan also noticed, quite suddenly, that he was naked and lying on a soft bed of packs and blankets. Panicking, Jhan began to sit up. The incredible rush of pain through every nerve in his body nearly made him faint again. Lying back down, Jhan's eyes darted about, trying to see who was seeing him.

"Don't worry," Bheni admonished him, a firm hand on his shoulder. "Just relax. I've taken you to a fall of stones. It's like a wall. None of the other women can see you."

Bheni had unwrapped the bandages around Jhan's waist. His side was covered in a black bruise as large as a dinner plate, the sword cut, and broad scrapes where flesh had been gouged away by the rock face the imala had smashed him against. The worst of the damage had been neatly stitched closed. Jhan also felt stitches on the inside of his mouth. He tried to speak, but his words came out distorted by his swollen cheek.

"You bit into the inside of your mouth very badly," Bheni explained. "You also bruised your ribs and pulled muscles in your side. You won't be feeling good for awhile, but it's not nearly as bad as we thought. You'll live."

Jhan was frustrated, unable to voice his relief or express his gratitude as Bheni helped him to sit. She supported him while she wrapped bandages about his middle. Then she helped Jhan dress in fresh clothes, even wiping the blood out of his hair.

Warm and secure once again, Jhan became aware that Bheni was looking at him strangely. He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Bheni shrugged, dumping the bowl of bloodied water off to one side. She then rose to a crouch and began packing bandages and a smelly salve into a small bag. "Aside from the obvious, you don't look like a man. Your body is shaped like a woman, not an eighteen year old boy. I think the Dark King you speak of did more than put your soul into that body." If she hadn't believed him before she was believing now.

Jhan nodded in agreement as she helped him lay down, covering him in a blanket. Jhan saw pity on her face before she turned and left him.

Alone, Jhan closed his eyes and tried to sleep, all of his fears and anxieties seeping slowly away as his mind began to believe that he was safe, for now. When his mind finally relaxed, Jhan felt frustration when the bright afternoon sun, shining in his face, made sleep elusive. Sounds magnified against the rock walls and Jhan became aware of someone talking. They were the voices of women, rising and falling querulously.

“This is taking shyness to an extreme!” That was sour Gruna. “The only cure for it is to force her to confront it. We don't care how many scars she has.”

“Leave her.” It was a warning growl from Bheni.

“What is it, Bheni?” Lhiddi chimed in. “You are the last person to coddle such silliness. I let her have her privacy before, but there will be less and less of it as we travel farther. Bring her out and let us talk about it. Perhaps if she understood that we will not judge her or be horrified by her body...”

“She is sleeping.” Bheni was firm. “I dressed her wounds, Granmam. You do not want to see what she has under her clothes. Trust in my judgment.”

“Poor thing!” Hana exclaimed sympathetically. “Who could have done such a thing and why? That anyone could have raised a hand to such a little girl is unbelievable!”

“She is not a little girl, Hana,” Lhiddi corrected. “But, you are right. It is terrible that someone could have done such a thing. Are men so cruel in your land?”

Hana spluttered, outraged. “Why, no! Women are treated well. Our laws deal harshly with anyone who harms women and children.”

“Then why would Jhan not go to the king's men and complain?” Lhiddi wondered, looking at Bheni. “Has she said anything to you about this?”

“I do not think that it has anything to do with someone back in Pekarín, Granmam,” Bheni replied. “I think it has everything to do with the enemy army approaching their land. She tangled with them, somehow, and they did this to her.”

“Secrets!” Lhiddi growled. “That one is too full of them! Perhaps we should leave her at the next city?”

Jhan tensed, forgetting sleep. There was a long silence. Was Bheni pretending to consider Lhiddi's advice or was she truly thinking about it? “She is wounded,” Bheni finally informed them. “It is not bad, but it will be weeks before she is better. We will have to slow down for her.”

Reva, surprisingly, came to Jhan's defense. “We have to slow down for the baby,” she pointed out. “A wounded woman can't be much different. I don't think that she'll slow us down enough to matter.”

“No, don't leave her!” Hana cut in with her anxious support. “What will the poor girl do, alone and so timid, in a strange city?”

“She is not timid,” Bheni corrected, voice shadowed with her certain knowledge. “I think that she could take care of herself very well.”

“Nonsense!” Hana disagreed strongly. “She fainted when you were attacked by those bandits. She's terribly shy and she's obviously been hurt to the point where a hard look would kill her! She needs us! Come, ladies! Don't abandon the poor girl!”

“Hana is right,” Gruna agreed roughly. “I couldn't live with myself if we left her behind, especially with those big eyes staring after us. I'd always wonder if she came to harm.”

“Your decision,” Bheni sighed, but accepted quickly enough.

“Hopefully, there will not be consequences for that decision,” Lhiddi added irritably.

Jhan let out the breath that he hadn't realized that he was holding. It hadn't surprised him to learn that Bheni wanted him gone, but he hadn't expected her to support Lhiddi and try to persuade the others. She had promised to keep Jhan's secret, but now he knew that she didn't feel comfortable about it or about him. Feeling that the argument had resolved itself and that he was safe for now, Jhan rolled over onto his good side and managed to sleep.

The ground was moving! Jhan opened his eyes and clutched hard at anything close to hand. Opening sleep encrusted eyes, Jhan discovered that his hands were dug into Bheni's arms and that he was slung in front of her on her imala.

“Shhh!” Bheni soothed. “You did not wake, so I decided to move you this way. Lie still or you will fall!”

Jhan obeyed her, eyes adjusting to his surroundings. They were still traveling down the narrow trail, but snow was powdering everything and they were moving at a quick amble. The imala's gait was smooth, but Jhan still experienced a sickening sway back and forth that sent his head spinning. He tried to motion to Bheni to let him sit up.

“No,” Bheni replied. “Close your eyes and try to relax. That will help. Is there much pain?”

There wasn't and that was surprising. Jhan shook his head, tongue feeling his swollen, inner cheek. That still stung like fire, but his side was just a dull, stiff ache. In his position, it should have felt a lot worse.

“I applied a salve that numbs the skin and muscle,” Bheni explained. “It will last for awhile. I am

afraid that we will have to keep this pace up until we arrive in the lowlands. A storm is brewing, heavy with snow. We can not get caught in it. It might block the trail.”

Jhan looked at the sky, with its low, pregnant clouds, and then blinked in consternation. The sun was rising! It was morning! He had slept through a day and a night!

“We will be in Nanjia in a few more hours,” Lhiddi announced. She was riding beside them. “Phonam city is three days away, but there are enough little hamlets on the way to give us shelter, should we need it.”

Gruna, riding just behind them was more certain. “My bones never lie. They're telling me this is going to be a bad storm.”

Lhiddi seemed to be mulling over their options and not liking any of them. “I think that we will stick to Ankar road. It is well populated and clear enough to follow should there be a storm.”

“There will be,” Gruna repeated grimly.

“Once the storm passes, we should leave the road and return to our original plan,” Bheni interjected, unperturbed. “I do not like the thought of showing ourselves to so many. We may find ourselves faced by bandits once more.”

Lhiddi scowled. “You do not need to lecture me in strategy, granddaughter! The road is also longer. It takes us far to the East.”

The baby began crying. Reva's voice carried to them from far back in the line. “The baby needs to rest!”

I need to rest, Jhan thought, but there wasn't to be any quarter given to either the baby or him. Lhiddi was stern, her craggy face brooking no argument. “Hold him close and use your knees to reduce the shock of your beast's stride! We cannot stop, Reva!”

Jhan, held uncomfortably in Bheni's arms like Reva's baby was in hers, was hardly able to eat the squares of dried meat and fruit that Bheni handed him or drink the clear water in its carrying skin. Though Jhan was starving and parched with thirst, his stomach was threatening to react in a bout that could only be termed *'sea-sickness'*. Jhan ended up closing his eyes, as Bheni had instructed, and bracing himself to endure the journey.

The sun went behind dark clouds mid-afternoon and the sky exploded with snow just as they exited the trail and entered a sparse, evergreen forest growing tenaciously on the upper altitudes of the mountains. The road broadened out, but it was still clear to see even covered in snow. The trees lined it and ages of falling rocks, cleared to one side or the other, made a natural fence.

“I remember a home close by,” Bheni shouted above the howl of the storm. “It had a stables and a few beds for travelers!”

Lhiddi nodded. "I remember as well!"

"I do not know how we will find it, Granmam!"

"The imala will scent it out! Give them their head! They do not want to be in this storm anymore than we do!"

Bheni's imala jerked and began to trot forward. Jhan cried out, the numbing effects of the salve wearing thin. He clutched at Bheni, but found that the arm on his wounded side refused to move to his will. Jhan thought that he might fall, but Bheni cursed and told him to be still, her grip sure and tight.

The snow storm blasted into their faces, chilling everyone down to the bone. Imala and baku bowed their heads and breasted through the mounting snow, hopefully knowing where they were going. Their riders were blinded, huddled down low to make as little a target as possible for the winds deadly fingers.

A light. Lhiddi saw it first and cried out thankfully to God. Her cry of relief was taken up down the line as a two story house, windows gleaming with light, materialized beside the road.

They streamed into a courtyard, imala and baku honking and tangling in their eagerness to escape the storm. Lhiddi was just as eager, dismounting from her imala like someone half her age and rushing to pound on the thick door of the house.

The door opened and someone peeked outside suspiciously. It was an older man in a woolen hat and a thick coat. Fat cheeks and frightened blue eyes were revealed by the timid lantern he held up to see by. "Who goes in this weather?"

"A caravan of women, eager for shelter, good man," Lhiddi responded and flashed a handful of coppers in her gloved hand. "We need stalls for our animals and a room for as long as the storm rages."

The man was still suspicious, blinking at the flying snow while he tried to make out their group in the darkening gloom. "The color of your coin is welcome, but -"

"We have a baby and a wounded comrade," Bheni snapped as she forced her imala near the door. "Show kindness and let us in!"

The man relented. He called inside and two young men came out as they threw on heavy coats, grumbling under their breaths as they braved the storm to take the beasts in hand. Reva left hers and entered at once with the baby, head bent over it in concern. Bheni followed, carrying Jhan easily.

Warmth enveloped them like an embrace. A long table, polished and nicked with use, dominated the center of a large room. Old couches and overstuffed chairs were arranged before a huge, roaring fireplace and an assortment of people lounged comfortably in them. All were staring, alert, and suspicious.

Bheni settled Jhan onto an empty couch and went out again after giving the suspicious looks a

piercing glance of her own. Reva settled on the couch by Jhan, rocking the baby and still looking concerned.

Jhan tried to sit up and failed, biting back a howl of pain. "The baby?" he asked thickly.

"Cold," Reva told him anxiously.

"Feed him?" Jhan suggested.

Reva nodded. Her breast milk was warm. The baby latched on and Reva relaxed a little, feeling the strength of his efforts. She touched his cheek gently and the look of love and relief on her face made her glow in the firelight.

"Mad to travel in this weather with a baby!" Jhan heard and he looked up, startled and wary, to try and see who owned the voice.

The people were standing now, curious instead of suspicious. Two were older men dressed in uniforms, black with some sort of animal embroidered on the breast in blue. Another man looked like a farmer. He wore homespun clothing, rough and choppily sewn. He also wore a leather cap on his balding head. His face was grizzled and compressed until his chin and nose seemed to meet. The last man was barely that. Very young and slim, he was still broad in the shoulder. He had a nobleman's stance and the fine fur-lined silk clothes to go with it. His hair was as black as Jhan's and his eyes were sparkling amber. His face was sharp, but fine, with a solid chin and high cheekbones offset by a generous mouth. He looked almost familiar.

"Your men should be whipped by the king's soldiers!" That querulous voice again. It was coming from the farmer. He had a few, unlovely teeth in his mouth.

"We don't have any men," Reva spoke up hotly. "We didn't expect a storm this early in the cold season."

"Say nothing," Jhan managed to say, aching with every word he forced from his stitched mouth, but determined to warn Reva. Making the men angry while they were trapped there by the storm was a bad idea. Perhaps, Reva realized it as well. She chewed on her lip and bent her head over her baby once more.

"No men?" the farmer continued and spat aside into the fire. It hissed back at him as it hit the flames. He waved a hand at them, dismissive, as he sat down, acting as if his bones ached and the weight of foolish women bowed his shoulders. "Probably some pleasure house riff raff! Running away from your keepers, are you?"

Reva looked up with daggers in her eyes, but Jhan gave her a hard stare and she turned her face away, cheeks flaming in embarrassment and anger. After a moment, she said to Jhan, almost in amusement, "Bheni was right. You aren't timid, are you?"

Timid? Frightened to death to be in a room full of strange men, was more accurate, Jhan thought. He was surprised that his face wasn't giving him away. He was probably too tired and in too much pain to express anything other than the depths of his endurance.

The door opened and howling wind and snow swept in as the women trudged in with all of their packs. They let them fall at the doorway and started to divest themselves of gloves and sodden capes, closing the door just as the men began to shout complaints.

The keeper of the house came out of a back room and motioned them to follow him up a flight of stairs. "I only have one room," he told them, "and it's the smallest. I have a full house, as you can see."

"The smaller the warmer," Bheni replied. "Does it have a fireplace?"

"No," the man admitted apologetically. "It is warmed by the main hearth flue, though, so you won't be completely chilled to death. I'll have some braziers with charcoal sent up as well. That should make the night pass more tolerably."

"We can help you stay warm," one of the men in uniform called out crudely.

The man's companion laughed, but that laughter stopped when Bheni straightened to her full height. Like a mahogany statue, she seemed to tower as the hearth fire flickered over her strong form. She placed a hand on the hilt of her sword. "We do not appreciate such offers, sir. We take offense easily and are quite capable of gaining apologies in ways, that I am certain, you will not appreciate."

"None of that!" the farmer chided the crude man. "I won't hear women spoken to like that, no matter what kind of women they are."

The man shrugged and turned his back, his companion still laughing. The handsome man was frowning, but it was hard to tell if he was frowning at the crude man or at the women. The Housekeeper was more direct. "Any of you give them trouble and you'll find yourself sleeping in the snow!"

Bheni lifted Jhan up and the other women gathered their packs and followed the Housekeeper up the stairs. He turned right at the top and opened the door of a room that seemed more like an oversized closet. There was a small bed, a table, and a chair. The floors were covered in thick carpets and, thankfully, it lacked a window to let in drafts.

Jhan longed for the bed, but Bheni moved past it and settled him on the floor in a corner. It was Reva that took the bed, sitting down at once and pulling off the baby's cold and snow encrusted clothing.

Bheni put a blanket over Jhan and gave him a pack to lay against for support. "You are pale and your eyes... they do not look good."

The room was cold, but, compared to the outside, it was comfortable. Once they settled, their combined body warmth would heat it up even more. With a blanket on and a surface that didn't rock,

Jhan was already feeling better. "All right," he told her, wincing at the sting in his mouth. "but arm won't move."

"You have hurt muscles in your side and arm," Bheni explained. "That is the pain you feel. It will only get better with time."

Hana sat close by, eyes full of concern. Her apple cheeks were even redder from the thrashing they had taken from the storm. Combined with her smile, they made her look like a kindly cherub. Jhan remembered that she had stood with the other two women in support of Jhan when Lhiddi and Bheni had wanted to leave him behind. Her voice had been the loudest and the most concerned.

"Your face is all one bruise on one side," Hana told Jhan. "You have dirt all the way to your ears as well, my dear. Let me get a cloth and wash you up. If we keep applying cold, the swelling may go down."

Jhan didn't want to offend her by refusing, even though he already had his fill of the cold. When she left and then returned with a wet cloth, Jhan suffered its cold touch as she washed away the dirt and pressed against the bruise. Her hands were caring and motherly, smoothing back his hair gently as she finished. Jhan found himself smiling at her, despite the pain that it caused the inside of his mouth.

"Thanks," was all Jhan could manage to express his deep gratitude for her kindness.

"You are most welcome, dear." Hana rolled the dirty cloth between her hands, eyes on Jhan. "The other women can be a little rough in their ways. One is too young with too many responsibilities and the other is old and a childless spinster like myself."

Hana pulled the blanket up under Jhan's chin and tucked in the corners as if she had raised a dozen children. "I'm trying to say that you can trust us, Jhan," she said. "There's no need to hide away and think that we will be disgusted by anything that we see."

Jhan had been feeling as if his own mother, Christine's mother, were there, speaking lovingly to her and smoothing her hair affectionately. She had been transported back in time to a place that she would never see again. She had imagined her mother's hands, her face, and her light perfume. The dream evaporated, blown away by the knowledge that these women *would* be disgusted by what they would see if Jhan were to reveal himself to them. They would throw him out into the snow, feeling betrayed and outraged by his lies.

Hana saw the change in his face and his silent withdrawal from her touch. She sighed. "We have a long journey, Jhan. I think that you will learn to trust us by the end of it."

Jhan fought back tears. He was glad when Bheni bent down to help him up. She knew he had to attend to matters that had to be private and she had searched out and found a place for it. They hobbled down the hall to a small closet with a chamber pot, a basin with frozen water in it, and a towel.

Bheni had to help him. Jhan was thoroughly embarrassed by the time that it was done and he was glad when they hobbled back to the other women. They treated him with offended and irritated looks. All but Hana, who simply ignored the proceeding and helped serve Jhan the stew and the cider that the Housekeeper had brought up to them while he was gone.

Jhan could only eat with his good arm, the bowl balanced on his lap and the cider sitting beside him on the floor. The stew was good and hot. Jhan's frozen stomach warmed up and its hungry growls ceased.

"Give me your bad arm," Lhiddi ordered as she sat beside Jhan. Her leathery, dark face and her one, white eye were suddenly very close to Jhan. He could smell a cinnamon scent on her that mingled with imala and wood smoke.

Jhan reluctantly allowed Lhiddi to take his limp arm, wondering what she intended. Jhan could feel her calloused fingers digging and searching along his muscles. He winced and held moans of pain behind his teeth.

"You have to keep the muscles moving or they will stick like a rusted wheel," Lhiddi warned gruffly. "It is a paradox. Your muscles have been badly strained, yet allowing them to rest completely to heal is the worst course to take. A little bit a day and a little more each day. In a five day it should be moving again."

Jhan nodded, wondering how good her medical advice was. There seemed to be vastly different levels of skill among the people in that world. Jhan recalled Thaos telling him that Pekarín ineptitude had nearly killed him.

"You must be in a great deal of pain," Lhiddi commented as she finished. She handed Jhan a jar of salve. "This will numb it. Use it sparingly. More does not work any better than a little and it can damage your skin if you overuse it." She started to turn away and then leaned close. "I cannot imagine how you came to be wounded like that falling off of a small baku."

So, her administrations hadn't been purely humanitarian in nature. She had wanted a closer examination of Jhan. Now, she had even more suspicions. There was nothing for it, but to let her have some of the truth. Jhan didn't want every move that he made to be scrutinized by that eagle eyed woman. He had too much to hide.

Jhan whispered his words as if he were deeply embarrassed, a show for Lhiddi's benefit. "Didn't just fall." His words came slowly and with great difficulty, but Jhan struggled to be clear. "Pulled imala off Reva and baby. Smashed against mountainside." His eyes pleaded. "Don't tell."

Lhiddi's look was pure consternation. It almost made Jhan laugh. "Why not?"

Why not? Jhan searched frantically through his mind for an explanation that would resonate with

someone like Lhiddi. "Did badly," Jhan replied at last. "Hurt myself. Left behind. Embarrassed. So small and weak."

"Ah," Lhiddi thought that she completely understood now. She was a warrior. She could imagine herself in such a situation. She could see herself not wanting anyone to know that, on top of fainting before her enemy and being saved by someone else, she had botched a rescue and jeopardized herself to boot. "The matter is forgotten."

It must have cleared up some grave doubts Lhiddi was harboring. Her demeanor was more relaxed now and the glitter in her good eye had dimmed. "You are brave for one so little. You bear pain like a warrior and you do what is necessary despite the cost. If you could learn to control your fear and train, you could make a fine woman when you are older."

Older. Jhan was glad that Lhiddi turned and moved away before she could see the bitter look that crossed Jhan's face. He supposed that he should have been grateful to get another chance at youth, but Jhan couldn't help feeling that he was being cheated out of long hard years of experience and the respect those years had given him. Now he was a girl, discounted and dismissed easily by those who thought that they were older, but were, in truth, much younger than he really was. Jhan didn't think that he would ever get used to that treatment. From Lhiddi it was almost acceptable, but the others... it burned and made him angry.

With dinner over, everyone stretched out on the packs and covered up with quilts and blankets. The room became a warm nest and they all fell asleep, listening to the storm pounding against the walls and whistling through rafters in the ceiling.

Jhan, still weary from his ordeal, fell easily off the edge of consciousness into sleep. When the mental map unfolded before his dreaming eyes, it felt like a rude flip out of his blankets, forcing Jhan, unwillingly, to look.

Jhan felt as if he were being drawn into the map and then the map became an ancient forest with a rippling stream winding its way through it. Along its bank sat a low slung cottage made out of timber and thatch. Jhan seemed to fly through the propped open door and hover inside of a cozy room filled with books, comfortable furniture, and shelves of odd powders and liquids in corked bottles.

Sitting in a leather bound chair before a fireplace, was the man the Sahvossa had demanded that he, Jhan, journey to find. From this new perspective, Jhan could see that the man's face wasn't lined from age, but from long days in the sun. His ice blue eyes peered through spectacles perched low on his nose and he was reading a book propped on his knees. He looked up, quite suddenly, straight at Jhan.

"You are strong." His voice was light and melodic. "The Sahvossa were right." He bowed slightly in his chair. "I am Gregory."

Jhan was too deep in the dream to be shocked. Instead, he accepted its strangeness, feeling angry and defiant. Even if it were a dream it was something to vent his frustration at. "I'm going away!" Jhan shouted. "I'm not coming to you! I won't let the Sahvossa or anyone else lead my life for me!"

In the dream, Jhan's voice was clear and unencumbered by his swollen cheek. The man watched him, unsurprised, as if he saw floating apparitions every day. Perhaps he did. "You will come," he said, with an absolute certainty. "You are a moth that is being drawn to a light that will not only destroy you, but the entire world. Only I stand between you and that light. Eventually, you will have to pass me to reach it. I will not allow it. For everyone's sake, I will not."

"A map works both ways," Jhan shot back. "I can use it to avoid you."

The man laughed. "It's not that type of map."

His last words were an echo as Jhan felt himself pulled in reverse and sucked back along the map's trail and into his own body once more. Jhan slept deeply then, but, when he awoke the next morning, the dream stayed with him, uncomfortably real and as present in his mind as the map.

The storm raged on. The women were furious at first, venting their anger loudly back and forth, making Jhan wish that they had a larger room. Finally, they began to accept that matters couldn't be changed and they slowly settled down. Gruna took charge and suggested that they pass the time by mending their harnesses and repacking their weaving goods.

Jhan, hampered by his injured arm, could only watch, using the forced inaction to rest and to heal. He was secretly glad that they had to stay at the house, not certain that he would have had the strength to continue on the journey, yet Jhan's relief was tempered by an undercurrent of anxiety. No one knew when the Dark King would be coming into Pekarín. The strange dream of the night before had only crystallized Jhan's need to get away from the Dark King and all who wanted to control him.

After the chore of repacking had been exhausted as a means to pass the time, the women turned to the room. They piled all of their bags into a corner and set the warm braziers along the walls. They removed the table and chairs completely from the room and cushioned the hard wood floors with carpets and blankets until it was as soft as a bed.

Feeling safe, warm, and free from the prying eyes of men, the women dressed in their most comfortable clothes, let their hair down, and walked about in their socks as if their company had turned into a large slumber party of girls. They lounged while they did squares of needlepoint, talking incessantly.

Jhan watched them from his lonely corner for some time and then worked up the courage to try

and join in. Expecting rejection, Jhan was warmed by their quick and easy acceptance. They helped him sit by them and tried to offer him some thread and material. Jhan gently turned them down and they weren't offended. "Not nimble enough," Jhan explained carefully, not wanting a misunderstanding and holding up his one good hand.

Their looks were sympathetic, yet curious, as if they found it hard to believe that Jhan couldn't master a needle. He supposed, in a society that had to make all of its clothing, lacking needlework skills was almost unheard of.

Jhan sat quietly, hands in his lap, wishing for that magical connection that he had experienced on the road that night not so long ago. It remained elusive, however, and he couldn't find it in himself to join in with the women entirely. There was a barrier between them, Jhan realized, with a sinking of his heart. An uncrossable gulf of experiences that put him in the shadows while they played in the sunlight of innocence.

"You remember Jhenya?" That was Reva, baby sleeping in her lap while she stitched yellow flowers on her square of material. "She was always going on about her man, how he was captain of the guard." Her voice changed to imitate her topic of conversation. "Raold has respect. Raold keeps a fine house. Raold commands men. Well, when I told her that I didn't give a stitch for finding a husband any longer, and that I was going away, I thought that she would run screaming in shock."

"Loya as well," Gruna said, nodding and smiling at some memory. "She thought that I had caught the illness that makes the old forget. She wanted me to see a healer at once!"

"As if she were so proper!" Hana laughed. "I heard tell that she had strayed with the metal worker's apprentice."

Gruna looked down her nose at Hana, face twisting sourly. "She's older than I am, Hana! Why would a strapping boy -"

"I think it's true!" Reva butted in. "Give a lad enough gifts and he might be willing to keep his eyes closed."

They all laughed at that. Jhan didn't join in, finding himself frowning, distressed by his own lack of interest. Mageritte's maids had seemed simple and empty headed. Their talk had grated and rubbed raw, cat claws and evil rumors. These women were at least more honest and normal, speaking of day to day life and day to day interests. Jhan should have been able to join in and laugh, Christine had loved gossip.

The shadow wouldn't release him, Jhan understood at last. His mind was preoccupied with fear and memories that pricked, stung, and wailed at his forced stay in that house. His mind begged for action, demanded to know what would happen next. Whether to put yellow flowers or blue ones on a delicate

hemline was as far from consideration as the sun in the sky.

Bheni and Lhiddi were sitting apart. Bheni was mending a harness with a knife and fresh strips of leather. Lhiddi was patiently braiding her long white hair after having combed it out and washed it with a rag and a small bucket of warm water.

“Three days, maybe,” Bheni was saying. “The road will clear, if we are lucky. We should strike out West again and forget about going to Phonam.”

“And if the deep snows have come early?” Lhiddi wondered.

That talk drew Jhan. They were a part of the shadows, too, and only they held the answers that he craved. Jhan left the women prattling on about dress material and scarves, and painfully moved himself over towards Bheni and Lhiddi.

“Can't stay,” Jhan interrupted their conversation softly, but the intense look on his face gave them all of his attention. “Dark King coming. Walk through snow, if have to.”

Lhiddi snorted irritably. She let fall her braids and motioned Jhan even closer. When Jhan complied, she took up his arm and began to massage it and work it. The salve gave it some numbness, but it was still agonizing. Jhan's eyes watered, but he remained silent. Lhiddi approved of his stoicism.

“We have been warned that it snows deep here,” Lhiddi explained. “Consider that, if we cannot get out, then your Dark King cannot get in either. We decided to travel in winter because only those with baku and imala and light packs can leave the road. Bandits and ruffians empty out of their dens as well and find warm towns and cities to hole up in until Spring. We are in very little danger, Jhan.”

“The danger,” Bheni interjected. “Is in attracting attention in towns or cities by those self same men taking shelter there. We do not want any more incidents like Rhenwall. I agree with you, Jhan, that we should chance the snow and move on as quickly as possible.”

“And if the deep snows have come early and we are trapped in no man's land far from help or shelter?” Lhiddi wondered acidly.

“Road take us where we want?” Jhan asked.

“Yes,” Bheni replied. “It curves far East, though, and that will eat up precious time. If we get away from the mountains, the air is more temperate and the snows not so deep. The wilderness will not be as clear to travel or as heavily inhabited, but the advantages of stealth and speed will far outweigh those benefits.”

“But, if the storms continue and catch us unprotected...” Lhiddi interjected again.

“We will take the chance.” Bheni was firm.

“Yes,” Jhan agreed adamantly. “I want to.”

Lhiddi scowled. “I know that I said that you were in charge of this, Bheni, because you needed the

experience, but this is foolishness. We agreed to protect these women, not risk their lives. If we have to wait until Spring thaw, than we may have to.”

There was silence as the two women stared at each other angrily. Lhiddi's strong hands had paused in their kneading of Jhan's arm. Jhan became aware of the other women, giggling over something the baby had done, unaware they were deciding their fate. It wasn't right. “Ask them,” he suggested suddenly.

Both Lhiddi and Bheni blinked at him. “They do not have enough knowledge to make such a decision,” Lhiddi pointed out. “We -”

“Don't know anything about land,” Jhan countered. “They do. Let decide.”

“And if they decide to wait in Phonam?” Bheni asked with a raised eyebrow, knowing Jhan's fears well.

“Go alone. Won't wait,” Jhan replied. “My decision.”

Jhan couldn't tell if they respected him for it or thought that he was foolish. Their faces were blank as they both thought about his words. Finally, Bheni sighed. “All right, we will ask them.”

“But not yet,” Lhiddi added quickly. “Let us see what the weather looks like in a few days. It may take all such choices out of our hands.”

Jhan nodded agreement, wondering what he would do if they weather didn't allow them to even leave that house. He would go slowly mad with anxiety, Jhan thought, fearing the approach of the Dark King. That madness would eventually send him out into the snow, he realized, whether the fiercest storm was raging or not.

Bheni must have seen something of it in Jhan's face. Her hand gripped his briefly and her look was stern. “Patience, Jhan. Remember what we have said. If we cannot leave this place then an army cannot reach us either.”

She was thinking of a normal army, Jhan knew, not an army led by a man with the power to change nature and its laws. Could snow stop such a man? Could anything? Jhan thought of Rehn, Kile, King Tekhal, and even the vain and silly Margeritte. Tears gathered behind his eyes and he pulled away from Lhiddi. The images that had formed in his mind of what might happen to them had turned him white and made him shake with horror.

Bheni and Lhiddi looked after Jhan as he hobbled to a corner of the room and sat, huddled in a blanket away from everyone. What did they think? It was probably wrong. They couldn't begin to guess at what bothered him. They would never understand his fears. It wasn't the dead faces of the bandits that Jhan had killed that haunted him as much as the faces of the living that he had left behind. Jhan's worst guilt and fear were reserved for them.

When yet another morning dawned murky and filled with snow, everyone became irritable and depressed. The room was simply too small to accommodate so many for so long. Some of the women wanted to rebel and go downstairs. Bheni fought them, liking her charges as safely penned as the baku and imala in the stables.

“Those men are down there,” Bheni pointed out, snapping and standing in the doorway with arms crossed over her chest like a barrier. “There is no telling what they might say or do. We have already heard crudeness from one of them.”

Hana chuckled and gently used her weight to push Bheni aside. “We are grown women, Bheni. Two of us are too old, I'm certain, for their tastes, and Reva carries a baby. We are not naive about men.”

“I'm only guessing,” Gruna said with a twist to her smile and a humorous glint in her eye. “but I think only Jhan and yourself are the only two those men might want to approach. I suggest that both of you stay here and remain *'untouched'*. Lhiddi will come along and keep a hand to her sword in case those men turn out to be desperate.”

It was hard to tell if Bheni was blushing under her dark skin, but she was certainly angry. “I may be young, and *'untouched'*, as you put it, but I have campaigned with enough men to know them well. You are all being foolish!”

“Now, Granddaughter,” Lhiddi sighed. She had her cane and she rose stiffly, walking to the door, the weather getting into her joints. “I am certain that we can handle any trouble. I did not see anything to convince me that those few travelers are a serious threat to us. I do not like being familiar with strangers any more than you do, but, I think that we have to in this case. We cannot spend many more days locked in here.”

The women agreed excitedly, scrambling to put on shoes, lace up their dresses, and put themselves in order. They were acting as if they had been promised a party instead of a simple walk downstairs.

“Jhan?” Reva turned to Jhan in concern. “Forget what Gruna said. Don't stay here and be shy. Come down with us. We will help you down the stairs.”

Jhan was surprised. Reva was acting as she hadn't even noticed that he had spent the last two days avoiding their conversations and activity. Perhaps they had simply come to accept that he was different, considering his aloofness only acute shyness?

Jhan was as eager to see something beside their room as they were, even willing to face the strange men below to accomplish it. “Okay,” he replied simply and discovered a smile on his lips in response to

the one Reva beamed at him in encouragement.

Jhan's arm was beginning to move again, but his side was still stiff enough to hamper his movements. Gruna and Hana stepped to either side of him and helped him walk. Suddenly, Jhan felt surrounded by their friendship and he was thankful for more than their help.

“Are you?” Reva asked impishly.

Jhan was wide eyed, uncomprehending.”What?”

“Untouched?”

Jhan understood. Such a simple question, asked to innocently tease him, yet the weight of memories and the pain that came crashing down on Jhan was all out of proportion. It was a subject his mind had closed off, hiding the very question, who's answer could only be obtained by reliving his days with the Dark King.

It was like being thrust into a red hot fire, but it was dark, so dark. Eyes glowed there, saw Jhan, laughed at him, and raked him with pain. Memories danced and drew nearer with every heartbeat. He was going to remember, Jhan knew, if he didn't do something.

Jhan felt a thud against his body and a rush of cold air. The blow against his back expelled all of his breath and he gasped harshly, wildly trying to reclaim it. He blinked rapidly, disoriented to discover that he was lying on his back in a snowbank, staring up at a broken shutter and an open window. The storm had lessened, but snow was still falling steadily. The flakes landed on Jhan's face, mingling with tears and melting against his hot skin.

The women came rushing out of the house with the men and the Housekeeper trailing behind. Bheni was first to fall to her knees in the snow beside Jhan, waving the other women back. “What were you trying to do?” Bheni shouted in angry confusion. “Are you injured?”

The memories were gone, locked up again somewhere in the back of Jhan's mind. He shook his head numbly, still trying to simply breathe. Only then would Bheni help him sit up. He was remarkably unhurt. “What happened?” Jhan managed to say at last in dazed amazement.

“You don't know?” Reva exclaimed in bewilderment, baby balanced on one hip.

Jhan shook his head again as Bheni helped him to stand, getting him out of the snow before he became wet and freezing. Lhiddi stepped forward, eyes narrowed. “Do you remember what Reva asked you?”

Jhan shook his head once more, confused. He watched the women look at each other and some secret was mutually agreed on with a few nods. Jhan's skin crawled to see the horror and sympathy in every face. He should know what it meant. He should- Looking up at the broken shutter and the open window, Jhan did know suddenly. He had tried to kill himself!

“How?” Jhan choked out, the hairs standing up on the back of his neck and his face echoing back the horror in theirs.

“In a warmer place,” Bheni replied firmly and helped him hobble back into the house. The roaring fire took the chill off immediately and she lowered him into a chair near it. She didn't keep Jhan waiting long for an explanation or try to spare him shock. “You staggered down the hall and threw yourself out of the first window that you reached.”

“Why?” Jhan cursed his swollen mouth. The rush of questions backed up on his tongue like a blocked, rushing river.

“Only you know that,” Bheni replied evasively. “Do not think about it now. I will take you back to our room.”

“That must have been some fight!” One of the men, the crude one, was laughing around a pipe he was smoking. “Next time, call me up so that I may watch!”

Jhan curled up in his chair, miserable and nerves frayed. “No,” he replied, pushing away Bheni's helping hands. “Need calm.”

“This is not a good place to calm down,” Lhiddi protested gruffly, glaring at the crude man.

The Housekeeper was wringing his hands in his apron, eyes wide and nervous. “I'll fetch a drink that will soothe the young miss.”

The young man was close by, leaning against a stone wall. His face was compassionate and curious. “Stay,” he said. “I'll take care of that one if he makes much more trouble.”

“And who else?” the man shot back, biting down on the stem of his pipe and putting burly hands on his hips.

“I'm growing tired of only seeing their ugly faces,” the young man continued, undaunted. “Please stay, ladies.”

“Yes, stay,” said the farmer. “You will brighten the room, if you would only stop scowling at us!”

Bheni relented, sitting down in a chair opposite Jhan's, hand on her sword hilt.

The Housekeeper ran for his potion and returned shortly with a steaming mug. Jhan took it in a shaking hand and slowly put it to his lips, drinking cautiously. Peppermint, he thought as it soothed his throat, but there was a drug there too. Jhan waited until it had worked its way through his body, taking the edge off of his panic.

Jhan had tried to kill himself several times before, the compulsion set into motion each time by unbearable stress. Jhan wondered if the stress of knowing that the Dark King was approaching was the cause. If so, he had to get that fear under control. He had to believe that the snow was as much a hindrance to him as it was to them. He must not lose control again.

Jhan cautiously looked up at Bheni, a new fear taking hold even through the drug. “Must think crazy. Leave me behind?”

Bheni had been watching the men. Her reaction was surprising and swift. “No! Why would I do that? I will take you along, and get you away from this place, even if I have to carry you on my back all the way to Alatha!”

Jhan was speechless. He looked at the other women. They were huddled together across the room, speaking in low tones and casting glances at him. “Them?”

“I am certain that they feel the same way,” Bheni assured him.

Jhan felt that there was a great deal that wasn't being said about his incident. He almost tried to recall it, wondering what had tipped the balance between fear and madness, but shied away at the last second. If he remembered, Jhan felt, there might be a replay of events, this time with disastrous results.

“Thanks,” Jhan managed to say at last, reduced to a monosyllable that did nothing to encompass the gratitude that he actually felt.

“The Dark King will not put his hands on you or any of us,” Bheni swore through gritted teeth, as if Jhan had said volumes. Her hand gripped the hilt of her sword hard. “There will not be a vote. We will chance the weather and forget the road.”

An army would take the road, Bheni and Lhiddi had both said. If they stayed off of it there wouldn't be a chance of meeting the Dark King. Jhan felt himself relax and he was glad. Perhaps, as they traveled further, the fear would diminish as well and the chance of more madness with it.

“I am Jaross Ke Nava of Petrath,” the young man unexpectedly announced, cutting into their conversation without an ounce of tact or empathy. He gave a curt bow and motioned to the other men, deciding to become their go between. “Loud mouth is Rory Anegre of Nangia. His companion is his brother, Kory. The older gentleman -”

“No gentleman,” the man cut in. “I'm a farmer! Bopin Jiken of Tath Valley. I came to get a wagon wheel fixed and ended up trapped here by the storm.”

“I am Bheni of Alatha,” Bheni looked uncomfortable and annoyed to be interrupted. She motioned absently to the other women, wishing to put a quick end to the conversation. “Reva, baby Keva, Hana, and Gruna of Soeteuse. My grandmother Lhiddi, also of Alatha.”

Jaross hooked a stool with one foot and sat nearest to Bheni and Jhan. “What brings you so far from home and in such company?”

“It does not concern you,” Bheni replied shortly, not liking his proximity.

Stubbornly blind to the fact that his conversation and his presence were unwanted, Jaross continued. “Should I start first? I was adventuring up in these parts when I heard that my land had been

attacked by the forces of someone everyone is calling the Dark King. I'm returning home as fast as I can to fight beside my family and my people.”

“You are a nobleman?” Bheni wondered, strangely reassured, but not ready to let her guard down.

“Cousin to a king, actually, but, yes, I suppose that you could still count that as nobility.” The man laughed at his own wit, but Bheni didn't join in and Jhan was too busy drowning in his own troubles, Jaross' words an unwelcome buzz of noise he wished would stop.

“I have heard that the Dark King has moved on and is now coming to fight Pekarín,” Bheni was unintentionally cruel. “I do not think that you will have a battle to join when you return home.”

The man was silent for a moment, swallowing as if in pain, but then his chin lifted. “That may be so,” he responded at last. “but I will see it with my own eyes before I believe it.”

The young man wanted to leave that subject and so did Jhan, but when he became that next topic of conversation, Jhan wished that he could shout and express his anger at the young man's maddening persistence to annoy them.

“You look as if an imala kicked you in the face, dear lady!” Abrupt and awkward, Jaross appeared to regret his words in the next moment, but his next weren't any better. “Tangling with imala and jumping out of windows!” Jaross laughed. “You're not a bower maid, for certain!”

The man was very handsome and his smile was easily come by, but his humor was the last straw for Jhan. Did Jaross expect him to laugh about his attempt to kill himself? No, the man was nervous, Jhan conceded, though not any less angry about it. Jaross was making foolish conversation to hide the fact.

“That bruise hardly detracts from your beauty,” Jaross continued, undaunted by the lack of response. “Your eyes are like blue skies, no, those dark blue flowers that grow on the hills in Spring.”

“Enough!” Bheni cut in sharply as she stood up to her full height, seeing Jhan's weariness and his growing anger. “Jhan is in need of rest, not idle chatter! If you wish to engage in flattery, go to the other women. They will appreciate it more.”

Jaross flushed, caught off guard by Bheni's harsh response. “I didn't mean to offend -”

“You have!” Bheni shouted back. “Are you so thick in the head that you can't see that Jhan is troubled?”

Everyone was looking now. Embarrassed, Jaross stood as well, made a short bow, and nervously backed away from Bheni's large and dangerous presence. Bheni picked Jhan up out of his chair without another word. Carrying him up the stairs, Jhan could see the anger and disgust on her face.

“Doesn't know,” Jhan said, misunderstanding, as they entered their room.

Bheni placed him on his blankets and covered him up with a quilt in short, angry movements. She

paused, considering Jhan's words, and then bent to kneel on the floor beside him, surprised at herself. "I was not even thinking about that! I had forgotten that you are a man! I was angry that he bothered you. How can anyone watch someone jump out of a window and then attempt to woo that person in the next moment?"

Is that what Jaross had been trying to do? "Young," Jhan replied, settling under the quilt. He was more forgiving than Bheni. "Desperate, maybe."

Bheni stared and didn't laugh. "Does he frighten you?"

That question was pregnant with many hidden questions. Jhan could feel the weight of them. "No, but I suppose that he wasn't close enough. I'm not very good with strange men. Sometimes, I'm not even good with men that I know. I've been through too much."

Bheni blinked. "The drug must be taking down the swelling in your mouth. That is more than you have said in days."

Jhan touched his mouth and felt the stitches with his tongue. Bheni was right. It wasn't the swollen lump it had been before he'd drank the drug. "At last," Jhan sighed. "I could have said a thing or two back there in my own defense."

"I will make certain that you will not get the chance," Bheni growled back and stood up. "Something upset you so much that you attempted to kill yourself." Bheni paused as if picking words carefully. "If it is fear of the Dark King or fear of all men that might have caused it -"

"Were we talking about the Dark King when I jumped out of the window?" Jhan snatched at that gingerly, as if he were trying to touch something hot and didn't want to burn his fingers.. "Did you tell me something that I might have been frightened about?"

Bheni half turned away, fearing she'd given away too much. "Enough. Let the drug take full affect and sleep, Jhan. I will sit by the door and make certain that no one, not even handsome young men, come in to bother you."

It was an attempt to turn the subject. Jhan let it turn and drop completely. He watched Bheni go to the door and, true to her word, sit down beside it. She drew her sword and slowly began cleaning it with an oiled cloth.

Bheni looked utterly barbaric, but it was comforting having her there. Jhan had feared returning to the room. In his mind, he had imagined that whatever had frightened him might still be there; a beast crouching in a corner ready to strike.

The braziers lit every corner. There weren't even any shadows. The familiar tumble of baggage and the women's paraphernalia lay all about like a burst closet. The gentle smell of baby and the women's perfume danced through the smell of burning charcoal in the braziers. Nothing to fear, Jhan thought,

fuzzily, and let the drug pull him down into sleep.

“You are losing control.”

“Damn you!” Jhan found himself hovering above a garden, not certain whether he was shouting at himself for having this dream or at Gregory. The man was wearing a heavy robe as he knelt and pulled frost burned plants out of their beds. It wasn't snowing wherever he was, but it looked cold.

“You don't see,” Gregory sighed as he straightened and looked up at Jhan, plants bunched in one hand.

“See what?” Jhan exploded furiously.

“That he is reaching out for you. Whenever you become stressed, your guard drops. He can touch you then.”

“How do you know what happened?” Jhan demanded and then recalled that it was only a dream. Though it seemed very real, he was simply talking to himself!

“The Sahvossa connected me with your mind. I can hear you when you sleep.” Gregory rose and threw the dead plants into a basket already filled with them. “But, you come here on your own. I'm not forcing you to.”

Jhan wanted to cover his eyes with his hands, but his hands weren't solid enough to do that. He wanted to wake up. Why did he dream this dream? Wasn't it bad enough that he was bombarded with fear and uncertainty waking? Why did he have to be attacked as well when rest and solace should have been his in sleep?

“You don't believe me.” That was stated fact, not a question. Gregory sighed again. The small, white braids on the top of his head jiggled almost comically as he shook his head, but Jhan found nothing funny in any of this. “Perhaps you will believe me if I tell you something that you don't know?”

“What?” Jhan's question was half-hearted, automatic. He felt himself sinking into the depths of depression, wondering at his sanity. First, the jump out of a window and now, this nightmare. Jhan wanted to ignore everything and escape this dream.

“I know why you attempted to kill yourself.”

Jhan felt the shock of it jolt his mind and he felt himself clench fearfully, even though his body wasn't really hovering there above the ground. “I don't want to know!” he protested to the dream. “I might try to kill myself again!”

“I can prevent that,” Gregory stepped closer. His light, blue eyes were compassionate. “I will stop you from trying to remember. Memory is your enemy.”

“It's only a dream,” Jhan whispered, wanting to convince himself completely of that.

“No, it is not,” Gregory corrected firmly. He didn't wait for permission. He simply jumped into a recitation of past events, ignoring Jhan's cries to stop. “When you were leaving your quarters with those other women, one turned to you and asked if you were '*untouched*'. I suppose she meant untouched by a man. It made you look into your memory, automatically, as anyone would have. Unfortunately, your memories are enough to drive anyone mad.”

Such an innocent question. Even now, Jhan's mind tried to find the answer, despite his struggle not to. Thankfully, it found only a blank space where memory should have been. Jhan refused to test it further, fearing the barrier between him and memory was a thin veil keeping the darkness confused and at bay, but not truly mastered.

“I know that I heard the question,” Jhan said slowly, attempting to reason with himself and find a handhold on sanity. “You aren't proving anything to me by telling me what it was. As for the memories, I probably blocked them off myself after the pain they caused me. I've done it before.”

Gregory scowled. “I see you have a reasoning mind. We might go round and round with you finding explanations for everything that I say. I will have to look hard. A moment, please.” His eyes became intense and then he smiled. “Jaross Ke Nava is your cousin, “ he announced with satisfaction “The name of the Dark King is Dagara Ku Ni. The first will eliminate difficulties for you. The latter will not, but it is always good to know the name of your enemy.”

“My cousin? Dagara Ku Ni?” Jhan was doubtful, drawn into the dream despite his furious efforts not to. “Jaross does look a little like Thaos, but it sounds too much like something that I might have made up subconsciously.”

“And the latter?”

Jhan felt that dread start to overtake him, but memory remained elusive. It was hard to believe that Dagara Ku Ni was the name of that horrific man when it didn't carry any memories or weight of emotions. “I don't know.”

“You will,” Gregory assured him. He picked up the basket of dead plants. “Go to sleep now, Christine, or Jhan if you prefer, and let me finish with my garden.”

His words propelled Jhan away and he seemed to fall onto a cushion of down as he slipped into dreamless sleep, realizing at the very end, that his dream body had not been of a man, but of his old self; Christine. It comforted Jhan. Madness hadn't claimed him so thoroughly that he had forgotten his true self.

Jhan remembered everything when he awoke the next morning. Disoriented, it was Gruna who told

him that he had slept all day and through the night. "I wish that I could have slept through the boredom as well," Gruna grumbled enviously.

Keva was crying fussily as Reva was attempting to clean him with a wet cloth. She looked up at Jhan and Jhan saw guilt there. She was blaming herself for making Jhan attempt to kill himself.

"I remember, now, what you asked me. You couldn't have known," Jhan told her, attempting to assuage her guilt even though a small, angry part of himself, deep inside, did blame the woman.

"Does it hurt you now?" Reva was rising a little, as if she expected Jhan to bolt for the door and the window once again. She shifted the baby uncertainly in her hands, probably wondering how she could manage to stop Jhan with the baby to worry about.

Everyone else in the room was beginning to rise as well, faces concerned. "I remembered something terrible when you said those words to me," Jhan explained. "It's gone now and I don't remember it. I think that I locked it up again where I can't get to it." He looked around the room. "Calm down. I'm all right."

Lhiddi hobbled forward on her cane. She crouched by Jhan and looked at his face. "The swelling is all gone," she observed. "I will have to get the recipe of that drug from the Housekeeper. I will need it for my old joints before we go."

"Are we going?" Jhan asked anxiously, hardly daring to hope. "Has the snow stopped?"

"It has stopped," Lhiddi confirmed. "but we still have to wait for some of the snow to melt. Even a tall imala could not get through those drifts now."

"How long?"

"Cannot say," Lhiddi shrugged and stood up again, joints popping. "The sun works in its own way."

The women were gathering together as if they were readying to go somewhere. "The Housekeeper has made a special breakfast," Hana explained to Jhan excitedly. "We have been called down to eat. The man is a wonder with a hearth fire and I don't intend to miss it."

"Sounds like love," Gruna growled sarcastically, but she was the first to the door.

"Coming, Jhan?" Reva asked timidly, wanting to make amends. "We will help you."

Jhan braced himself against the wall and stood up. His dress was wrinkled and he needed to be cleaned up. "I think that I will wash and change before I come down. I'll call you from the top of the stairs if I need help."

"Don't miss out, shy one," Hana warned with a warm smile. "He really is an excellent cook!"

They filed out, chattering away and the baby still crying. Lhiddi followed in the dignified solitude of the very old and Bheni was nowhere to be found.

Jhan walked cautiously to the door, surprisingly, not feeling any pain as he reached it and shot the bolt to lock it.

Jhan took a deep breath, the first one in days. Nothing. He straightened slowly, wincing and expecting the pain to come leaping out of hiding to rake his senses. Still nothing. Jhan sighed in relief.

Taking off his dress, Jhan examined the ugly bruise on his side, now turning shocking shades of purple and green. The wound there had scabbed. Jhan washed it with the cloth and bowl of water Reva had been using for the baby. When it was clean, he pulled out the stitches Bheni had put there. The wound remained closed, an ugly red line. Jhan did the same to the stitches in his mouth, hissing at the small tweaks of pain. That too had healed well.

Jhan washed himself completely, dried with a blanket, and then slipped on a dusky gray dress with a border of white flowers at the hem and along the neck. Putting on thick socks and the only shoes that he had, his traveling boots, he felt much better.

Nature called. Jhan walked confidently to the door and unbolted it. He felt renewed and charged with energy. After so long being sick, deprived of speech, and an invalid, it was good to walk by himself and do things for himself.

Jhan used the chamber pot in the private closet. Someone had placed a little lit lantern there and a small mirror. The Housekeeper or Bheni? It was a caring touch and Jhan was grateful, until he looked at himself in the mirror.

In a world that prized mirrors like gold, few had them. Jhan had been getting used to never seeing his own face. Now, he picked up the mirror and was shocked at what he beheld.

Thin, very thin. Jhan touched his face. It was all sharp points. His eyes were huge, blue wells in a pure white oval. His skin was as pale as a ghost, except for the purpling bruise on one side along his cheek and eye. Stress marked Jhan under his eyes and his mouth was tight and hard.

Jhan put the mirror back, swallowing grief. He remembered how beautiful that face had used to be. Now, it was almost frightening the way it reflected outwardly the horror that he held within him. No wonder the other women looked at him in sympathy and spoke to him as if their words were treading eggshells. Jhan looked like a lunatic ready to throw aside his last vestiges of sanity at the least excuse.

Jhan left the room, hands twisting in the material of his dress in anguish, and fled down the long hall as if the mirror and its cruel reflection were trying to pursue him. In his haste, Jhan almost ran head long into Jaross. The man backed up, apologizing and giving Jhan a quick bow. "Forgive me, Lady Jhan."

"Why call me a lady?" Jhan wondered acidly, backing up as well so that there was even more room between them.

"I'm mistaken?" Jaross attempted a smile, but it faltered in the face of Jhan's obvious inner distraction. "You don't look old enough to be a dame or a ma'am. You hold yourself too well to simply be a miss."

"I don't have time for your flattery." Jhan wanted to escape him, but Jaross was between him and the sleeping room that he had been fleeing to.

Jaross was dressed very handsomely in deep blue. It reflected well against his dark coloring. He tried to smile once more and held an arm out to Jhan. "Let me escort you downstairs. You seem better than the other day, but you must still need some help."

Jhan flinched, drawing back as if Jaross' hand were a poisonous snake. "Don't touch me!"

Jaross was taken aback now, not understanding why Jhan was so upset. "I assure you that my intentions are honorable. I mean no disrespect."

"You are a lord's son!" Jhan spat back, willing to say anything to get the man to go away. "I know what your kind is like and how honorable your intentions can be when *low born* people are concerned. I am not easy and I have absolutely no intention of getting into bed with you, now or ever, so leave me alone!"

That was too blunt for Jaross. He turned red all the way to the tips of his ears and his mouth fell open like a fish gasping for air. "I-I assure you!" his voice almost squeaked with outrage.

"Don't assure me of anything, just leave me alone!"

Jaross reached out a hand again, maybe to calm Jhan down and explain, but Jhan was swift in his response. Without thinking, he grabbed Jaross by his thumb and twisted. Jaross cried out and fell to his knees, his face reflecting his pain. Jhan released him, turned, and left him there, having no choice but to go to the head of the stairs to call out to the women below for help.

"You never cease to amaze me."

Jhan jumped, but it was Bheni by his side, having come down the hall from the opposite side of the stairs. The woman was staring at Jaross, who was slowly standing and shaking his injured thumb ruefully. When he saw Bheni staring, he shook his head to let her know that he didn't want more trouble, and went in the other direction.

"General Vek of Pekarín taught me that," Jhan stammered, feeling his heart hammering and trying to calm down. "I never thought that I would have the presence of mind to use it."

"Or run into a fool who would give you the time and the opportunity to use it," Bheni finished with a grim chuckle.

Jhan gripped the wooden rail to steady himself, taking a deep breath. "I don't find it funny. He wouldn't leave me alone."

Bheni sighed. "You are beautiful, Jhan. As long as they do not know what you truly are, they will hover hopefully about you."

"Not so beautiful anymore."

Bheni started, taken aback by Jhan's intense bitterness. "I gave you a mirror to straighten your hair and clean your face. I did not realize that you would see such a distorted image of yourself."

"Is it distorted?"

Bheni paused to choose her words and then replied carefully. "You are thin and worn and your face is all bruised, that is true enough, but like a dark storm promising wildness and lightning, you are still beautiful."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" Jhan was sarcastic.

Bheni, patience always thin, had run out of it now. "I did not realize that you were so vain and that your face mattered so much."

Jhan wanted to cry. He bit down on his lip so hard that red blood sprang up. The sharp pain kept him from shouting. When Bheni grabbed his chin hard and turned his face to look at her, Jhan saw that she was furious.

"Stop it!" Bheni shouted, and then suddenly guessed. "It is not your face at all, is it?"

"No," Jhan whispered back, found out, and pulled his chin out of her grip. "It's everything! Every pain and every horror! When it was hidden inside, I could pretend to people that it was all right. People would treat me normally. Now that it's on my face, in my eyes, I see how they look at me! I hear the change in their voices! I don't want that. It makes it so much worse for me!"

"I do not have a solution for that," Bheni replied, pitying. "This is something that you will have to accept and deal with."

"I know," Jhan looked down, closed his eyes briefly, and then shrugged. "This is beginning to be too much for me. Maybe I should have stayed in Pekarín."

"I do not think that, and I do not know why you should, either."

Jhan persisted, speaking his greatest fear with a casualness that mocked her assurances, knowing what she really felt. "Do you think I'll arrive at our destination with my sanity intact?"

"Jhan," Bheni hooked an arm in his, pulling him close and speaking as if she were giving advice to an uncertain soldier before a battle. "Stop being alone. Join with us and do not shy away from us. If you face your fears head on, you will see that they are not so terrible."

She said that because she didn't know, Jhan thought, but he was done speaking, emotionally exhausted. He allowed her to take him down the stairs and he sat with the other women and ate a very good breakfast of fried vegetables, noodles, eggs, and a sausage type meat. They drank cider to wash it

down and Jhan managed to sit and hold a conversation with the women, mental demons silent for now, even when Jaross finally appeared to eat as well.

“He is so handsome!” Reva said aside to Jhan and her smile was full of stirring passion. “He looks gentle and kind, doesn't he? Jaross... what a fine name, don't you think? Too bad he is a lord's son.”

Jhan endured her talk, keeping his face turned away from where Jaross was sitting. He supposed that he shouldn't be so angry with the man. He hadn't really done anything wrong. Jhan had simply reacted to him as he would any stranger. A simple *hello* would have panicked him. Still, he didn't want to give the man any encouragement either. Jhan decided it was better to ignore him altogether and not to answer any of Reva's questions. She didn't seem to notice.

The women's conversation turned to needlepoint. It was simple and dull, but, Jhan realized, it was also soothing. He shouldn't have dismissed it so early on, he realized, turning to the more frightening and worrisome conversations of Bheni and Lhiddi. Jhan knew that he needed to not worry. He needed to not be afraid of the future. He needed to talk and think only about needlepoint and concentrate on following the tedious advice of the women on how to improve his skill.

“Use your fingertips, not your whole fingers,” Hana suggested. “Use your needle to wrap and tie knots.”

“A good piece of cloth is your best friend,” Gruna was saying on top of Hana's speech. “Shoddy cloth, shoddy work, I always say.”

“Do you think he's married?” Reva was still talking about Jaross, bouncing Keva on her knee. “Do you think that he likes children? He spoke to Keva the other day and smiled at him.”

Jhan felt his face relax and the tightness about his eyes went away. Yes, this was right. He needed to forget his troubles whenever he could, not sit alone and brood on them endlessly. Bheni had been right and Jhan managed a brief smile to acknowledge that and to impart an apology when she glanced his way. Bheni nodded in return and then began speaking to Lhiddi, finger tracing a path on the tabletop. Jhan turned from that. No, he thought, worry about the road ahead when it was time.

CHAPTER SIX

(Revelations)

The sun was very bright when they finally forced the imala and the baku out of their warm stalls and out into the wet morass of the courtyard. They packed them with eager speed and were ready to go in under an hour. Bheni inspected everything, mouth working silently as she mentally tallied everything to make certain that nothing had been left undone.

The Housekeeper watched them from the doorway, a weather-wise eye cocked at the sky. "Weather should hold for a time."

"I hope that you are right," Lhiddi responded as she mounted her imala. Her bones were losing their stiffness under the heat of the sun and she even managed a grim smile. "We need fair weather for at least three weeks. After that, we will be in more hospitable climes."

Jhan mounted his baku. After two more days of rest, he felt nearly as good as new. He too was glad of the sun and a blue sky overhead. The forced confinement and inactivity had given him too much time to think. Jhan wanted action now to drive away the deep depression such reflection caused.

The other women seemed just as eager to get going. They had packed their weaving with loving hands, faces beaming excitedly as they too mounted their baku. They all waited impatiently for Bheni to order them to move.

Bheni took her time haggling over their bill with the Housekeeper. She argued point by point and he, with good nature, stood his ground and argued back. Finally, they settled on a price and Bheni paid it.

Jaross came out of the stable leading a pack imala and a riding imala, loaded with his gear. Even dressed in utilitarian leathers and thick furs, he still managed to look handsome and like a lord's son. His resemblance to King Torian and Prince Thaos was even more remarkable in the light of the sun. It brought to Jhan's mind a dream. A dream that had said that this man was his cousin.

Jaross was looking at Jhan as well and his words troubled Jhan. "You look familiar." His gloved hand motioned to Jhan's face. "I've only seen you by the light of lanterns and that bruise distorted your face. Now that I can see you clearly, you remind me of my own family. Are you in any way related to the Kevelt, the Nava, or the Indri?"

"No," Jhan replied quickly, feeling the creeping fear of discovery. "I don't have any family."

The next question would have been indelicate. Jaross chose not to ask whether Jhan might have been illegitimate. "Forgive the question, Lady Jhan."

He was very close to Jhan's Baku. Jhan tightened his hands on the reins, wondering if his urge to murder Kevelts included cousin Navas. When he felt nothing, he let out a little sigh. Jaross misinterpreted that and Jhan could see something confirmed in his face. He was thinking that Jhan was an illegitimate daughter of one of his kin. It was clear that he was thinking it his business to find out how close of a kin.

“Bheni!” Jhan called anxiously. “Can we go now?”

“I wish to check the room again to be certain nothing was left,” Bheni called back and began to enter the house once more. She was stopped by the combined shouted protests of the women.

“Nothing has been left, granddaughter,” Lhiddi growled impatiently. “Stop being so thorough and get on your imala.”

Annoyed, Bheni threw up her hands and swung easily into the saddle of her imala. Taking up the reins she almost ordered them to follow her out of the courtyard. Jaross stopped her.

“A moment, good woman.”

“Yes?” Bheni snapped back, not liking the title.

“May I travel with you?” Jaross asked.

Jhan saw Reva stiffen in her saddle and her eyes looked at Bheni as if she could mentally force the woman to assent. Bheni wasn't to be forced, mentally or otherwise.

“Follow the road, Nava. These women are under my protection.”

“One more sword will keep them that much safer,” Jaross argued.

“I do not know you. Your sword might endanger them,” Bheni parried back.

“The Housekeeper knows me and my family well. We have relatives in Nangia. No one has ever said ill of Nava or Indri.” Jaross purposely left off Kevelt and that made Jhan wonder.

“In the islands we hear little of anything,” Bheni pointed out, but she was clearly annoyed now and not certain what to do. She looked to Lhiddi for advice. “If I say no, he will follow us, I think.”

Lhiddi was of the same mind and not liking it one bit. “I think that you are right. Hear me, Jaross Ke Nava! We are very skilled warriors. If you place a disrespectful finger, cast a lewd eye, or in anyway endanger our charges, we will show you the island way of punishment. It is not pleasant, I assure you.”

Jhan could see Jaross swallow visibly. “I am the fourth son of Lord Khun Ji Nava of Petrath. He is the cousin of King Torian El Kevelt of Karana and cousin of King Fergara An Indri of Petrath. If you have a complaint about me, you may look to them for justice. They have strict laws about accosting women and I'm certain my punishment will be equal to any an Islander can met out.”

“Do not be too certain of that,” Lhiddi returned caustically, and then relented. “Come, boy, the sun

is leaving us behind.”

Jaross smiled and moved his imala to join the end of the line. That, unfortunately, placed him behind Jhan. When Bheni leaned down from her imala to hook a lead between Jaross's imala and Jhan's baku, they both protested at the same time.

“I don't like my imala tied. It is very temperamental and I need a free rein with it.”

“Could I be moved closer to the front?”

Their words overlapped one another. They fell silent, staring uncomfortably at one another.

“Already trouble begins,” Bheni growled, but she was sensitive to Jhan's moods. She switched leads so that Jhan's baggage baku was last in line between him and Jaross. “There. Do not speak to Jhan,” she warned Jaross. “She does not like you. If there is friction, I will leave you behind, even if I must break your imala's legs to leave you on foot.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Jaross replied respectfully.

Bheni nodded curtly and took her place at the front of the column. “Now, we go!”

The baku and imala started forward and they left the house and its warmth and shelter behind. Now they would probably camp out of doors for weeks before they even saw inhabited country again. Still, the mood was upbeat, and everyone was glad to be finally going.

They didn't stay on the road for long. Bheni lead them off to the West and they began slogging through mud and melting snow while weaving through a sparse evergreen forest. Everyone soon had mud splattered up to their knees. The women expressed chagrin, unable to pull their dresses up out of harms way because of Jaross' presence.

Jhan kept his back to Jaross for a good hour. He enjoyed the sunshine, despite the brisk chill of the morning air, but, slowly, the question of why Jaross had left the Kevelt out of his list of good references began to gnaw at him. It was something he needed to know, Jhan convinced himself at last. He should know the people that he was trying to avoid.

“What is wrong with the Kevelt?”

“Umm? Did you say something, Lady Jhan?”

Jhan chewed on his lip for a moment and then turned in his saddle to look at Jaross' polite, questioning face. Jhan raised his voice to carry across the pack baku. “What is wrong with the Kevelt?” he repeated. “I noticed that you didn't mention them.”

“You *are* Kevelt, aren't you? They have blue eyes.” Jaross smiled, proud of his slyness. “I thought that if I slandered them by omission that you would rise to their defense.”

“I'm not!” Jhan protested and turned back around, angry at himself for allowing Jaross to manipulate him against his better judgment.

“You are related to me,” Jaross insisted. “All of our family has a similar look.” When Jhan said nothing more, he kept speaking anyway. “I left the Kevelts out of my good regard for another purpose as well. Kevelts are hotheaded and not above doing deals like stingy merchants. They've cheated Petrath in trade treaties for generations. It doesn't even matter that the King of Petrath is Kevelt's own cousin!”

Jaross paused, waiting, but Jhan didn't rise to his bait. “It's personal too, my bias. I had a brawl with a Prince of Kevelt a few years ago. An indelicate matter I won't speak out loud, but it did pertain to a lady. I knocked one of his teeth out, but, you know, he didn't even know my name or that I was his cousin. We are such a large family that I shouldn't have been surprised.”

Jhan felt with a tongue along his teeth. Yes, there was a space. It was small, as if the other teeth had moved in to fill the space. “Which Kevelt?”

“Prince Jhanian Nor Kevelt,” Jaross replied, the name dripping with his anger and long ago humiliation. “I gave him one good punch, but he was the better warrior and larger than I. He beat me badly and laughed as he walked away.”

Jhan was compelled, by morbid fascination, to turn and face Jaross. Jaross was not a small man. He was tall and broad in the shoulder. It frightened Jhan to realize how much Power the Dark King had to have changed him so much! It was no wonder Jaross hadn't recognized him as Jhanian Kevelt!

Jaross was shrugging. “He is hotheaded, like all Kevelt, but I've heard tales that he likes some cruel sports and he isn't above an underhanded deal when it suites him. Poor Thaos! The firstborn son of Kevelt isn't a match for Jhanian! I think Jhanian will steal the throne out from under him in the end!”

Good, thought Jhan, an opening at last to cast aside suspicion. “Jhanian is dead.”

Jaross started, hands gripping his saddle for balance. “What?”

Jhan nodded, watching Jaross' reaction with satisfaction. “King Torian came to Pekarín before I left. He brought news that his son had been captured and killed by the Dark King and that his land had been taken over.”

Jaross had gone very pale and thoughtful. Jhan turned to face the head of the column again. Now Jaross had something other than him to think about; a dead enemy and a land close to his own that had been conquered.

Jaross had given Jhan something to think about as well. He had always imagined Jhanian as a poor little boy, captured by evil and forced, by pain and anguish, to commit suicide. The truth of the matter was harder to digest. Jhanian Kevelt had been a man, a large man, and a warrior with a temper and a penchant for his own type of cruelty, if rumor was right. Thaos's dislike of his own brother was becoming more understandable.

"Is he bothering you?" Bheni had dropped back, eyes glaring at the silent Jaross. "I heard you speaking loudly."

Jhan shook his head absently, mind on his troubles. "I spoke to him. He wasn't bothering me."

Bheni leaned close to Jhan, putting a hand on the pommel of his saddle for balance and making him give her all of his attention. "Why speak to him? It will only encourage him to bother you."

"I needed to know something," Jhan replied, offended by her tone. Bheni acted as if she were chastising a child for being immodest. "I can handle him, Bheni!"

"She can, ma'am!" Jaross acknowledged ruefully, having overheard. "My thumb still aches!"

"Then I will leave you to his company," Bheni retorted angrily and galloped her imala back to the head of the line with a stiff back. She knew Jhan was being foolish and Jhan knew it as well. The more he spoke to Jaross, the more the man would try to pierce his mystery. Any more information to be gleaned from Jaross had too high of a price. It was better to forget all about Kevelts, Navas, and Indri. The body may have been related to them, but the spirit inside definitely wasn't.

Jhan gave the man his back, for good, and rode through the mud and cold of the day without another word, even when the man tried to make small talk. When they stopped to make their first camp, they chose a flat topped rise of land sheltered by an overhanging canopy of trees. Jhan dismounted and promptly led his baku away from Jaross and his imala to join the other women.

Jaross, to his credit, stayed behind an invisible line that separated him from the other women. He made his own campfire and tended his imala without speaking to anyone or turning to face them at all. Reva was able to settle on a blanket and breast-feed Keva without any self consciousness.

Jhan watched the back of the man out of the corner of his eye, thinking, as he helped the women unload the baku and tend to them.

"He has manners," Gruna acknowledged approvingly under her breath as she bent near Jhan to hobble a baku.

"And he's handsome," Hana giggled on Jhan's other side. "I think Reva's fallen in love, poor girl."

Jhan glanced at Reva. The woman was watching Jaross openly and her eyes were filled with more than idle interest. "She's headed for disappointment," Jhan remarked sourly. "I've been around nobles. I know how they treat someone not in their station."

"Now, now, Jhan," Hana chided him. "We won't let it get too out of hand."

Gruna was more to the point. "I don't think Reva has anything to worry about. Now, Jhan, I think, should move further up the line. Hana and I should chaperone in between."

"You're wrong!" Jhan reacted so strongly that the women paused, taken aback. "I don't have any interest in him."

"Maybe not you, but he certainly does!" Hana responded with certain knowledge.

"Stop, you silly bird!" Lhiddi snapped at Hana, scowling. "You know Jhan is sensitive about such things! I am certain the only emotion she feels for Lord Jaross is fear."

Yes, fear, Jhan thought, but not about what they imagined. His fear was the fear of discovery. He tried to calm down and explain things better. "His only interest is that he thinks that I am a relation of his," Jhan replied evenly. "It's nonsense, of course, but he won't let it go. I intend to ignore him."

Gruna raised a skeptical eyebrow. "We will be traveling for weeks! That's a long time to ignore someone so close to you." She gave Jhan a long look, squinting her old eyes, and then said, "He may be right about you. You're much smaller and paler than he is, but otherwise I can see a family resemblance. Who are your parents?"

Unexpected and disorienting, Jhan had walked right into the question that he was most trying to avoid. He paused, chewing on his lip, while they all looked at him. "My parents are not Kevelt, Nava, or Indri. I am not noble. Our resemblance is coincidental."

"Bheni said that you had fled from a forced marriage," Gruna reminded him. "Those of the low class aren't forced into marriages, Jhan."

Jhan's hands balled into fists and he knew his eyes were getting wild. Lhiddi saw it and realized that things were getting out of hand. "Enough! You are upsetting Jhan! Easy, girl." Lhiddi spoke softly to him as if she were calming a nervous imala that might bolt. "No one is judging you here, no matter who your parents are, Jhan. We are not entitled to any explanation of why you have run away from Pekarín."

Jhan took a deep breath and unclenched his hands. How he longed to confide in these women. They wanted to be his friends and he needed that friendship. It was almost more than Jhan could bear to lie once more to those kindly faces.

"My days and nights are haunted by my past," Jhan told them, his voice sounding as if he were dredging his words up from the bottom of his soul. "Who I used to be doesn't matter any more. Jaross can speculate all he wants and so can you, but it doesn't make any difference in the end. I am not kin to him and I am not noble. What I am is Jhan and where I am going will soon define who Jhan will be. That's all that matters to me."

They nodded, even Gruna, all of them contrite. They worked beside him in silence and the silence hurt more than anything that they could have said. Jhan felt isolated. Stop this, he thought, knowing that he had the power to stop his own isolation, if he chose. "I-I don't really think that he is all that handsome," he said, speaking slowly and with an unsure stammer.

Jhan felt relief all around him, like a fever breaking, and Hana giggled. "Your eyes are unclear,

Jhan, he is very becoming!”

“Such thick hair, like an animal pelt, “ Gruna remarked, as if she were speaking of the fine points of a baku. “Strong arms, strong legs, and good skin.”

“Did you look at his teeth?” Lhiddi wondered sourly as she leaned on her cane and let her hobbled and groomed imala loose.

“Good teeth also,” Gruna replied, unperturbed. “I think that he could father fine sons.”

“Sold!” Hana giggled so loudly that Jaross shot a puzzled look over his shoulder, before remembering, and showing them a proper back again.

Bheni had lit the campfire, juggling pots and pans as she cooked their dinner. Sausage, something like rice, and pink beans were fried together with some sort of spicy fat. Jhan sat next to Reva and the baby and ate his meal while talk flew back and forth over his head.

Jaross wasn't asked to join them or to share in their meal. He had cooked plain beans, hard bread, and drank something that he had boiled over the coals. Jhan found himself still watching him, ignoring the conversation and thinking worriedly about how he was going to avoid any further questions. He knew that he needed better responses and a more coherent past. He couldn't let either the women or Jaross get so close to the truth again.

Bheni crouched beside Jhan when he finally sought his blankets for the night. Her anger was gone, but she was determined to put sense into Jhan. “You came very close today to letting them all know,” she whispered. “You must avoid Jaross.”

Jhan pulled the blankets about him to make a warm nest, but his eyes were accusing. “You are the one who allowed him to come. If you and Lhiddi -”

Bheni made an exasperated sound. “He was going the same way! What was I to say? Would it be better to have him skulking in the darkness, watching us, or sitting where we can watch him?”

She was right, Jhan knew, but that didn't lessen his irritation. “He is the cousin of this body, Bhenni. You can see it, he can see it, everyone can see it! I don't know what to do!”

“Keep denying it, Jhan. Doubt is very powerful. It can cloud common sense wonderfully. All you must do is to be intelligent and stay away from Jaross. Do not give him the opportunity again to question you or to look closely at you again.”

Jhan tried not to let the fear overwhelm him, but it was very difficult. “If he becomes convinced that I am his kin, he might try and take me back.”

Bheni's hand gripped his shoulder painfully tight. “Every day I see your eyes and I glimpse a little piece of what torture you must have been put through. I do not keep your secret only because you killed a few bandits. I keep it because of what I see. I would kill Jaross before I would let him take you back

to where you would get hurt again!”

“Thank you, Bheni,” Jhan gripped the hand that held his shoulder. “It means a great deal to me to know that I have such a friend.”

Bheni smiled and Jhan could just make it out in the moonlight. “I suppose that I am your friend, Jhan, though I do not know why. You are surely the strangest person that I have ever met.”

Her words sounded so much like something Rehn would have said, that Jhan felt a lump of nostalgia in his throat. As Bheni left him to stand watch over the sleeping women, Jhan wondered what Rehn was doing now. Had he put strange Jhan from his mind altogether? Was he preparing for war? Would he fight or stay behind the fortress walls? Jhan couldn't imagine gentle Rehn fighting alongside Kile Helarion Dor.

Kile. Jhan had kept from thinking about that man for some time. In his mind's eye, he could trace every line of Kile's face and body. Jaross might be handsome, but he didn't compare to the blue sky in Kile's eyes or the sunshine in his gold hair. He certainly would never stir in Jhan the deep, overwhelming love he felt for Kile.

Love. Yes, Jhan did love Kile. It hadn't been just a crazy admission dredged out of him when he thought that he'd been on his deathbed. Jhan had uttered what had truly been in his heart. It didn't matter that he had the body of a man and that their love could never be, in any way, consummated, let alone even spoken again aloud. This feeling transcended all of that. Like a bolt of lightning, and just as powerful, someone probably only felt it for one person in their entire life.

Reflecting on the past wasn't a good way to induce sleep, Jhan thought, as he tossed and turned through the night. When he awoke the next morning, he was irritable and still bone tired. Standing and stamping his booted feet to get warmth into him, Jhan trudged out of the camp to attend to personal business and to change out of his muddy clothes from the day before.

Returning to camp, Jhan found the other women breaking camp by the light of the milky dawn. The sun was going to play hide and seek behind gray clouds. The mud wouldn't be drying up, Jhan realized, and felt that he shouldn't have bothered changing his muddy clothes. His fresh ones would soon look like the soiled ones fairly quickly.

Jaross was shaving with a straight razor and a bowl of water. Without a mirror and crouched by his dying campfire, he felt along his face with his fingers to find the stubble. Jhan saw Bheni watching him. He could see a thought occur to her and she glanced at Jhan speculatively. The dawning pity was more than Jhan could bear as Bheni realized what else the Dark King had taken from him. She couldn't know that it was the one thing that Jhan felt gratitude for every day.

Jhan turned, cutting off that train of thought before memories stung him, and busied himself with

his baku and his baggage. After awhile, though, Lhiddi's old hand was on his arm, startling Jhan and tugging him away from the baku. "Sit and eat, child!" she admonished. "You are skin and bones! This task will wait!"

Jhan reluctantly settled by the glowing coals of the fire and ate the grain porridge that Reva ladled into a bowl and handed to him. Keva was being bounced in Gruna's capable hands so that his mother could have a little free time. Reva used that time to talk to Jhan.

"Jaross seems very taken with you," Reva remarked as she ate her own porridge, eyes on her bowl and not on Jhan. Jhan could see the set of her mouth and the frown line between her eyes. Her voice was casual, but Jhan could tell that her words were very important to her.

"Reva!" Jhan exclaimed, almost choking on a mouthful of food. He swallowed hard and assured her, "I don't have any interest in Jaross. I don't know how many times I have to repeat that."

"You are beautiful," Reva persisted. "I am very plain next to you. I can understand why he would desire you."

"He thinks that I am related to him!" Jhan wanted this matter out of the way once and for all, so he raised his voice so that everyone could hear. Reva's face colored in embarrassment, but Jhan didn't want this between them, Jaross, or the other women. "If true, that presents a problem. Unless, Lord Jaross wants to engage in incest, I don't see there ever being a relationship!" Jhan was even more blunt, embarrassing himself. "I'm not attracted to him or anyone else!"

Except Kile, Jhan amended to himself, but that wouldn't have helped his cause to admit that. Jhan was glad to see Jaross stand up and slowly put away his razor. He looked angry, jaw set and eyes narrowed. He had been the polite one and Jhan had shamed him in front of everyone for his trouble. If there had been desire there, it was gone now. Jhan was glad, but he couldn't help feeling uneasy too. Had he gone too far?

Reva was mortified. "How could you say such things?"

Jhan quieted so that only Reva could hear him. He wanted to impress on her how important this was to him. "You don't understand, but I want to make you understand. I can never be like you and the other women. I will never be normal. I will never have a normal life. What you want from Jaross, I can never aspire to. Chase after him and marry him, if he wants it. I am not competition. I am not standing in your way. Is that clear enough?"

Tears streamed down Reva's face. Suddenly, the woman was in his arms, holding him tight. Jhan felt tears in his own eyes. "I am so foolish!" Reva whispered in his ear. "Can you forgive me?"

"I already have." Jhan gave her a tight hug in return and then broke away, wiping his eyes.

He wasn't hungry anymore. Jhan cleaned out his own bowl and helped Reva put out the campfire.

When he walked to his baku to mount, Jaross was on the end of the line again, fiddling with the harness of his saddle.

“You've treated me disgracefully, Lady Jhan,” Jaross growled resentfully.

Jhan didn't reply, afraid as he was always afraid. His response was simple and without words. Jhan unhooked the harness of his baku and led them further up the line.

Gruna dropped back without comment and allowed Jhan to take her place. Now he was in the middle, Hana behind and Lhiddi in front. Tension and fear fell away at once. He should have protested more at the beginning of it all, Jhan realized, and not let his curiosity get the better of him.

The journey wasn't any smoother than the day before. Mud soon covered everyone again and the cold managed to hold on even when the sun rose high in the sky and peeked out from behind the clouds. When the forest became thicker and the branches of the trees grew closer to the ground, they were all forced to dismount and walk.

Jhan hooked a hand into the harness of his baku. Lighter than any of the other women, he had the most trouble dragging his feet through the mud. He envied Lhiddi's and Bheni's leather pants by the third hour of pulling his sodden hem behind him. Finally, Jhan pulled it up and tied it into a wet, muddy knot above his knees. He heard shocked gasps from the other women.

“If Jaross wants to ogle my knobby knees, he's welcome,” Jhan responded, impatient with their conservative attitudes about showing an inch of skin to any man. “I doubt that Jaross has the strength for it.”

That was true enough. At the rear of the line, Jaross had to deal with the churned up mud of the imala and baku. He had his head down and his hands were clenched on the harness of his imala as he slipped and struggled to keep his balance and keep on walking.

Gruna nodded, surprisingly agreeing with Jhan, and tied up her dress as well. The other women were slower to follow her example, but they too were just as weary of dragging their hems behind them as Jhan.

There would be a lot of other concessions, Jhan realized with growing trepidation. It was going to be difficult to impossible to keep his secret all the way to the end of their journey. It was only a matter of when they would find out. Jhan only hoped that Bheni would not desert him then and that they would be close to civilization when the other women threw him out of their midst in disgust and betrayal.

Reva called a halt midday and everyone thankfully settled on a rocky patch of ground above the mud and muck of the animals. Reva stepped behind a barrier of women to breastfeed, but she needn't have bothered. Jaross wasn't about to share their dry spot. He climbed onto his imala instead, and sat in

the saddle while he drank some water and chewed on a dried cake of fruit. He kept his eyes on his hands the entire time, dutifully mindful of the women's modesty.

There was a small pool of water by Jaross' imala. Jhan cautiously walked there to wash himself off a little, before he tried to eat. He froze when Jaross turned in the saddle. "Not near the animals, Lady Jhan."

He said something else, but Jhan felt the ground rushing up to meet him while the sky did a crazy spin. Strong hands caught him up out of the mud and those hands began pulling at the laces of his dress.

Fear. Jhan felt it overtake him. Pressure built up inside of him. A burning brightness began to fill his veins, looking for a way to explode outward like a volcano. A splash of freezing water into his face, startled Jhan. The brightness banked and faded, seeping back to its lair somewhere deep inside of him.

Bheni was holding him. Jhan blinked stupidly at her while the woman dabbed at his face with a cloth dripping with cold water. It was her strong hands, not Jaross', that had pulled him from the mud. The man was still sitting on his imala, one leg hooked over the pommel of the saddle as if he had just begun to dismount and someone had ordered him not to. That someone must have been Bheni. She would know, better than anyone else, Jhan's ability to kill.

"Can you hear me?" Bheni asked, enunciating each word and looking into Jhan's eyes for a response. Maybe she feared for her own life at that moment.

Jhan nodded, disoriented. "What happened?"

Bheni lifted him up and carried him to the patch of dry ground where the other women were milling about anxiously. She sat him down and propped him up with her knees while she dropped chunks of dried meat, fruit, and sticks of some sort of fat into his lap.

"You fainted," Bheni told him angrily. "You were told to eat this morning and you did not, did you? Do you think that you can walk through mud all day long with nothing to give you energy? Eat. Eat all of this."

Jhan's stomach rebelled, but he knew that she was right and forced it all down. His punishment was embarrassment but, when they began walking again, it was combined with fresh and drying mud all over his body and all through his long hair.

"Get on your baku and lay close to its back," Jaross suggested after awhile. He had grown tired of his submissive position at the rear of the column and had begun walking alongside instead. It had put him uncomfortably close to Jhan, but he was far too tired to care at that moment.

"Bad for the baku's legs," Hana butted in at once. "It has enough to deal with just getting itself and the baggage along."

Jaross was exasperated. "You are as small as a child, Lady Jhan! You will be less than a featherweight on top of what it already carries."

"Are you calling me small?" Jhan shot back, anger warming him up and circulating his adrenalin. "I am nearly as tall as Reva. Are you calling her small as well?"

Jaross blinked, puzzled as to how to reply safely. "You are not built like Reva, Lady Jhan."

"Then you are calling me small?"

"Dainty?" Jaross attempted, but failed miserably.

"I think that you should stop talking," Jhan warned.

Jaross let out an explosive breath. "Why do you seek to show me such discourtesy, Lady Jhan? What else would you like me to do to show my respect and honorable intentions?"

"I don't need you to care for me." Jhan was furious, but he didn't give Jaross the satisfaction of looking at him. "I can choose on my own what my limits are. I can still manage to walk. I only fainted back there because I hadn't eaten."

That was too much for Jaross. His pent up anger and frustration exploded out of him all at once. Jhan flinched as the man gestured at him broadly. "If you could see yourself now you would weep! Your beauty is covered in mud and your eyes are dark and sunken for lack of rest and proper treatment!"

Lhiddi gave him a glare from her good eye. "We are all covered in mud and all of us did not sleep well last night, Lord Jaross. Why is your concern only for Jhan? I would think Reva and her baby would be more worthy. She has to carry Keva while she walks through the mud."

Jaross was dismissive. "She is a good strong woman. Jhan is of more delicate breeding -"

"Better breeding, are you trying to say?" That was Reva, nostrils flared as she stood knee deep in mud with Keva strapped close to her breast. "Does it bother you that a *Lady* slogs through the mud along with the lower class?"

"I'm not a Lady," Jhan insisted wearily, bowing his head and turning it to face the flank of his baku.

Neither Reva nor Jaross heard him. It was between them now.

"I didn't say that!"

"But you thought it!" Reva shot back. "Reva's a good, strong farmer's daughter!" her tone was mocking.

"You are twisting my words!" Jaross threw up his hands. "Anyone can see that you could walk all day and not tire! You're used to hard work and long days in the fields and paddocks. I will wager that Lady Jhan doesn't own a single callous on her fingers!"

Jhan curled his fingers self consciously. They were all still walking through the mud, throwing conversation back and forth between their labored breathing. Jhan wanted to beg them to stop, feeling like weeping in anger. He didn't want to be singled out with arguments and special treatment.

“There! You *are* saying that she is bred finer than I am!” Reva snarled. Her baby woke, crying at the harsh tone of her voice. She comforted it automatically and it quieted just as quickly. “They were right about you! The other women told me that Lords looked down their noses at common folk! I thought that you were different and well mannered!”

“You are misunderstanding me!” Jaross broke off, paused to calm himself, and then he tried again. “I am not saying that Jhan was born better than any of you. I am merely pointing out that she was born lighter and obviously not so hardy. I don't think that I am wrong to assume that she's been doing palace work in Pekarín or something equally as soft. All of you are strong women. You aren't seeing that she isn't keeping up with you!”

That had been part of the masquerade too, Jhan knew, to hide his sex as well as the fact that he truly wasn't as capable as any of them. The Dark King had pared Jhan down to a slim hundred pounds and, though he had sculpted muscles that had the strength to kill a man, the body wasn't large enough to store the energy and fat Jhan needed to keep pace with more fleshed out bodies.

“Will you wait until she drops before your eyes once again, before you believe?” Jaross was demanding furiously.

Bheni and Lhiddi leaned close to speak to one another and Jhan saw contriteness on their faces. Lhiddi nodded and sighed. “I think you are right, Lord Jaross. She was holding up so well, that we did not realize that she lacked our strength.”

“Stop!” Jhan broke into the conversation, desperate to turn it back and change the outcome. “I think that I have some say in the matter! You shouldn't talk about me as if I weren't here! I can walk! When I can't, I'll let you know!”

Such pride, Jhan thought to himself angrily. It was keeping him from being reasonable when he knew that Jaross was right. Bheni realized it as well. She came to his rescue. “Reva needs a break. Will you sit on your baku and hold the baby for awhile? When she is feeling more rested, then you can give him back to her and walk once more.”

Jhan wanted to argue some more, but his legs were burning with weariness and his feet were lumps of frozen flesh inside of his boots, taking the strength for arguments away from him. There was no choice but to mount his baku and take the baby Reva handed up to him. She smiled in gratitude to let him know that he was really helping her, but it failed to soften Jhan's feelings of inadequacy.

“Now,” Bheni turned to Jaross, voice and face taking on the sternness of a commander. “You have

stated your concerns and the problem has been solved. If you have any more concerns in the future, you will bring them to me directly and not bother the women again.”

Jaross gave Bheni a respectful bow. If he expected a thank you from Jhan, he was disappointed. Jhan kept his eyes on the baby in his arms as he lay close to the baku's neck, scowling fiercely to dissuade the man from saying anything to him.

When the column started up again, Jhan caught himself sighing and wishing that Jaross would fall down a hole and disappear. At a time when he should have been making close bonds with the other women and saving energy to get through the day, Jhan was, instead, stopping irritating banter about his love interests, averting jealousy, and concealing his inadequacies.

Jaross was totally oblivious to the havoc that he was creating around him. Jhan could see him, out of the corner of his eye, walking beside the column with a raised chin and an air of a job well done. He thought that he had saved Jhan from the foolishness of the other women. He didn't realize that he had only managed to single Jhan out and cause unacceptable tension in the group.

Jhan needed to make Jaross see the trouble that he was causing. Unfortunately, that entailed doing something that he had promised that he wouldn't. He would have to get close to Jaross, out of earshot of the other women, and explain the facts of the matter to him. Jaross might have given up his sexual interest in Jhan, but the overblown concern for his frailty was just as bad.

Keva gurgled and cooed, smiling up at Jhan and trying to grab a hold of his mud covered braid playfully. The little blue eyes were innocent and nonjudgmental. Keva pulled Jhan out of his depression and anger and made him forget, for an hour or two, about anything but engaging in senseless baby talk.

When night fell it was moon less and very dark. Lhiddi pulled out a little lantern to light the way, but it was still hard going. Jhan had long ago dismounted and handed the baby back to Reva, afraid of hitting something in the dark and dropping the baby. By the time that Lhiddi spotted a piece of high ground to make camp, Jhan was ready to collapse where he stood.

Bheni had trouble lighting the fire. They all crouched in the cold close together, and didn't protest when Jaross crouched nearby. There was only room enough for one fire and they knew, without being told, that he would be sharing theirs; if Bheni ever lit it.

“Perhaps, I should try,” Jaross suggested.

Hana laughed. “How many cook fires have you lit, Lord's son?”

It was amazing that she could laugh without any sarcasm or irritation, Jhan thought. Everything Jaross said made him angry. Bheni was less amused, her voice tight and threatening. “Step near and I

will be angry.”

“I think that you already are,” Jaross muttered back.

Jhan huddled inside of his cloak and closed his eyes, enduring as best he could. He couldn't stop shivering and he knew that it was more from exhaustion than from cold. When Jaross' cloak dropped down around him, still warm from his body and lined with some sleek fur, Jhan shot up on his feet, anger giving him a strength that he otherwise wouldn't have had. He threw the cloak back into Jaross' face.

“You need the extra cloak,” Jaross insisted evenly, jaw clenching. “My intention is only to save your life! You don't have an ounce of extra fat to keep you warm.”

“Are you saying we are fat?” Gruna shot back, indignant.

“What? No! Oh, never mind! Freeze, if you wish it!” Jaross wrapped his cloak about him once more and turned his back away from them.

Jhan's anger kept him warm until Bheni finally lit the fire. Whether he wanted to or not, he definitely had to speak to Jaross alone. Jhan thought about what he would say and where he would say it while dinner cooked, a hot, fatty meat sauce with chunks of dehydrated vegetables, fruit, and strips of jerky tossed together. Bheni even fried grain cakes on hot stones. They were all feeling full and warm under their blankets by the time the fire was banked and the dishes cleaned.

“Pray for a bright sun in the morning,” Lhiddi suggested as she turned to go to sleep.

“And no snow,” Bheni added as she settled by a tree trunk to watch over them. Jhan knew she and Lhiddi took turns watching through the night, but Bheni was always there at night when he dropped off to sleep and again when he opened his eyes in the morning. Always comforting before, it posed a problem now.

The women all went to sleep fairly quickly, exhausted from the grueling day. Jhan found it hard keeping his eyes open. They fluttered and his chin dropped to his chest several times. He had almost given in, when Jaross stirred from his brooding at last, and stood up. He wrapped his cloak tightly about him, glanced at Bheni, and then went into the trees.

Jhan looked over at Bheni. The woman had fallen asleep still propped up against the tree, hands slack in her lap. He didn't blame her. None of them had inhuman strength or endurance and the long days had taken everyone to their limits.

Jhan stood quietly and followed after Jaross, giving him a good two minutes to finish any personal business that he might be engaged in. Jhan ran into Jaross a few yards away, coming back to the camp. He stopped, startled, and Jhan saw that he had taken Lhiddi's little lantern.

“What is it?” Jaross asked quietly.

Jhan found himself crouching a little, as if, subconsciously, he feared that he would have to use some of the deadly skills that Vek had taught him. Jhan forced himself to relax, but he didn't drop his guard completely.

Jaross began to walk past him, maybe thinking that Jhan had simply walked out there to do his own personal business. "I don't need any more thumb twisting, Lady Jhan."

"Wait!" Jhan licked dry lips and his tongue met mud. He wiped at his mouth, wondering just how awful did he look? By the flickering light of the lantern, it must have been gruesome.

"Yes?" Jaross was still half turned away, uncomfortable. "It isn't proper for us to be alone where others can't vouch for your honor."

It was automatic, something he might have said to anyone. To Jhan it stung. "I don't have any of that kind of honor left."

"What are you saying? I've heard you speaking to the other women. Are you..." he was attempting to choose a term that was proper for a lady to hear.

"I don't know," Jhan replied before he could find it and plunged on. "That's not what I came to talk about."

"How could you not know?"

The memories that had driven Jhan mad at such questioning were still sealed tight. Jaross' persistence only caused him irritation. "It's none of your business." Before Jaross could respond Jhan cut him off. "I am none of your business. I don't want you to speak to me, touch me, or speak to others about me. My health and my business, are just that! If I wish to walk until I drop dead, that is my choice. If I wish to freeze to death for want of body fat and a cloak, that also is my business. You will not single me out again for your attentions. I have no interest in you and I never will!"

Jaross appeared lost in thought, as if he hadn't been listening to a word Jhan had said. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft with a heartfelt ache. "When I first saw you, without pain and standing, in all of your beauty in the hallway of that house, I thought, *'I have never seen your equal'*. Now I see you, thin, filthy with mud, and eyes staring as if from a skull."

Jhan put hands to his face as if fearing to feel the truth of Jaross' words. He lowered them an instant later and turned them into angry, weary fists. Jhan knew that he had to end this in the only way that he could. He had to be blunt, hurtful, and tell as much of the horrible truth as he dared.

"I was taken by the Dark King and tortured in ways that you can't begin to imagine," Jhan began shakily. "I've told Bheni this and now I am going to tell you."

"You don't have to," Jaross protested.

"I do," Jhan insisted. "I want you to leave me alone and this is the only way that I know how to do

that.”

Jhan took a deep breath to steady himself. “Kind people in Pekarín found me and helped me to heal, but I couldn't completely heal and I never will. I ran away because they know me and they know what I've gone through. I want to stop hearing it. I want to stop seeing it in people's faces when they look at me. I never want to have to explain and answer questions like the ones you're asking me now!”

“That didn't work,” Jaross pointed out. “Now we all know.”

“At the end of this journey, I intend to leave all of you and find a place where no one knows me,” Jhan replied.

“The other women think that you are running from a marriage,” Jaross recalled.

Jhan clenched his hands together as if he were praying for strength. “I admit that, at first, I didn't tell them much of the truth. I suppose that there is confusion about my past.”

“What is your past, Jhan? Why did this Dark King want you?”

“You found me attractive, why shouldn't he?”

“That's an answer?”

“I don't remember,” Jhan admitted. “I don't remember who I used to be. I found myself in Pekarín and I remember enough of what the Dark King did to me to ruin me for the rest of my life.”

“Then you could be a noble lady of my family and not know it?”

“You aren't listening to me!” Jhan shouted, almost hysterical at Jaross' stubborn persistence.

“I am listening very well, indeed.”

“Then hear this!” Jhan shouted back, heedless now of who might hear. “I don't want anything to do with your family. I've told you what I want. I want a life free of this. I want you to leave me alone. Don't speculate about my breeding, don't plan some reunion, and don't hope that I'm a distant enough cousin for you to marry. It won't happen!”

Jaross swallowed hard, flushing pale in the lantern light. “All right. You've made yourself clear and I have to respect that. I will keep my distance and treat you as I would the other women.”

Jaross seemed to feel that he needed to explain, trying to save himself some embarrassment and wanting Jhan to understand. “I'm sort of a forgotten son who never quite measured up. I doubt if my father even remembers my name or cares that I left Petrath a year ago. When I saw you, I suppose that I felt that we had something in common, that you might be in the same situation; someone our family thinks might be best forgotten. I didn't realize that you wanted to be forgotten.”

Jhan might have felt sorry for Jaross, but he couldn't afford to soften. “I am not this person you've made up.”

“I believe you, but I don't think you're telling the whole truth,” Jaross replied with sharp insight,

“not to me or the other women. Besides, I think the woman that I've made up is better than the one you have.”

Shocked, Jhan felt the blood drain from his face. Afraid Jaross would see how close he had hit the mark written plainly there, Jhan turned as he hitched his mud laden dress up, striding away quickly. He intending to go back to camp and forget all about this fiasco.

Jaross call out to Jhan, sharply, something about going the wrong way. The words were drowned out by the splash as Jhan fell full length into a pool of water.

The cold of the water penetrated down to Jhan's bones in an instant as his head sank beneath the surface. He flailed and broke the surface again, sputtering and trying to get his feet under him. Those booted feet sank and the mud rose up all the way to Jhan's knees.

“Jhan?”

Jhan's teeth were chattering. The water was up to his waist and dripping from every point above that. Every fiber of his being screamed for him to get out of the water as fast as possible. Jhan tried to comply, but his feet were stuck fast into the mud!

“Jhan?” Jaross raised the lantern. He was standing on the edge of the pool. “Get out of there before you freeze!”

“I'm stuck!” Jhan shouted back. Furious and afraid, he was already blaming Jaross for it.

“Well, what a predicament!” Jaross commented breezily, turned, and started to walk away.

“Wait! Where are you going?” Jhan shrieked, the darkness becoming complete in the absence of the lantern's light.

Jaross stopped and turned, lantern illuminating his confused expression. “Yes, Lady Jhan?”

“You aren't just going to leave me here are you?”

Jaross rubbed his chin in mock deep thought. “Well, now, I seem to remember you telling me to leave you alone.”

He was joking, of course, but Jhan didn't perceive it that way. “You're going to leave me to die? Bheni warned me not to be alone with you, but I thought... I didn't imagine that you might do this to someone who refused your advances.”

Jaross' jaw dropped. He closed it with a snap, looking both offended and moved to pity. “You really think that I'm going to leave you here? I was only joking. I wanted you to ask me to save you, but I wouldn't have insisted on it.”

“That is well for you,” Bheni brushed past him and surveyed Jhan's predicament. “What is going on here?”

“I'm stuck, Bheni!” Jhan shouted, choking on a fearful sob. “Jaross was going to leave me here!”

"I do not think that he was, Jhan." Bheni came to a decision and nodded. "I will get a rope."

Bheni disappeared into the darkness and Jaross and Jhan were left once more in the silence.

"I wouldn't have," Jaross insisted, becoming angry. "I can't believe that you think that I could do such a thing! Haven't I been a complete gentleman? I have followed honor and comportment to the extreme."

Jhan closed his eyes, hands clenched into fists as his tremors threatened to shake apart his very being. "I have tried to explain what I have been put through. Now you know the end result. I can't trust any man. Yes, I expect you to leave me to die. Yes, I fully expect you to turn into a monster when I least expect it. Yes, I expect, if I let you close enough, that you might forget that fancy honor of yours. Do you finally understand?"

The anger escaped Jaross in one long exhale. "I do," he replied quietly and he lowered his lantern so that he didn't have to look at the hollow pain in Jhan's eyes.

Bheni returned with the rope. She handed one end to Jaross and strode out into the mud and the water with the other, cursing at the shock of the cold. "Never!" she swore at Jhan. "Never again leave camp without telling me! You have shamed me in front of everyone!"

"A-Are they a-awake?" Jhan chattered back to her as she hooked an arm around him.

"No," Bheni snarled back. "If they were I would have died from such shame! Now, hold tight!"

Jaross knew what to do. He walked to the nearest tree and pulled the rope around the trunk to give him leverage. Walking away, he pulled as hard as he could. "Should have brought one of the baku," he grumbled, but he was strong and he managed to pull Jhan and Bheni out of the mud and onto firmer ground.

Jhan could hardly make his frozen legs move. Bheni almost carried him back into camp and sat him by the fire. She threw more wood into the dying coals, making the flames crackle and flare, before she sat as well. Jhan moved as close as he dared to the flames, still shaking violently.

Jaross came back into camp, winding the rope up as he walked. He sat by the fire on the opposite side of the women. "Nothing happened," he seemed compelled to say to Bheni. "Lady Jhan followed me to speak privately. She felt that I was attempting to court her and wanted to refuse me in private, I think, to help me save face before the other women. I thank her for her courtesy."

"At which point did Jhan decided to take a swim?" Bheni retorted scathingly. "It sounds very courtly, but I doubt that it was so nice."

"I-I was w-walking back and s-stepped too far from the p-path," Jhan chattered.

"There is not a path to follow," Bheni was relentless. She looked about them at the other women, but they were all deeply asleep. "You followed Jaross into the forest and told him to mind his own

business. I know you well enough to guess that. You argued, as you always seem to do, Jhan, and you lost your way coming back to camp.”

“Very astute,” Jaross grumbled and put his chin on his fist as he hunkered by the fire. “Can you also guess how badly she treated me with her tongue?”

Bheni gave him such a look that he fell silent at once. “I meant to speak to you myself. I thought that it was agreed that you would not bother any of the women. For Jhan to have gone out alone after you demonstrates to me the stress and anger you must have caused her.”

“I tried to explain to him...” Jhan trailed off and shook his head, too weary to go through it again.

“I have trained with men,” Bheni replied, exasperated. “I know there are some that cannot see beyond themselves. Jaross is one of those. He only sees what he wants.”

“That isn't true,” Jaross protested, indignant. “She explained to me the awful things that were done to her, but I think, if she learns to trust me, that I might be able to heal some of that. She might come to care for me if she only tries -”

“As I said,” Bheni continued, unperturbed. “Jaross is one of those men who only sees what he wants. Explanations are lost on him. Actions are much more effective. I think, Jhan, if you truly wish him to leave you alone you will have to show him that you can do more than twist his thumb.”

“Stop!” Jhan was hard pressed to keep his voice down. He leaned close to Bheni so that the fire obscured them from Jaross. “Don't tell him that! I don't want anyone to know that!”

It was clear that Bheni didn't understand his reticence. If she had his skill she would have been crying it from the rooftops, he thought. She didn't understand the horror it caused Jhan. “Well, if Jhan will not defend against you, then I must,” Bheni announced. “Say anything or come near to Jhan again and you will be singing in higher notes from then on. Is that understood, Lord Jaross?”

“I've already agreed to it,” Jaross announced and turned his back on them, sacrificing some body warmth to keep his pride warm. “I am honorable, even if you don't think so.”

Bheni held a blanket up while Jhan changed his clothes and he did the same for her. Warm and dry in a pile of blankets and quilts, Jhan felt almost human again. “At least I'm clean, well, cleaner.” Jhan muttered.

Bheni rose to go wake Lhiddi to take watch. She leaned down for one final word. “Anything could have happened out there, Jhan. Think about that.”

Jhan couldn't defend himself against her words. She was absolutely right. Jaross could have left him in that mud hole and he would have froze to death with none the wiser. When would he ever stop and think with his head instead of his temper? Jhan wondered. He wished that he had an answer.

The next day, the weather turned and the temperature dropped dramatically. The mud froze, but no one was glad. Instead of walking through mud, they were slipping and sliding over ice and stepping into half frozen muddy slush.

Jhan tried to keep up, but, in the end, it was too much. He climbed onto the back of his baku without a word. He felt eyes on him. Jhan knew they weren't accusatory, no one blamed him for admitting his weakness, but he couldn't help feeling ashamed of himself. He'd always thought of himself as strong and capable. This frailty was unpleasantly surprising and Jhan didn't know how to deal with it.

Jaross followed a few lengths behind the column, suffering the churned up earth and the beast droppings like a man toiling through a penance. He was fishing for sympathy and, maybe still, a tacit apology. If he was hoping for it from Jhan, Jhan was too busy enduring the day. It was Reva who became concerned and Hana who urged him to come up on the side. Like a child who gets his way by pouting, he managed a smile and a lightening of mood.

Lhiddi had been unusually silent. Jhan could see Bheni becoming concerned. They spoke together, but Lhiddi offered only short, sharp replies. Jhan wondered how the old woman was holding up through the march. Jhan's pride wasn't the equal to hers. He was convinced that she would drop dead in her tracks before she would admit weakness and get on her imala. Bheni seemed to think so as well.

Bheni's voice carried back to Jhan and he tried to hear, wearily hanging on the baku's neck and trying not to get swept off by tree branches. "See some reason! We all need rest! Think of Reva and the baby! We all need time to strengthen ourselves for the next part of the journey. Surely you cannot deny a baby rest?"

"You are transparent," Lhiddi replied sourly. "I know that you are worried about me. Still, you are making valid arguments. I agree with your reasoning."

Bheni smiled in relief and turned to the women and Jaross. "There is a fortress just outside the forest. None live there, but I am certain that we can make a home for a few days while we rest. I recall the walls still being in one piece. Hopefully, we will find a sound roof as well."

"How far?" Gruna wondered. Her old bones were feeling the wear as well, but she was younger than Lhiddi. "Any place with a solid, dry floor is welcome."

"Another day, I think," Bheni replied. "Distance is uncertain in these forests."

"I'll be happy to get out of this forest," Reva interjected with a sigh. "I never thought that I would long to put my backside on a baku, but I do!"

"I don't think that I like the delay," Hana said, surprisingly. "We waited a long while to start and it's taken us many days to get this far. We need to get to market at the first touch of Spring to sell our weaving successfully. Then, everyone will be longing for bright colors and light materials."

"You're right," Gruna agreed with a sour twist of her face. "If we hope to glean enough money to set up shop, we will need every fair day that we can get!"

"Yes, I think that we should go on," Reva was caught up now too. "Once we are out of the forest, everyone can ride, can't they? We can rest in the saddle. We'll all feel better once we get out of the mud and the slush."

Bheni glared at them, but they seemed oblivious to her real reason for wanting to stop. Even Lhiddi tried to thwart her. "Riding will improve me greatly, granddaughter. Forget drafty stone fortresses and let us stay in the sun and on the journey."

Jaross said nothing, knowing that he was expected to keep quiet, and not willing to cross Bheni. Jhan glanced at him and saw that he too was of a mind to keep going. Jhan felt his insides tighten and his stomach felt as cold as the slush under his baku's feet. It was up to him, he knew. He could sense Bheni struggling with herself, knowing that she had to call attention to Jhan and make him the reason for the stop. For Lhiddi, she would do it. Jhan decided to relieve her of the guilt. For Lhiddi he would do it too.

"I'm sorry," Jhan said, letting his weariness seep into his words. "I have to stop. I think that I am becoming ill."

Hana and Reva were worried and solicitous. They gathered beside Jhan's baku as they continued walking, forcing him to eat an herbal, dried fruit cake for strength and put on a warm blanket to ward off chills. Hana touched Jhan's forehead with her hand and proclaimed that she felt a raging fever, even though Jhan felt as frozen as a block of ice.

"We will stop, don't worry!" Hana assured Jhan. "A few days won't matter, I'm sure! We'll make up for it when everyone is rested and the land is easier to travel."

Gruna wasn't as charitable. She watched the women fuss over Jhan and then she decided to speak her piece, her tone conveying that she knew her view wasn't going to be popular. "I think Lord Jaross was right. Jhan isn't made for such journeying. I think that we will be saving her life if we leave her at the next city."

Jhan expected angry replies or even a little outrage. He was disappointed when everyone fell silent, Hana and Reva looking away and serious. Even Bheni, who had sworn that she would see Jhan to the end of his journey, was conspicuously silent. That told Jhan, more than words, that they all believed what Gruna was saying.

“I see,” Jhan whispered. “You think that I am too weak. Too small. Helpless next to you.” His voice hardened. “These baku are mine. The supplies on them are mine. No one tells me where I will stay or when I will go!” Anger made him harsh and foolish. “I only asked for rest just now for Lhiddi's sake. She is the one Bheni wants to rest. Perhaps we should leave her at the nearest city?”

Reckless temper. Jhan turned his face away from Lhiddi's obvious embarrassment. It stung him, knowing that he could have said it all better. He could have argued and protested softly. There had never been a real chance that he would have been left behind. Now, selfish and hot headed, Jhan had managed to undue the very thing that he had sacrificed his own pride for. There was no way Lhiddi would stop and rest now. Jhan could see it in the set of her rigid shoulders.

The women still imagined that Jhan was ill. They walked beside him as the column started up again and they traded healing recipes back and forth while they argued which would be best for Jhan. The discussions about stopping and leaving Jhan behind were thought best forgotten. They still had a days worth of travel before those issues needed to be addressed.

Bheni was less restrained with Lhiddi. They were bent close again and arguing softly as they walked. Jhan couldn't hear what was said, but he could imagine. If he had just kept his mouth shut, he knew, that old woman would be in a warm, dry place tomorrow. What was worse, though Jhan would never have admitted it to anyone, he needed the rest as well.

The temperature that night dipped even further. They managed to build two fires, huddling close together between them. Jaross kept to their perimeter and took what warmth he could without offending anyone's sense of propriety.

In the morning, everyone was glad to be up and moving. The baby had weathered the night well in his mother's arms and Lhiddi was standing and saddling her imala as if she had spent her life outdoors in such weather. It was Jhan who was slow to rise and leave the dying coals of the fires. It was he, and not an old woman, who had trouble making fingers and feet move and his body warm up as he struggled to pack his baku.

Jhan felt panic rising within him as they began their journey once again. What if they were all right and he didn't have the strength to make the journey? What if his man's body, twisted and transformed to look like a sixteen year old girl, had enough strength to kill a man, but not enough strength for endurance? How far could it take him before he collapsed?

How far was far enough? Jhan wondered. That was the next question and it was quickly followed by others. Did he have to travel all the way to the coast with these women? At what point could he feel

safe enough from the Dark King to stop and settle down? They were far off the beaten paths. The main road to Pekarín was many miles to the West. Could he stop now? That thought sent a chill of fear through Jhan. What if he never felt safe, no matter where he went?

Towards mid-day, Jhan accepted some hard truths about himself. Even if he traveled all the way to the islands with Bheni and Lhiddi, he would still be afraid. There was nothing to keep the Dark King from sailing there and conquering them as he seemed to be conquering everywhere else. Jhan felt, with a sinking of his heart, that he had never really escaped the Dark King. The man had instilled a darkness that no sun in any land would ever have the strength to dispel.

“Stand!”

The voice was male and commanding. The baku milled in surprise. Bheni and Lhiddi both drew swords and put their imala between the women and the men who suddenly came pouring out of the trees like ants out of an anthill. Jaross began to draw his sword as well, but saw that they were outnumbered and wisely did nothing.

Jhan straightened in his saddle, hands tense on the reins of his baku as his eyes searched the approaching men for the telltale orange and black uniforms of the Dark King. Jhan imagined a thousand ugly things that were about to happen, before one soldier stepped forward and gave a bow to Jaross, acknowledging him as the leader.

“I am Captain Kel Vatoth, in the name of Duke Aldor Na Yhenii of Belross, I ask your business here.”

The man was very large and dressed in heavy armor. He was an iron jawed man with a shock of brown hair and a line of black brows that almost hid his squinting brown eyes. Over his armor he wore a yellow and black tunic with a hawk like bird flying inside of a circle of wreaths. Jaross looked very young as he faced the man, but his chin was up and he managed to pull off an air of command despite the mud that covered him.

“I am Jaross Ke Nava, fourth son of Lord Khun Ji Nava of Petrath.”

“Your father is known to me,” the captain replied with a bow. He wasn't implying that he was friends with Khun Ji Nava. He was only acknowledging that Jaross was a lord's son and above him in class.

“We are traveling to Petrath,” Jaross informed him. “We decided to take a wide route, knowing that there might be trouble on the road.”

“Understood,” the man was curt and business like. He wasn't owed complicated explanations. Even asking had been simplest formality. “You will pardon me if I request that you meet with my lord. He has asked us to detain and question all who travel near the fortress. I am certain that he will wish to

meet you and give you rest from your travels.”

No! Jhan thought it with every fiber of his being, even though he knew that there was only the illusion of a choice. The captain was taking them into captivity with polite words. The women knew it and Bheni and Lhiddi knew it. There was only a brave face to put on it now.

Jaross could have asked many questions. He chose not to. “It will be a pleasure seeing Duke Yhenni.”

“You know my lord?”

“Not personally,” Jaross replied. “I recall him from several trade missions he attended with my father. I will accompany you. Let these women go on their way. They are merely weavers taking their wares to market on the coast. I gave them escort for a time, but they are well guarded by the two Islanders that you see.”

“Forgive me, Lord Nava, but I have my orders.” The Captain didn't sound the least apologetic. “I'm certain that they will not be detained long.”

Jhan wasn't comforted by the polite and casual conversation. He could feel the tension running underneath. If his baku hadn't been tied along with the others he would have tried to run for it. Everything in the Captain's manner set off alarm bells. Lhiddi and Bheni felt something wrong as well. They exchanged words between themselves and Lhiddi nodded grimly. A plan? Jhan could only hope.

“Lead on, Captain.” Jaross acted as if he were giving the orders, but his jaw was clenching and his hand was on the hilt of his sword, betraying his unease.

The Captain bowed curtly and walked back to his men, giving orders briskly. They were surrounded in short order by soldiers all dressed in yellow and black. Like hornets ready to swarm and sting, Jhan thought fearfully, but the men kept their eyes on their captain and Jhan never saw one lewd look or promise of harm as they made their way to the fortress.

The fortress looked very old. The trees fell away and a rocky landscape stretched to the horizon as if someone had clear cut the world. It was such a shocking change, that it made the fortress appear dark and forbidding, even in the sunlight. It was a stone tooth sticking up from the landscape. Someone had dug a moat and it was filled with frozen water, giving the appearance that the fortress sat on a giant's mirror. A drawbridge straddled the frozen moat and it led into a dark maw of an entrance way.

Keva began to cry, sensing Reva's trepidation, no doubt. She rocked it gently, eyes wide and arms tightening protectively. She was closest to Jaross. “Is everything going to be all right?” she wondered.

“Yes,” Jaross answered quickly and strongly, but his jaw clenched again and Reva noticed. She went pale and her arms tightened even more, making Keva cry again.

There were soldiers on imala drilling with troops in front of the fortress. A hundred, maybe two,

Jhan guessed at their number. When they were led inside of the fortress and into a courtyard, he could see more men, armed and waiting. It was servants who came to greet them though, bowing and attempting to help them dismount and gather anything that they might need for their comfort.

“We won't be long,” Bheni announced loudly. “Leave our baggage on the baku.”

Jhan saw the quick looks the servants exchanged with each other, nervous and knowing. Jhan really became frightened then and found it beyond his courage to get off of his baku. A servant held up a hand to help, but it seemed to Jhan as if he were surrounded by darkness and that it was lapping at his feet, ready to engulf him should he dismount. He hid from it by covering his face with shaking hands as if, like a child, he could make it all go away if he couldn't see it. Unfortunately, the darkness was hiding even there.

“Leave her alone!” Hana shouted and fended the servant away. “I'll help you, Jhan. Are you too sick to get down?”

Something was going to happen to all of them, Jhan thought. He could see it in the darkness of his hands and he wanted to scream against the inevitability of it. Jhan heard Gruna growling and Reva pleading. They were all so innocent.

“The soldiers are getting nervous, Jhan.” That was Bheni, firm and not to be denied. “Do not be frightened. They will only question us about our business and then we will be set free to go on our way.”

Jhan felt pressure building up inside of him. Something burned and flared like lightning through his veins. What was it? Why did it hurt so much? Jhan instinctively knew that it was dangerous. It wanted out. It wanted to strike at his enemies, his rising fear the catalyst.

It was like slow lava, Jhan thought in a panic, spreading and testing every inch of him with fingers of flame to find an exit: a flash point. Jhan was fully aware of it this time. He wasn't blinded by wounds, shock, or fear of raping bandits. This burning thing within him had a name. He knew it now, knowing it could be nothing else. It was the Power the Sahvossa had warned him about, a monster he was unleashing with his fear, uncontrollable and devastating. Jhan realized, in an utter moment of clarity, that this Power was about to kill more than just his enemies.

Bheni must have thought that he had lost his mind. Jhan felt her grab him and pull him out of the saddle. She swore as he struggled. Jhan wanted to shout for her to run, but the pain was too incredible for him to speak. She pulled his hands from his face and the Power flexed and prepared to escape out of his eyes. He screeched, feeling as if those eyes were being burned out of their sockets.

Jaross appeared through the red hot haze of pain. The man grabbed Jhan by the hair, steadied him, and then chopped down with his free hand. Jhan felt it strike a tender spot along his jaw. Was the man

trying to kill him? Snap his neck? It didn't matter anymore as the pain engulfed Jhan. Another blow and Jhan felt the Power pause as if it were alive and startled. When he felt his head plunged into a half frozen trough of water, it threatened to spring again.

Jaross was drowning him in the water, Jhan thought, and clawed at Jaross' strong hands with his small ones ineffectually. With oxygen running out, Jhan became suddenly peaceful. At last, an end, he thought. Let it come. As Jhan's panic subsided, the Power receded and cooled as if the water were filling him and putting out a sun. He drifted, finally, into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

(Phoenix)

Jhan awoke, head pounding fiercely and eyes feeling as if they were swollen. Half fearing that he might have been blinded, he opened them slowly. Blinking, he sat up, relieved to see a room take shape around him. The face of Jaross, suddenly blocking his view, was less welcome.

Jaross held up two hands. They were red and blistered, as if he had held them too close to a fire. “Who are you?”

Shaken, Jhan sat up further, checking to make certain that he was still wearing his dirty clothes and looking for the other women. He was sitting on a small bed, an old frame that looked as if it had been cleaned up hastily and covered in straw and a blanket. The room looked just as hastily cleaned. The fire burned fitfully in a broken fireplace and cobwebs hung from every point. A filthy table was off to one side and a scratched chair, with only three legs, lay discarded in a corner.

Jhan lay back on the bed, exhausted and beginning to remember to be frightened. “Is the door locked?”

“How did you know?”

“I’m very good at being a prisoner,” Jhan replied shakily. “I recognize the signs pretty quickly now.”

“Who are you?” Jaross demanded again.

“Jhan of Pekarín.”

“That isn’t a real name and you know it. Is it short for something else? Who is your family?”

Jhan pulled his blanket up around him, too distraught to formulate a lie. His mind was too preoccupied with turning over and over the events in the courtyard while he wondered, fearfully, what their captors intended to do to them. Had they seen how Jhan had nearly unleashed Power and killed them all?

“Do they know?”

Jaross understood. “No.” He held up his burned hands again. “This happened while I held you under water.”

Jhan wanted to pull the blanket up over his head and hide from those hands. He had almost convinced himself that the Sahvossa had killed that bandit back in the forest, and that what he had been feeling inside had only been madness and fear. Those hands were proof positive that something dangerous lay sleeping inside of him, ready to be unleashed the moment that he lost control. Power.

Rehn had feared it. Jhan remembered Rehn telling him that people were killed for having it.

“Were you trying to kill me?” Jhan asked, inching back from those big hands of Jaross.

Jaross lowered his hands and frowned, obviously deeply disturbed. “I thought that you were having some sort of fit. I was trying to shock you back to your senses. When my hands started to burn, I realized that something far more dangerous was about to happen. I knew that you were trying to use Power. If those soldiers hadn't pulled me off, yes, I might have killed you to stop you.”

“And now?” Jhan's voice trembled.

“If you have it, you could kill me,” Jaross pointed out and Jhan could see that he was trying to hide his fear. “I ask yet again. Who are you?”

“I've already told you,” Jhan replied, maddeningly persistent. “I was captured by the Dark King. After he was done, the people of Pekarín found me.”

“Did you run from them when they discovered that you had Power?” Jaross guessed.

“No. They don't know. I told you why I left them. It was all true.”

Jaross paced the room, aching hands held out stiffly at his sides. “Jhan isn't a name,” he repeated accusingly.

Sometimes the obvious escaped people, Jhan thought. Jaross knew Jhanian Kevelt, yet he couldn't get past Jhan's face and the illusion that he was a woman to draw a line between the two. “It's all I have,” Jhan replied quietly.

“You don't remember anything from before your capture by the Dark King?”

As Jhan, no, so he could answer that with a sly hint of the truth. “No, I don't remember anything.”

“This Dark King said nothing to you about your past?” Jaross demanded, incredulous.

Jhan felt his face go ashen, but he refused to be drawn into memories. He bit the inside of his mouth to steady himself, and tasted blood. “He didn't talk to me much.”

That brought Jaross around, face flaming red and mouth stammering. He shut it, having said nothing coherent. His jaw firmed. He was refusing Jhan pity. “I wonder that they did not kill you at birth. Those with Power are burning to the touch and they usually kill their mothers being born.”

That made Jhan think, remembering Thaós telling him that Marissa, Jhan's mother, had died at his birth. Had Jhan been born with Power and not had it thrust on him by the Dark King? That put a new perspective on it, a hope that he might not have it because of some evil plan.

“I didn't know that I had it,” Jhan found himself admitting softly to Jaross. “It only began to show itself lately.”

Jaross nodded, considering his words, and then managing to come to a conclusion. “You have worn yourself to the bone. I don't think that you realize how close to collapse you are. If you are being

truthful about the Power only recently manifesting itself, your condition might explain it.”

Jhan hardly heard him, replaying again and again the sickening scene in the courtyard, knowing that he had almost killed, not only his traveling companions, but everyone else in that courtyard. Jhan felt like skin and bones, his spirit flickering inside of his body like an almost spent match. How could there be such a force inside of him? Where was it hiding? How could he keep it contained? The answer was, that he couldn't.

The Sahvossa had known, Jhan recalled, but he had ignored them, thinking that they had been just another, of a long line, of people wanting to control him. Jhan could still see the map in his mind's eye, vibrant and alive, pointing the way to help.

The Sahvossa had not been concerned about a few people falling to Jhan's Power. They had spoken of everyone. They had feared that Jhan would unleash his Power and destroy the world. Could it be possible? Intelligent, yet as instinctive and as cold as nature, Jhan couldn't imagine the Sahvossa exaggerating.

“You've been imprisoned before?”

Jhan pulled himself from his thoughts with an effort, looking vaguely at Jaross. “It's too long and too complicated to go into. No, it wasn't because I, personally, did anything wrong.” The last was added when Jaross began frowning suspiciously.

“A mysterious woman, held captive by an evil king, escaping from those who would help her, and possessing Power. Last, but not least, a woman who also looks remarkably like me.” Jaross paced again as he summed it all up. “Loss of memory might be convenient in such circumstances.”

Jhan ignored Jaross' suspicions. He put aside thoughts of Power as something that he couldn't do anything about for now. Instead, more important fears reasserted themselves, needing to be dealt with. “Tell me about your Duke. Where do you think the women are?”

“Not my Duke,” Jaross growled back and stopped pacing to face Jhan. “He might be yours, though. He came up to us, took one look at you, and separated us from the others at once. He didn't even give me time to greet him.”

“I don't recognize his name,” Jhan replied, feeling a chill overtake him, despite the blanket. “He might know me from Pekarín.” Or elsewhere, Jhan thought, and felt as if a spider had run over his skin.

“He must think that we are kin, the way we look,” Jaross was speculating almost to himself. “or he may think that you are my wife. I don't know why else they would have put us so immodestly in the same room.”

Jhan knew. His heart began to beat harshly and he felt sweat break out on his forehead. You don't know for certain, he told himself sternly, wait until you have proof. He repeated it over and over again

to calm himself down. It could be anything. The man might just have been taken with his face, just as Jaross had. It could be that and nothing more.

“He knows I’m a noble.” Jaross was still speaking, not noticing Jhan’s rising panic. “He must have thought that we both were, though I don’t know why he didn’t even bother speaking to me.”

That broke through Jhan’s inner mantra and he couldn’t regain the rhythm. His eyes searched for a way of escape, found none, and then searched for something sharp. Jaross didn’t even have his sword. It was going to be difficult, but not impossible.

“What is it?” Jaross watched Jhan leave the bed and totter about the room like a lost wraith, searching through scattered trash and broken furniture. “I think that you should lay down and rest. I hit you fairly hard and nearly drowning can’t have been much better. I assure you that I will bow to your modesty and stand as the most virtuous man that you have ever met.”

While he spoke, Jhan had broken off another leg of the chair by using his stockinged foot and bearing down with his weight. Turning the leg over, he chose the sharpest end and began stripping at the wood with his hands to make it sharper and narrower.

“Threatening our captures with that puny barb won’t make them let us go,” Jaross protested sarcastically. He sat on the old table and crossed his arms over his chest. “You are just wasting time that you could be spending getting your strength back.”

Jhan turned to face him, holding a long sliver of wood in a trembling hand. He tucked it into the bodice of his dress purposefully, catching it in the material there to hold it in place. “Don’t speak to me as if I were a child,” Jhan replied with a dead voice and an equally dead expression on his face. “I know what’s going to happen. I know what’s probably happening to the other women.”

“You don’t know that!” Jaross shouted and jumped to his feet. “I’ve never heard anything good of Duke Yhenii, but I’ve never heard that he was a villain who harmed women, either!”

The door opened, shocking them both into silence as servants rolled in a wooden tub on its side. Setting it upright, they began a long, tedious operation of filling it with hot water. They worked efficiently while more servants came in with a tray laden with food and a steaming hot pitcher of cider. Placing this on the table along with a pile of thick towels and a sweet smelling soap, they all bowed and backed out of the door as one.

“Wait!” Jaross shouted. “I demand to speak to the Duke! Jhan isn’t kin to me! These accommodations are unacceptable! I demand to know why the door is being locked!” This as he was ignored and the door shut and locked in his face.

“It seems that someone wants me clean,” Jhan surmised in a small voice.

“I know what you’re thinking!” Jaross turned on him and confronted him with a hand outstretched.

“Give me that overblown knitting needle you just made. You are not going to harm yourself with it or threaten anyone. Our chances may rely entirely on diplomacy. It's probably all just a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding,” Jhan repeated softly as he picked up the soap, smelled its floral scent and flipped through the soft towels.

“He didn't recognize me,” Jaross persisted. “The Duke is probably just confirming my identity before he releases us.”

“I'm going to bathe,” Jhan announced, straightening and not listening at all to Jaross' attempt to delude himself. “Turn around. I am going to trust your vaunted honor.”

“Bathe, now?”

“I'm tired and I have mud where I don't like to consider,” Jhan sighed, picking distractedly at his mud crusted dress. “I'm also so terrified that I can't just stand and wait to see what happens. This will be a pleasant distraction, perhaps the last pleasant thing that I will be allowed to experience.”

“First, give me that wooden needle.”

Jhan stared at Jaross' hand until he lowered it. “If your Duke tries to touch me, I'll unleash the Power for certain. I've done it before. There's a burned up corpse near Pekarín to prove it.”

“Then, what are you worried about?” Jaross' face had gone ashen, perhaps thinking how he could just as easily have ended up just like the dead bandit. “If you have the means to protect yourself from being defiled or harmed, why not be glad of it and forget about other weapons?”

“It's not something that I can control,” Jhan admitted, thinking that, besides the Duke, he might kill everyone in the room, everyone in the fortress, and maybe everyone in the world. Jhan didn't say it aloud, imagining how Jaross might panic to learn he had been imprisoned with a human equivalent of a ticking time bomb.

Jhan touched the needle under his clothes, making a case that Jaross could understand. “This is my last resort, Jaross. This is for me, not the Duke.”

Jaross rubbed a weary hand across his face and turned around, unable to argue further. He sat on the straw bed, sagging and propping his chin up in his hand, elbow on one knee. “You are as small as a girl, but you have the face of a woman, and the eyes of someone who's looked deep into the darkness.”

“Almost poetic,” Jhan commented dryly. He undid his dress with shaking fingers, not really trusting Jaross' avowed honor, but too tired to let it stop him. Slipping slowly into the hot water, he sighed as sore muscles and tortured, muddy flesh found a moment of relief.

“You hold very loosely to life, as if you were hoping for it to end,” Jaross continued, as if thinking out loud.

“You are a poet,” Jhan murmured and began taking the braid out of his hair. “I want to live as much as anyone, but this life is very torturous, Jaross. It would be a relief to let it go.”

“Do you know Duke Yhenii?”

Jhan blinked, caught off guard. “I’ve told you, I don’t think so.” Jhanian might, though, and that was what was really worrying Jhan.

“Why is he here?” Jaross spoke rhetorically, shaking his head, disturbed by the mystery. “Why come to a fortress in the middle of nowhere and set up his men? Why accost a band of women and bring them in for questioning?”

“Maybe he’s working for Pekarín?” Jhan broke in, mind attempting a last ditch effort to deny the truth.

Jaross seemed to think this over and then Jhan saw him nod again. “It’s possible, but I think it more likely that Belross has been defeated by your Dark King and that Duke Yhenni has fled here to hide.” He ran with that idea. “If that were so, then he wouldn’t want anyone finding out that he was so cowardly. He wouldn’t want a noble of Petrath going home and telling everyone.”

“His men don’t seem to care,” Jhan pointed out as he washed the mud from his hair. “Shouldn’t they be angry at the Duke if that were so?”

“It depends on what he’s told them,” Jaross replied. “If I were him, I would tell my men that they are here simply to retrain and regroup before returning and fighting.”

“Maybe he’s doing just that?”

“What?” Jaross almost turned his head, remembered, and didn’t.

“Maybe he is regrouping and retraining,” Jhan suggested.

“Then why imprison us and separate us?”

It came back to that again and Jhan couldn’t escape the inevitable conclusion. The third explanation and the most frightening was that this Duke Yhenni had joined forces with the Dark King and that his presence in no man’s land was to gather troops in secret and then surprise Pekarín. Jhan saw it without any military experience. He wondered why Jaross didn’t. It came to him, at last, that Jaross was choosing not to see it, doing a better job than Jhan of hiding the awful truth from himself.

Jhan finished bathing, left the water, and dried off. There was nothing for it but to put the dirty dress on again, but he at least felt better underneath. “All done,” Jhan called to Jaross.

Jaross stood and turned. He was looking very pale now. Jhan had been wrong to think that Jaross hadn’t considered the third option. The man was simply trying to keep Jhan from being afraid. That gesture made Jhan feel almost warm towards Jaross, but he wasn’t ready to trust completely.

Jaross checked the water in the tub to see how dirty Jhan had made it. Satisfied that it was still

usable, he nodded to Jhan. "If you'll turn about, I'll bathe now as well."

Jhan put a hunk of bread, a leg of some cooked animal, and a thick stew of vegetables onto a plate and poured himself a mug of cider. Carrying the meal to the bed, he sat on the spot vacated by Jaross and ate his food with his back to the tub.

"I want you to know," Jaross said suddenly, and his voice was determined and serious. "I will defend your honor as best I can."

"If this turns out the way that we both suspect that it will, there will be only one way to defend my honor. You may leave that to me," Jhan replied harshly, feeling his meal churning uncomfortably in his stomach.

The door opened and Jhan almost upset his plate and mug by jumping to his feet. Ignoring Jaross' embarrassed protest, Jhan turned as a servant entered carrying fresh clothes. "Forgive the lateness, but we had to tailor these to fit from your old clothes in your packs," the man explained.

"Put it down!" Jaross commanded the servant angrily and then, embarrassed. "Please, turn back around, Jhan!"

Jhan nervously complied after the servant had left the room once more. Listening to water splash as Jaross left the tub, Jhan heard him drying off. Cloth brushed against cloth and Jhan heard Jaross murmur in surprise.

"What is it?" Jhan demanded anxiously, nerves frayed and near breaking.

"Someone either wants us to look well for our funeral or this may be a means to an apology," Jaross replied. Another minute passed. "You may turn now."

Jhan stood up and turned, eyes going wide. Jaross stood in a sleek cut tunic of red leather, embossed with a gold design along the collar. Underneath was a white shirt and a pair of brushed leather pants dyed russet and tucked into soft, leather boots that were also trimmed in gold embossing. He was standing straight and he looked every inch a nobleman.

In one hand, Jaross held a pile of red velvet embroidered with seed pearls. In the other, was a hairbrush, gold hair combs, and red slippers. "Yours."

Jhan stepped forward and slowly took the things out of Jaross' hands. Jaross turned his back as if he fully expected Jhan to put them on. Should he? The velvet was soft on his skin and the pearls caught the light from the fireplace like luminescent rainbows. Maybe it was what Jaross had guessed, an apology of some sort. Jhan desperately wanted to believe that.

Jhan slowly took off his dirty dress and slipped the red velvet over his head, letting its soft folds settle all around him. The pearls decorated the collar in a fanciful design and they glittered on his long sleeves and along his waist. He laced the front with unsure fingers as tightly as he could. The dress was

a little large in the bust, but the laces remedied that.

Jhan brushed out his hair and left it free to dry, putting the gold combs in, one on each side. He wished that he had a mirror and then felt tension grip him again. He was doing exactly what someone wanted him to do and he didn't know why. It could be a way of getting his guard to drop. It might be a psychological ploy as transparent as the one Thaos and King Torian had attempted to perpetrate on him back in Pekarín. Torture a person with uncertainty and make them feel at their lowest before you raise them up again and get them to trust.

Jhan put on his traveling socks and boots. Purposefully, he removed the long, wooden needle from his old clothes and slipped it into the bodice of his new dress. "Done," he announced and Jaross turned.

The man was shocked. His eyes went wide and his mouth opened a little. He stood for a good minute before he blinked and came back to life. "You are the most beautiful person that I have ever seen."

"Surely my face hasn't changed?" Jhan disputed, rejecting Jaross' unwanted flattery. Sitting heavily on the bed, Jhan took up his food again and began eating, trying not to drip anything on the dress.

"I don't understand," Jaross responded, as if he were dazed.

"I seem to recall being told that I looked terrible and near death!" Jhan felt obligated to remind Jaross, secretly feeling that it was still true and that Jaross was lying for his own reasons.

Jaross winced, feeling the sting of his own words returned to him like a weapon to wound him. "I only said that, then, so that you would listen to me. You had not been treating yourself well."

It was no time to argue and Jhan ended it by refusing to reply. He finished his meal as if it were his last, deep down believing that it was, and was glad that it was good. When a servant came to fetch them both, he was stronger for it and feeling more competent to face whatever was going to befall them.

They followed the servant, reluctantly, down long, decrepit corridors sparsely manned by soldiers. Jhan could see Jaross taking note of this, but Jhan couldn't see how it mattered. One soldier with a sword was more than a match for two, unarmed people.

They were led into a room with low windows, shuttered against the cold. It appeared to be some sort of reception hall, long and narrow with two chairs placed at the end flanked by guards. A great hearth fire blazed from one wall, but it seemed powerless to dispel the chill that had settled around Jhan as they approached those two chairs and the two people there; one standing and one sitting.

A woman with blonde braids spilling in her lap, sat on the left, slightly lower and back from the other chair. She was wearing a simple blue dress, but she wore a circlet of gold over her brows. Brown eyes peeked over the white gloved hand that she had raised to cover a titter of laughter.

The man standing before the other chair glared at her warningly and she fell silent. He was short

and stocky and stuffed into black leather clothing a size too small. His long arms were big and muscular, his thumbs hooked into his wide belt as he took a military stance of command. A thatch of graying, brown hair was trapped under a gold circlet and his stern mouth, set in a hard line, was at odds with the shocked look in his brown eyes.

Jaross stepped forward, chin going up in a way that only a haughty nobleman could manage. “Duke Aldor Na Yhenii! I am Jaross Ke Nava, son of Lord Khun Ji Nava of Petrath. You know him well, even if you don't know me at all.”

The Duke flicked eyes at Jaross, but they returned in a split second back to Jhan. He took a step forward. “You are... ?” His voice was gravely and deep, full of his astonishment.

“Jhan of Pekarín,” Jhan replied after a moment's hesitation.

The man nodded as if a terrible truth had been confirmed. He pulled his eyes away with an effort and took a steadying breath before saying, “Lord Jaross, I trust you were not inconvenienced too badly? I beg your indulgence longer. Please be my guest and ask of the servants anything that you wish-”

“I wish to know what has happened to our other traveling companions.” Jaross cut in, keeping his voice calm.

Duke Yhenii replied easily enough. “I sent them on their way. A group of women is of little concern or threat to me or my men. As for you, I felt that I needed to speak with you and discover your plans. We are at war, you understand? I must be careful.”

“Careful?” Jaross was confused, bordering on outrage. “I am the son of a man that you know.”

“Sons are sometimes not as noble or as honest as their fathers.” The Duke was looking again at Jhan as he said this. He seemed to be hoping for some reaction, a sign of recognition from Jhan. Jhan simply stared with blank eyes, giving back nothing. “I meant no offense, Lord Jaross, but in wartime -”

“Am I a prisoner?” Jaross cut to the chase.

“Only until I receive a report back from my scouts. They left weeks ago to see how my land fared. They should be returning shortly. They will be able to give good or bad report of you.” The Duke shrugged. “Until then, I'm afraid that I can't chance letting you go and alerting the enemy of my presence.”

“And the lady?” Jaross had gone stiff lipped with anger, but he was far too practiced in courtly manners to lose his temper. “Why didn't you release her with the other women?”

“I wanted to ask some questions. I still do.” The Duke motioned to the servant that had brought them. “Lord Jaross, please return to your room. This man will make you as comfortable as possible in this wreck of a fortress.”

“And Jhan?”

“I've told you.”

Jaross drew himself up to his full height. “My Lord Duke, I must inform you that Lady Jhan is under my protection.”

The woman in the chair tittered behind her hand again. The Duke frowned. “I assure you, that she will come to no harm. Jhan's honor is safe in my presence. You may go, with full confidence in me, and allow us to speak privately.”

There was really no choice and Jaross knew it. “Jhan?”

“There isn't anything that you can do,” Jhan replied tightly. “Do as he says.”

“You won't... ?”

“Go.” Jhan could hardly keep the anguish from his voice.

“I will need to speak with you myself,” Jaross told the Duke angrily. “I would like to know what you and your men are doing out here in the wilderness.”

“Not knowing is what's keeping you safe, Lord Jaross. Ignorance is a gift you shouldn't spurn.”

That was something for Jaross to chew over as he turned on his heel and allowed the servant to take him out of the hall. Jhan watched him go, turned slightly away from the Duke, and felt his heart sink down into his boots as a familiar coldness settled over him and the shadows in the corners of the hall seemed to gather and creep towards him.

“It is Jhanian Kevelt of Karana before me, isn't it?”

Jhan turned to face the Duke and whatever terror he might have in store, face frozen and eyes reflecting his memories of torture like portals to some dark hell hidden within him.

The Duke walked around Jhan, scrutinizing him with a face full of disbelief. “You were a tall man; strong arms, wide chest, a beard sprouting... You shouldn't have crossed Dagara. You shouldn't have doubted his Power.”

At that name, all of Jhan's fears were realized. He looked down at his feet, trying not to tremble, dissembling with his last ounce of courage. “I don't understand you.”

The Duke stopped walking and touched the fabric of Jhan's dress in morbid fascination. “Did he make you a woman... entire?”

Jhan lifted his hands to his mouth to stifle a whimper. He found that he couldn't reply, tongue frozen with fear and the certain knowledge that nothing he could say would matter or stop what he knew was about to happen to him.

“I sent you the dress... I didn't expect Jhanian Kevelt to put it on.” The Duke rubbed at his chin. “You came here wearing a dress, but I thought... I don't know, that perhaps you were forced to wear it. I couldn't believe that a son of Kevelt would willingly... This is monstrous! You truly don't remember

me, do you? Do you even remember my daughter Alaina?" He motioned to the woman in the chair.

Jhan didn't even bother looking or replying, but the Duke went on, managing to shock him even amidst his complete terror. "She is your wife," the Duke persisted, trying to illicit some response. "You have a son, Patric."

Jhan shook his head, eyes wide in disbelief. He hid his face in his hands, listening to the heavy, executioner tread of the Duke's boots on the stone floor as he paced.

"Does Jaross know who and what you are?" A sudden, loaded question from the Duke. He was weighing possibilities where Jaross was concerned, perhaps life or death for the young man among them.

Jhan looked up swiftly. Even engulfed by fear for himself, Jhan was still able to spare a thought for Jaross. It forced words from his lips, stammering and pleading. "No, he doesn't know anything. Please, let him go."

"To report to his father and others about me?" The Duke faced Jhan squarely, placing a hand on each of Jhan's small shoulders and gripping cruelly tight. He waited until Jhan met his eyes before continuing. "You are as small as a child. Your bones are like a birds'. How did he use you, hmm? Does Dagara like such sport? Jhanian would have killed himself before allowing such things to happen to him! Yet, here you are, dressing as a woman! Do you believe you are a woman? Has he damaged your mind so badly?"

Jhan shuddered under the man's hands and the Duke sneered in contempt. Jhan's voice came out weak and quavering. He wasn't even certain the Duke could hear him. "I am not Jhanian. Please, believe me and let us go."

The Duke's eyes narrowed, speculatively. "You *are* mad to think that I would just let you go. You made bargains with me, sealed in blood. I gave you my daughter and promised you Karana, Petrath, and Camaroe to rule if you followed me and Dagara Ku Ni. We own you, little Jhanian Nor Kevelt, body and soul."

His worst fears confirmed at last, Jhan felt his heart hammering and his mind becoming frantic. Jhanian had followed the Dark King and plotted with the Duke to take over other countries? The last vestiges of Jhan's image of Jhanian as an innocent, tortured boy, were swept away completely.

"Is Dagara looking for you? Did you escape him?" The Duke was still staring into Jhan's face, eyes hot and a tight smile playing across his hard face. The Duke looked like someone who suspected that he might have found gold.

"He let me go," Jhan choked out, knowing what the Duke was thinking. Jhan was so frightened now that his knees were growing weak and he wondered how he managed to keep on standing. Would

the Power awaken in him now, rising with his fear and danger?

Jhan's hand touched the firmness of the wooden needle nestled in the bosom of his dress. It seemed to burn his fingers with its threat of violence. Could he really use it? As Jhan's fear escalated, he felt more and more convinced that he could, if only to quiet the torturous terror that was overwhelming him.

The light in the Duke's eyes faded a little, but he was still hopeful. "Let you go? Why? You betrayed him by returning to your father. Even punishment as severe as this," he motioned contemptuously to Jhan's diminutive body, "wouldn't have satisfied him! I don't believe you!"

The Duke released Jhan with a suddenness that made Jhan stagger, and strode back to his chair. He sat heavily and crossed his legs, chin going onto his fist and elbow resting on the chair arm. "I'll have to consider my options," the Duke announced loudly, as if he were speaking to an invisible throng in the large hall. "You betrayed me, as well as Dagara Ku Ni. You betrayed my daughter and my grandson. You might be praying for Dagara's gentle touch before I'm done with you."

"I doubt... I doubt that you could be as inventive," Jhan said it, not with defiance, but with utter despair as tears began a slow trickle down his face.

"Now that sounded like the old Jhanian!" the Duke grunted. He leaned forward, going suddenly intense "I could punish you. I could return you to Dagara. He might reward me for it." He paused to watch Jhan drown in terror with some satisfaction and then continued, offering Jhan a life saving hand. "I might also take you back into my trust. Give over this fantasy of being a woman. If there is a man under that dress, you can be one again. Jhanian had a good, tactical mind. I needed that. I need it still, despite the package it might come in. A reward from Dagara is good, but a man who can win battles and conquer countries is a better gift. Be that for me again, Jhanian."

The Duke motioned to his daughter. "Go to him, Alaina. Show him the woman that he once begged for and could have again."

Alaina rose slowly. She was lovely and shaped in rounded curves a man might find desirable. She walked slowly to Jhan, every step a sensuous movement meant to make men desire her. Her red painted lips smiled and she leaned close as if to kiss. "You were heavy handed, my husband. I rejoice that now you can feel what it is like to be small and helpless and at man's mercy. I no longer want you."

Jhan hardly heard her, feeling a familiar pressure building up inside of him; a slow burning that alerted him that his Power was stirring like an angry rattlesnake preparing to strike. Shuddering, he knew what he had to do. It had to be done quickly before nerve failed him and everyone died. Jhan's fingers touched the top of the wooden needle and began to pull it out.

Alaina used Jhan's obvious moment of distraction to her advantage. She suddenly kicked him

behind the knees. As Jhan sprawled at her feet, too disoriented to defend himself, Alaina's slippers buried itself into his stomach.

Jhan curled up, the air kicked out of him and the Power recoiling and dying as his entire being forgot about fear and concentrated on simply trying to breathe.

“Alaina!” That was the Duke, furious and grabbing hold of his daughter. Jhan heard them shouting back and forth over his prone body. Alaina managed to kick Jhan one more time, viciously, before the Duke lifted her off the ground and carried her to a safe distance. Putting her down again, they continued to shout.

“I heard fighting! What is going on!” Jaross! Jhan recognized the man's young, indignant voice through the red haze of his pain. “Jhan! What has happened to her? Duke Yhenii! I demand to know-”

More shouting. Jhan found his breath yet again and the voices rolled in and out as if he were going to lose consciousness. Jhan fought it, won, and forced himself to sit up, hands wrapped about his aching stomach.

“Of course I didn't obey you,” Jaross was shouting to the Duke, face red with fury. “I couldn't leave Lady Jhan unprotected - Yes, I do question your honor when such as this happens! No, I didn't hear anything! I was outside the door! It was your shouting that brought me back in! Don't blame the servant! I am a Lord!”

Jhan flinched as hands touched him lightly. When he realized it was Jaross touching him cautiously, Jhan looked up into the man's concerned face through a veil of tears.

“What happened?” Jaross demanded. When he saw that Jhan was unable to reply, Jaross straightened and turned on the Duke. There was more shouting.

The guards were drawing their weapons, waiting for orders. The Duke's mouth was opening to give them, his false courtesy to Jaross at an end. Jhan saw it all as if it were in slow motion. It galvanized him, his concern for Jaross pushing back the fear for himself enough to allow him to react.

“Stop!” Jhan managed to gasp and stood, putting a hand on Jaross' arm, both to implore and to steady himself. When Jaross refused to calm down Jhan threw his slight weight against the man, pushing Jaross over to a shuttered window. Slowly and painfully, still clutching at his stomach, Jhan reached for the shutter with one hand and threw it open. A cold wind blew in and everyone shivered.

Jaross stopped shouting and scowled down at Jhan. “You don't need to freeze me to death for being concerned about you! I promised that you would be under my protection!”

It was dark outside, snow blowing in small flakes. Jhan turned from it and faced the Duke, taking one step, and then another; hand going once again to the needle in the bosom of his dress.

The Duke spoke as if nothing had happened between his last question to Jhan and that moment,

Jhan's reply that important to him. "Give me your answer." Chilling threats and promised retribution weighted each word.

Jhan swallowed. Darkness hovered around the Duke. The man's eyes seemed to grow dark and deadly. The Duke was a demon masquerading as a human, Jhan thought, and that realization silenced his one last plea, knowing that it would go unheard. Instead, he made a request to buy time and one step more. "Let Jaross go and we will talk."

"Let me go?" Jaross was incensed. "I don't need you to protect me, Jhan! I am a man! I will stand by you! Do you think that I care so little for my honor that I would allow you -"

The Duke made an inarticulate shout of anger at Jaross' interruption, effectively silencing Jaross as he strode to Jhan in three, powerful steps and stood over him like an avalanche ready to fall. "Don't play games with me!" The Duke spat in Jhan's face. "Don't demand things of me! You truly don't remember me if you think that I can't be as *'inventive'* as Dagara."

The Duke ran a hand down Jhan's side in a crude manner, as if searching among Jhan's skirts. "I can take whatever he left you, slowly and painfully," the Duke threatened.

Jhan had formulated a plan. Instead of carrying it out, he found himself staring into the Duke's angry face, transfixed. Despair gripped him. He wasn't going to save Jaross. He couldn't even save himself! The Duke had him rooted in terror, groping him and intending to do something horrible. Even the Power wasn't there to save him! One effort seemed to have spent it entirely.

Jhan pulled the long needle out of its hiding place. He stared at it in amazement, having made no conscious effort to do so. The world narrowed down to the tip of that needle and Jhan heard a voice deep down inside of him speaking to him, telling him that there was only one way out. His usefulness was done. Time to end it. The needle plunged downwards, Jhan's hand moving as if guided by someone else.

The Duke chose that moment to lean in close to Jhan, eyes on his own searching hand and not his victim. The needle, intended for Jhan's heart, buried itself into the back of the man's neck. Blood spurted and the Duke howled, hands clawing at the deadly sliver of wood.

Jhan blinked. He came out of the trance that had taken control of him in one second and then reacted in the next. The compulsion to attempt suicide had failed. The next attempt was all Jhan's own, knowing what the Duke would do to him if he survived.

Adrenalin surged through Jhan. He forgot about weakness, pain, and terror and leaped over the sagging body of the Duke. He hurdled towards Jaross, just as guards began to react, made contact against the stone floor with both booted feet, and then pushed off with all of his strength to sail past Jaross and straight through the open window.

The wind and the cold caught Jhan and it felt as if they held him suspended. Time seemed to stop as he looked down and saw the glitter of the moon on the ice of the moat rushing up to meet him. Instead of howling in terror, Jhan laughed, relieved to be ending it all at last.

The Duke wouldn't be able to torture him now, Jhan thought gleefully. The Dark King would never play with his mind or his body again. He would never wake up another day trapped in a man's body. And... it came to Jhan all at once, rushing at him like the ground below him. He would never see another day, Jhan realized in shock. He would never hear the birds. He would never smell the rich green of a forest. He would never see Rehn or... worse, Kile, again!

The beauty of the night and the exhilaration of life magnified itself and filled all of Jhan's senses. He cried out. "No!" Knowing that he'd made an irrevocable mistake. Torture was better! Jhan realized. Pain was better! Sorrow. Loss. It was such a small price to pay for being alive and being able to experience all that life had to offer.

A body plowed into Jhan. Arms wrapped about him, and he felt himself turning. The magical moment of suspended time shattered and the wind rushed past Jhan, blinding him, as he plunged a sickening two stories, screaming all the way.

Jhan didn't feel himself hit the ice of the moat. Something soft cushioned his fall as he fell through and splashed into the freezing water underneath. He allowed himself to sink, stunned momentarily by the cold, until his air began to run out and he realized that he was still alive!

Clawing and kicking, Jhan fought his way back to the surface and broke through the water, shuddering and gasping. When hands suddenly grabbed him he flailed and screamed again.

"Stop!" It was Jaross! "Stop it! I'm trying to save your life!"

Jhan allowed Jaross to pull him out of the broken ice and freezing water to the slush covered bank of the moat. There the man didn't give Jhan any time to rest and recover, dragging Jhan after him as he began running; attempting escape.

It was hopeless, of course. The open, rolling hills were illuminated by moonlight and the falling snow made clear tracks. Jhan listened for the drum of pursuing hoof beats as he tried to keep up with Jaross, the fear of being carried back to the Duke and tortured giving his feet strength he didn't know that he possessed. When Jaross brought him up short, he struggled and tried to pull out of the man's grip so that he could keep on running.

"They aren't following us!" Jaross sat down as if he were an anchor, still holding Jhan fast.

"Get up!" Jhan panted at him desperately, breath wheezing in and out so harshly that he wondered how he could go on, but determined to do so.

"Listen!" Jaross gasped back, as winded as Jhan. "If they were following they would have captured

us by now!”

Jhan stopped struggling, defeated and ready to collapse from the cold of his wet clothes and exhaustion. Jaross was right and even his panicked mind realized it. He sat down heavily and wrapped arms about himself, as if that could warm him up and fend off the looming darkness all around him.

Jaross released Jhan's hand and bent over, cradling one arm. He sounded confused, disbelieving. “Why aren't they trying to capture us?”

Jhan knew and the truth of it was plain, shaking him down to his core. “I-I must have killed Duke Yhenii. Alaina, his daughter... she doesn't want me.”

“Dead? Yes, you must have killed him, sticking him like that.” Jaross spoke raggedly, still gasping for breath, but it wasn't hard to miss the matter-of-fact tone of his voice. The Duke's death didn't bother him at all. Jhan wished that he could say the same for himself. “Why wouldn't his daughter want revenge?” Jaross wondered. “It doesn't make any sense.”

“I don't think that she cared much for her father.” Jhan left it at that, cryptic, and, when Jaross didn't pursue it further, he was glad.

Jhan clasped his hands together. Killer! The voice of his conscience dripped disgust and contempt deep in his mind. He shuddered and shut it off with an effort. He recalled the Duke's hand on him and the man's promises of pain. General to the Dark King. Co-conspirator of Jhanian Kevelt. Evil. Jhan named him much more, trying to convince himself that the man had deserved death.

Jaross suddenly cut into Jhan's thoughts. “The look on your face... You were trying to kill yourself, weren't you? The Duke just managed to get in the way!”

Jhan felt like weeping, but he was far too cold. “Yes,” he answered, short and sharp.

“Did he... Did he try to compromise your honor? I saw him touch you.” Jaross sounded as if he were grappling with his own guilt. “I should never have left you! I realized my mistake as soon as I was on the other side of the hall doors. Even then I only stood and struggled with myself about what to do! Lady Jhan! Please forgive me!”

Jhan wanted to scream at him, scream at himself. Forgive Jaross? Who was going to forgive him? Jhan's own mind never would, he knew. Duke Yhenii had joined the other corpses in his head, faces staring at him, accusing and lost.

“What did he say to you?” Jaross was maddening in his persistence. He wanted every detail and Jhan only wanted to forget.

“He thought that he knew me. He didn't, really.”

Jhan stood, eyes begging Jaross to stop, but Jaross was blind to Jhan's anguish and guilt. “You are a brave lady, Jhan. The way that you threw yourself out of that window... How did you know that you

would survive the fall? I grabbed you and cushioned your fall against the ice, but still, my arm feels bruised to the bone!” Jaross rubbed his arm as he straightened. “I would never have thought a fall like that survivable.”

“I wasn't trying to survive it,” Jhan admitted brutally and began walking.

Jaross paused and then followed. He was silent for several yards. “Twice? Twice you tried to kill yourself?” He seemed shaken.

Jhan refused to reply, keeping his back turned and wrapping his arms about himself as if he feared his shivering was going to tear him apart. He hoped that his silence would silence Jaross, but the man didn't seem to need or want a reply.

Jaross swallowed audibly and appeared to be speaking more to himself than to Jhan; voice betraying his growing terror. “It's just that, the second time, I didn't know. I jumped with you because I thought -”

Jhan turned and saw Jaross' white face. So, that was it! Jaross was grappling with the realization that he had almost died! Hadn't he ever come close before? Jhan wondered. From Jaross' reaction now, Jhan didn't think so.

“I thought that you had a plan of escape,” Jaross finished lamely.

Jhan laughed. The laugh was cruel and harsh, not humorous at all, and it went on in a hysterical fashion. Jhan was laughing at Jaross' innocence and youth. He was laughing at himself, because he had none of it. Most of all, Jhan was laughing at a young man who had relied on a mad woman, trapped inside of a man, to have a workable plan. Jhan was only able to stop it with an effort.

Jhan expected Jaross to explode angrily, offended, but the man was surprisingly gentle, forgiving, and insightful. “You must have been very afraid. Did you really think death was preferable to anything the Duke might have done to you? Or have you lost so much that life no longer matters to you?”

Jhan recalled his jump from the window. He remembered, with frightening clarity, every emotion and every sensation. He knew that moment in time would be frozen perfectly in memory for the rest of his life. “I don't think that I feel that way anymore,” Jhan replied quietly, feeling the truth of those words in every fiber of his being.

“I'm glad.” Jaross sounded relieved, but his voice firmed, taking responsibility. “I swore to protect you. I feel responsible for your attempt at death. If I had stayed and done my duty -”

“We might still be prisoners.” Jhan snapped back, angry now and knowing that he had to set Jaross straight then and there. Jhan knew the danger they were in, yet he couldn't go another step with Jaross' guilt weighing down on him along with his own.

“I'm not the little, delicate flower, that you imagine me to be,” Jhan began evenly, hands turning

into fists and hardly able to contain his emotions. "I know that you had your heart set on begging my forgiveness and feeling duty bound to protect me from now on, but I don't need that, not any of it! I was going to kill myself. I jumped from a window to do just that! If you want to know what I think, you saved me from breaking my head open on the ice by cushioning my fall. So, you did your manly duty by me. Please, stop feeling sorry and guilty. I don't have the strength for it. I have my own problems!"

"Such as?" Jaross asked, stung.

"I did just kill a man."

"Now who's feeling sorry and guilty?" Jaross struck back. "You didn't mean to kill him."

"That's supposed to make a difference?"

"Yes."

They began walking again, but it was a half-hearted effort, both of them still expecting pursuit and to be easily captured on the open, bare hills.

He had so much power, Jhan thought as he walked. It was in his hands and lurking inside of him, yet he had stood there and let the Duke put his hands on him and tell him what he would do. Instead of taking the needle and trying to kill the Duke, that mysterious inner weakness had caused Jhan to attempt to kill himself. Released from that compulsion by failure, Jhan still hadn't acted with the ability Vek and the Dark King had given him.

Jhan knew that it wasn't that the Duke hadn't frightened him enough, or proven that he hadn't deserved to be killed, in self defense, if nothing else. The Duke had invoked the Dark King's name. He had revealed Jhanian as a traitor, a wife beater, and a man Jhan would have hated had they ever met separately. The Duke had promised pain equal to anything that the Dark King could have meted out and Jhan had stood, feared, and not defended himself.

Jhan recalled the bandits in the mountains. He had been terrified, then, but he hadn't frozen. Jhan could still see their faces, as they had died, in his mind's eye. Perhaps, knowing the horror of having killed once on purpose, Jhan couldn't find the strength, despite the threat of eminent torture, to do it again, even to someone like Duke Yhenni?

Jhan clenched his hands, the ones that could be so deadly if he chose. "They haunt you."

"What?" The silence had been long and Jaross had been, perhaps, thinking of something else.

"Have you ever killed anyone, Jaross?"

"No."

Jhan kept his face averted, trying to see where his feet were going in the darkness and using the shadows to hide his anguish. "The people you kill haunt you, day and night. It doesn't matter why or

how much they deserved it. The Duke... he was planning something terrible for me, but I still can't rejoice that he's dead. I will always relive the moment when I plunged... plunged that needle into him. Don't you see? It never makes things better. It never makes men like that truly go away and stop hurting you. They become a part of your life forever."

"When I saw Duke Yhenii touch you the way that he did, Lady Jhan, I would have killed him if I had carried my sword in my hand," Jaross admitted. "I wouldn't have felt guilty or allowed him to haunt me afterward. I am a man. Women think far too much and feel too keenly."

Jhan sighed and let it go at that, turning the conversation to the subject that they had both been avoiding because of its hopelessness. "Do you know which way to go?"

Jaross took a moment to switch mental gears and then replied with certainty. "Yes, the Hunter star is the one we follow."

"Do you think that the women have gone very far ahead?" Jhan wondered, fearing he already knew the answer.

Jaross confirmed his fear. "They're riding now and the land is easy. Yes, I think they are far ahead."

Neither of them blamed the women. They knew that they were both chance companions on the road and that Bheni and Lhiddi had sworn to protect and deliver the other women to their destination safely. In that harsh world, Jaross and Jhan would have been mourned, but given up for lost fairly quickly.

"W-We need to d-dry off," Jhan said, stating the obvious. The cold was beginning to take hold as the adrenalin rushing through Jhan began to slow and die out, his teeth chattering in time to the shivering of his body.

Jaross didn't feel the need to reply with something equally as obvious. They both knew that if they lit a fire they would be advertising their position to all around them. If, by chance, they had simply given the slip to a pursuing enemy in the dark, they would be quickly spotted and recaptured if they dared a flame. "Try and find fuel," Jaross responded at last, knowing that they hadn't any choice if they wanted to live.

It was difficult to find anything that would burn. Not much grew in that rocky soil and they quickly discovered what there was even less that was dry. Still, by snatching up every twig and bush they happened on as they walked, they soon had enough to at least make a start.

Crouching down as one, they stacked the precious wood into a cone and Jaross struggled to light it by trying to make sparks with the stones laying about everywhere.

Slow and awkward, Jaross struggled, his one arm appearing weak and unresponsive; that hand fumbling as if it didn't want to close. Still, he managed to light the fire, coaxing and begging it every

step of the way. It smoked fitfully, flared up, and then died with an angry hiss.

Jaross cursed and began again. Jhan sat back, face frozen and body feeling as if his blood was turning to ice in his veins. Jhan knew that it was useless, but he couldn't bring himself to tell Jaross to give up. Giving up was death.

Jaross failed to light the fire again. He sat back, now, too, and his hands were lax in his lap, head bowed in defeat. "We have to keep walking," he said at last. "It's our only hope."

"Hope for what?" Jhan wondered dejectedly. "My clothes are already turning to ice."

"There might be a town we don't know about. A house. A shelter. We have to try."

Jhan nodded and stood as if he believed it. Jaross was slower in getting up. "Are you all right?"

"I'm freezing to death! Of course I'm not all right!" Jaross snarled back to cover up his fear.

There was more, Jhan knew, but right then it didn't matter. If Jaross was hurt, they had no way of treating him.

Jhan began to start walking again, his muscles stiff and sluggish. Looking back in concern to see if Jaross was following, Jhan didn't see the baku standing before him. He ran into its soft, warm side and recoiled with a shout of surprise. His shout made the baku jump and shiver, but it was well trained and didn't run away. Its companion baku, tied by a lead, flared nostrils at them and flapped its large ears in alarm.

"Jaross!" Jhan called excitedly. "These are mine! Bheni must have left them!"

Jaross came up slowly despite his relief and eagerness. "A soldier's trick," he explained. "Leave a man's mount behind without feed. If he comes anywhere in smelling distance the beast will seek him out to get fed! Did she leave supplies?"

Jhan reached up, felt the bulging baggage, and grinned, his face stiff and unused to the expression. "Yes! Hopefully there will be dry clothes!"

There were clothes, food, grain, water, and even a bag of dry manure for fuel. Jaross took the manure and lit a fire with shaking hands, while Jhan trudged out into the darkness and changed clothes. Returning in a thick woven dress, a dry cape, and double thick socks, he gratefully sank down by the fire and tried to warm up his frozen body while Jaross left to change his clothes. When he returned, they both huddled by the fire and said nothing for long minutes.

"I have faced death twice in one day," Jaross softly said at last.

"Three times," Jhan corrected absently.

"Three?"

"Duke Yhenii was going to kill you, I think. You weren't of any use to him and he couldn't let you go."

“He told you this?” Jaross was shocked and disturbed.

Jhan shook himself. Why had he told Jaross that? The warmth of dry clothes and a fire was making him sleepy and too contented. “I might be wrong,” Jhan amended lamely. “He didn't actually say he was going to.”

It was easy to see, in the firelight, Jaross' pale face and clenched brow. “No, you're right. I was a danger to him alive.” Jaross paused and then asked, puzzled, “Why not kill you as well?”

Jhan mentally swore at himself, becoming fully alert now to the fact that his secret was in danger of being revealed. He took a deep breath and then gave Jaross the full force of his sad, blue eyes. “Women are much more... useful, Jaross.”

Jaross understood and his cheeks turned red, face going grim. He gave one, short nod, too mortified to pursue it further. “So, Duke Yhenii is a traitor, or was,” Jaross continued on another track. “I hope that you did kill him. Any man who would side with someone as evil as your Dark King, against countries that have lived in peace together for a generation, deserves nothing less.”

“You think that he was working for the Dark King?” Jhan acted ignorant.

“Why else would he be so afraid of my returning home and giving report of his position to my Father?” Jaross shrugged. “It seems obvious to me. There could be no other reason.”

“I see,” Jhan chewed on his lower lip and then stood, wanting to escape the entire conversation. “We should keep going now that we're dry and have the baku. We've already eaten and I've had enough rest. How about you?”

Jaross was reluctant. He stood slowly as well, but he kicked out the fire and nodded. “We shouldn't give our enemies a chance to change their minds and find us. Yes, let's go on.”

They repacked the baku and mounted. Jaross was almost comically large on his baku, but he had the saddle. Jhan was hard pressed to find a comfortable spot on top of the baggage of the other baku. Both awkward and uncomfortable, they started out slowly and didn't pick up more than walking speed. Still, it was better than being on foot and Jaross was able to relax his arm and rest.

They both fell quiet and Jhan had time to think. If they couldn't catch up to the women, what would he do? Following Jaross was out of the question. Sooner or later, if Jhan stayed around him long enough, Jaross was going to realize that the woman Jhan was really Jhanian Kevelt, just as much a traitor as Duke Yhenii.

Jhan shivered and drew his cloak closer about himself. Where should he go? Jaross believed Petrath was under siege by the Dark King. Duke Yhenni was from Belross. King Torian had come from Karana. Jhan had thought of going with Bheni and Lhiddi to their islands, but now... It was all uncertain.

“How many men have you killed, Lady Jhan?” Jaross asked suddenly.

Jhan clenched his hands on the reins of his baku. Jaross must have struggled with the question, knowing the subject was painful to Jhan, yet Jaross had been unable to resist. Jhan picked carefully through replies and then discarded them all.

“I don't want to talk about it,” Jhan said at last, but thought that Jaross should at least know how he felt. “I- You told me once that you thought that I held loosely to life and that you thought that I'd rather be dead. That was true until I jumped out of that window. I realized then that life is very sweet. I saw it all in an instant. I think the person,” he did not want to admit to more than one, “that I killed must have felt that too, only he wasn't saved in the end. He lost it and I took it away from him.”

He had taken it away from the Duke as well, Jhan realized with a sickening feeling, and felt hot tears on his cold cheeks. Whether he was weeping for the Duke or weeping for himself he couldn't tell and, if Jaross said anything else, he didn't hear it. Jhan was drowning in guilt and pain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

(Companions Alone)

Dawn came slowly and Jhan watched the sun rise with trepidation. The land was still consisting of bare, rolling hills and he was well aware that they would be in easy view of anyone who might be looking for them.

During the night, Jhan's mind had turned to the Dark King's army, wondering if they had braved the winter and attempted to come on their enemy when they least expected it. With inky blackness all around, it was easy to be terrified, expecting shouts and cruel hands grabbing him at any moment. The face Jaross saw when the man turned in his saddle to look back, must have shocked him.

"Jhan!" Jaross pulled up his baku and swung out of the saddle. He staggered a little, his bad arm refusing to give him balance, as he dropped the reins and came to Jhan's side. Looking up, he began to touch Jhan's hand and then recoiled, disgust on his face. Jhan looked down and saw that he had crusted blood under his fingernails and wherever the water of the moat hadn't washed it away. It was Duke Yhenii's blood.

Jhan retched and collapsed from his perch on top of the baggage. He fell into Jaross' arms, but the man couldn't bring up his injured arm in time to catch him. Overbalanced, they both fell heavily to the ground.

Jhan turned aside and had dry heaves. He felt Jaross gripping his shoulder and holding his hair back from his face. When Jhan finally curled up on his side, his stomach aching, Jaross used some of their water to wash the bloody hand clean and as much of Jhan's face as he would allow before Jhan turned his face away.

Jaross wrung out the rag that he had been using, winced at the red blood that colored it, and then threw it aside. "Not as tough as you'd like me to think," was his only comment.

I've seen so much, Jhan thought to himself. What was a little more blood, his or the blood of someone else? He surprised himself by slowly relaxing and actually feeling better about himself. If he still cared about that question, and if pain and blood still bothered him, then the Dark King hadn't destroyed his life completely. Gentle Christine still lived.

Jaross made a fire without asking and began to cook a thick porridge for breakfast. It smelled like bacon fat and boiling grains. Jhan almost retched again, but, when he sat up slowly and Jaross handed him a bowl, Jhan discovered that he was starving and that he could eat it.

"Thank you," Jhan said quietly, recalling how harshly he had treated Jaross and how the man always returned kindness.

Jaross merely nodded over his own bowl of food, shoveling it into his mouth and making a pleased sound.

Jhan watched Jaross eat. So young and resilient, he thought. Jhan could tell that he was already getting over the fright of almost having died. His thoughts were as uncomplicated as the taste of the food he was eating. Jhan envied him.

“Go ahead and sleep,” Jaross told him when he had put aside his bowl. “I’ll keep watch and then you can spell me.”

Jhan felt that his eyes were about to close all on their own, but his mind, unlike Jaross', was still throbbing with the fear that they might run into the Dark King's troops. “I can't.”

Jaross stood and came to sit next to him. Even sitting, he was still much taller than Jhan. Jhan had to look up at him, puzzled and uncomfortable with their closeness. “Too tense from riding? You didn't look good even before you fell off of your baku.”

Jhan wanted to tell Jaross his fears, but he knew that he couldn't bear to see the same fright in the eyes of someone else. How could he tell Jaross that he was imagining all of the tortures that the men of the Dark King might visit on him if they caught him? It was indescribable!

Jaross raised his good hand, it was calloused and broad. “Let me rub your shoulders. It will relax you and let you sleep.” He added quickly as Jhan's eyes went wide in alarm. “Trust in my honor. My hand will not leave your shoulders, Lady Jhan. Please, you need to sleep. At least do it for me. I won't be able to sleep without knowing that you won't fall asleep on watch.”

It was horrible, that complete fear. It took all of Jhan's courage to lower his head and turn slightly away, but he knew that Jaross was right. When Jhan felt Jaross' broad hand touch him, he flinched. “No,” Jhan began to protest and draw away, but Jaross' hand stretched out and followed him and Jhan found the touch surprisingly soothing.

“Quietly, my Lady,” Jaross murmured and his hand began kneading spring loaded muscles all along Jhan's shoulders and neck. “Your muscles are so tight that it must be making your head pound.”

“Stop,” Jhan protested weakly, but it was without conviction.

“So small,” Jaross was whispering, almost to himself. “Like a bird, yet your muscles feel as tough as tempered steel. Is this helping at all?” The back rub, he meant.

“Yes,” Jhan admitted softly. It was. He felt fear spill out of him in a slow trickle that soon left him feeling as hollow as an empty glass. He had carried it since his meeting with the Duke like a rabid dog at his throat. Now that it was gone, Jhan's irrational fear of running into the Dark King's men seemed foolish under the blue of the sky.

“I'm sorry,” Jhan said at last.

Jaross lowered his hand. He was the one suddenly uncomfortable now “For what?”

“For distrusting you.”

Jaross quickly rose and went to get one of the bags. He opened it and pulled out a blanket.

Spreading it on the ground, he motioned for Jhan to take it.

Jhan could see the muscles in Jaross' jaw bunching as the man struggled with some inner emotion.

Jhan wanted to say something, ask if he had made Jaross angry, but the man didn't give him the chance.

Jaross sat a safe and honorable few paces away, his hands in his lap as if he were embarrassed.

Jaross was the one who looked haunted now, pale and still, but he said nothing as Jhan lay down and

Jhan could only turn away and try to sleep.

Jhan was allowed two hours rest. He groaned when Jaross called his name, but forced himself to sit up and keep watch while Jaross took only an hour to sleep. Afterward, the man sat up as if he had set a mental alarm clock. He began packing their things and loading up the baku, as if that one hour had been as good for him as an entire night.

“Jaross,” Jhan protested. “You're hurt! Please, sleep some more!”

Jaross shook his head and mounted his baku. “My arm was only bruised, Jhan. It's already feeling better. I've never needed a great deal of sleep and I'm young enough to endure it. Let us go.”

Jhan knew that he was being lied to, but he was eager enough to want to get moving, that he didn't argue further. He mounted his baku and followed Jaross down a narrow trail between hills, feeling as if he hadn't slept at all.

“You were having a nightmare,” Jaross told him thoughtfully as Jhan came up a little even with him. “You had them when we were with the women as well.”

Jhan hadn't been aware of that. “Did I say anything?”

Jaross face was set and he was cradling his injured arm and kneading it with his good hand absently. “Nothing clear. Do you remember it?”

“No,” Jhan replied.

“You seemed... terrified.” Jaross picked over what he wanted to say for long minutes and then said, “Isn't there anything that you can tell me... about yourself? We are traveling companions. We would trust one another -”

“You don't trust me?” Jhan interjected, startled.

Jaross winced and tried again. “You have Power. I've been taught all of my life to fear it and those

who have it.”

Jhan considered the request and then shrugged. “I’ve already told you all that I know. You can’t understand, but, if I talk about my past it brings up horrible memories. As for the Power, you probably know more about it than I do. I have no control over it and I’m just as afraid of it as you are.”

“That isn’t helpful,” Jaross replied sourly.

“I’m sorry.”

“You keep saying that,” Jaross pointed out in exasperation.

“I don’t know what else to say,” Jhan replied, too weary to be angry. “I am Jhan, just what you see before you. I’m afraid all of the time. My life is one great darkness cornered by the small patch of light where I’m living now. Mentally, I have a candle in my hand and I’m shielding it from a strong wind. The flame is my sanity and people, like you, who keep asking me to remember, are the other hands trying to uncover the flame so it can be burned out entirely!”

“You misunderstand me,” Jaross seemed pained. “I meant, who are you now? What was your life in Pekarín? I didn’t mean to dredge up *that* past.”

“Oh,” Jhan almost apologized again, but realized that, to even tell Jaross about that part of his life, was impossible. “I was a maid,” Jhan replied shortly. “I did a great deal of needlepoint and lounging about in gardens.”

Jaross was looking at him with wide eyes.

“What?” Jhan wondered, disconcerted.

“You seem so wild,” Jaross explained awkwardly. “I can’t imagine you submitting meekly to such work.”

“Oh, I didn’t, you’re right there,” Jhan shrugged. “I wasn’t any good at needlepoint and I was bored to tears by the lounging about part. They’re probably all glad to get rid of me.”

“Then they are fools.”

Jhan blinked at Jaross, hearing something unmistakable in the man’s voice and seeing a look in Jaross’ eyes that left no doubt in Jhan’s mind what the man was feeling towards him.

“Jaross,” Jhan twisted his hands in the reins of his baku, angry that this was necessary, but it had to be said. “I’ve told you. I’m not interested in you.”

Jaross stiffened, not realizing that he had been so transparent. He colored uncomfortably and seemed shaken. It was obvious that Jhan’s words had struck him as hard as a blow. “Forgive me, Lady Jhan. This is surely not the time to have such thoughts, but hearts are never practical.”

No they weren’t, Jhan agreed silently, thinking of Kile. “I know you can’t help it,” Jhan agreed, but refused to soften. “This journey is very hard for me already. Please don’t burden me any further, Jaross.

I don't think that I can bear it.”

Jaross nodded and turned his back, urging his baku a little ahead. He was hurt and Jhan swore softly. When had he ever given this young man the chance to fall in love with him? Jhan remembered only acid remarks and cold looks. The back rub? Jhan winced. Had that been enough to rekindle Jaross' passion for him? Jhan supposed that it had.

Despite this new trouble between himself and Jaross, Jhan was feeling more and more normal. Shaking off the last vestiges of his fear, Jhan was opening his eyes to the possibilities of the road ahead. Would they find Bheni, Lhiddi, and the women? What if they didn't? What would he do? What would Jaross do? His money hadn't been on the baku. What would he do for money for more supplies? The thought of being reliant on Jaross was unthinkable. He had to separate himself from the man and his unwanted love as soon as possible.

Jhan looked about them and tried to make some sense out of the land. How was Jaross finding his way? The man had neither compass or map. Was he following the sun as he had the Hunter star? Jhan looked up and tried it himself. Yes, you could roughly be guided by the sun, but the land wasn't forgiving enough to allow a person to travel in a straight line.

They halted by a little stream and made camp. Jaross built the fire, his one arm still awkward, and sat down while Jhan took care of the baku. After Jhan had hobbled them, rubbed them down, and fed them, he too sat by the fire and warmed his hands.

“Will you cook?” Jaross wondered, as if it had been as much on his mind as his love for Jhan. “I know that you are a lady and used to servants, but I am a man. Now that you are better...”

Jhan scowled, the partitioning of camp duties the last thing that he wanted to argue about. “I'm not a good cook . Do you ask other men to cook for you when you're out on a journey with them?”

“No,” Jaross replied, confused.

“Then don't ask me to.” Jhan took up a rag. “I'm going to wash in the stream. Anything you can scrape out of a pan will be better than anything I can manage, I assure you.”

Jhan didn't wait for a reply. He wearily crouched by the stream and dipped his rag into the half frozen water. Huffing in shock as he wiped his face with the freezing wet rag, Jhan felt his fingers go instantly numb when he washed his hands.

Returning quickly to the warmth of the fire, Jhan was satisfied to see Jaross cooking some chunks of dried meat and vegetables in a boiling pan of water. The man was frowning, but biting on his lips to stifle an argument.

When the stew was finished and they were both sitting and eating quietly, Jaross' resentment ballooned until he exploded at last. “This is all wrong! I should have cared for the baku and you should

have cooked! I will not submit to this again!"

Jhan shrugged as he swallowed a mouthful of stew. "All right."

Jaross stared. "What?"

"All right," Jhan repeated, louder. "If you want me to, I don't mind. Taking care of the baku is hard work. I can see that your arm is still bothering you. I would have thought that you would have been glad not to have to do it." Jhan paused and then smiled tightly. "I just hope that you have a cast iron stomach."

Jaross was surprised and confused, looking as if he had been tricked somehow and not understanding how it had been done. He scowled. "I expected you to argue."

Jhan's smile widened, but it was a warning. "I might still. I take offense that you consider cooking women's work. I've known some men who were very good cooks. I worked for a Master cook in Pekarín and he was a man. I can accept cooking if your reasoning is because you don't like it, but I can't accept it just because you think you shouldn't do it because you're a man!"

Jaross became even more confused. "I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"All of what you just said! How can cooking not be women's work?"

Jhan sighed. "I can't cook. I've tried, but it takes patience, something I've always been very short of. Women aren't born able to cook, Jaross."

"But they are suited to it as they are suited to raising families and keeping the home," Jaross was maddeningly persistent.

Jhan wanted to argue about that too, but he sighed, thinking how much he wanted to do just that and how he would have given anything to be able to marry, raise a family, and keep a home. As Christine, he had fled from it, wanting a life of power and position. As Jhan, it was an oasis he could never reach.

"A woman should be able to choose," Jhan said at last. "Some women just aren't cut out to have families and keep homes."

"And you are one of those?" Jaross looked ashen, some dream collapsing like an unsteady brick wall.

How could he explain that such a dream was just that for him? Jhan wondered sadly. He knew that he couldn't, so, instead, he went to sit by Jaross and smoothed out a patch of barren earth. "Let's forget about all of that. I said I would cook. I want to know where we are. Can you draw a map for me?"

Jaross still looked crestfallen, but he nodded slowly, accepting the abrupt change of subject as if he too didn't want to face anymore uncomfortable truths.

Taking up a small rock, Jaross began scratching the frozen earth with it, making broad lines. He drew two horizontal lines about a foot apart. At the top he drew Pekarín and the cities about it. At the very top Jaross drew a forest as a border.

“Pekarín,” Jaross explained. “The mountains separating it from the lowlands are the Tath mountains. The road leading to the coast is called the Ankar road. We have swung wide of it, but that brings us faster to our destination.” He drew a line. “The Vaha River. It's very wide and there are only a few ways across. I don't know how Bheni intended to cross, but she and Lhiddi must have discovered a way. We will have to find it as well or return to the Ankar Road to cross. That will take time.”

Jhan noticed that he wasn't drawing any towns or cities. “Is there any inhabited places between us and the river?”

“I've never come this way,” Jaross admitted. “I've only been to Nanjia twice. I don't know.”

“Show me the rest,” Jhan urged. “Show me where you're from.”

“This is the coast,” Jaross pointed to the lowest line. “To the East is Petrath and Camaroe. Karana is nestled to the North just above Petrath. The Telaga mountains reach North East and Belross lies at their feet near the Vaha River.”

Jhan gripped Jaross' drawing hand, going pale. “Will we be close to that? If the Dark King has taken that over -”

“No!” Jaross assured him quickly. “Belross is weeks away to the East .”

Jhan released Jaross' hand. He'd left a mark there from his fingernails. “Sorry. What about the rest?”

“Jujido is along the coast to the West,” Jaross went on. “Elphata is beside that and Shunagra is to the North.” He drew some islands out from the coast. “Bheni and Lhiddi are from here. Shanjia, Alatha, and Bhotavi are the largest islands. You have to take ship from Lelita in Jujido to reach them.”

It was all so close together. “Isn't there somewhere else?”

“There is, but I've heard only strange trader stories about them,” Jaross admitted. “These are the places that I know,” he said as he pointed to the crude map.

“I'm going to the islands,” Jhan decided firmly, nodding a little grimly to himself. “I'll leave you as soon as we cross the Vaha River.”

“You are so afraid that you would go that far alone?” Jaross shook his head in disbelief and smoothed out the map with his free hand. “There is still a lot of country between you and Jujido. I hope that we find Bheni and the women, for your sake.”

Jaross didn't offer to escort Jhan. It bothered Jhan until he began thinking about it as he curled up in his blankets to go to sleep. Jaross wanted to get home as quickly as possible. He wanted to fight the

Dark King along with his people. Brave, Jhan thought, but only because Jaross didn't know the horror of what he would be facing. Jhan, who knew all too well, felt pity for Jaross as he fell asleep.

Jhan found himself sitting in a chair opposite Gregory. The man was smoking a pipe, of sorts, with two bowls, that trailed smoke into the rafters of his home. He took it out of his mouth and stared over it at Jhan.

"I'm trying to sleep!" Jhan protested and tried to stand. His dream body refused to move.

"I've told you," Gregory replied quietly. "You are bringing yourself here, not I."

"I don't like you!" Jhan shouted, dream fists clenched. "Why would I bring myself to someone that I don't like?"

"Why don't you like me?" Gregory asked, curious.

"Because you are trying to force me to do something that I don't want to!"

"Which is?"

"To come to you so that you can help me with my Power!"

Gregory picked up an ashtray made out of a cut open gourd and tapped his pipe into it methodically. "How many times have you almost used Power inadvertently since last we spoke? How many people have almost died?"

"I just need to get away from people who try to-to attack me!" Jhan stammered back, defiant, yet feeling like weeping. He knew the truth of Gregory's words.

"Do you think that there is such a place for one like you?"

Jhan knew that there wasn't, but he refused to admit it. "Jhanian was born with this Power. There must be a way to control it or to shut it off!"

"Jhanian wasn't born with it," Gregory seemed certain.

"No?"

"The Dark King twisted Jhanian's body and used Power on your mind so completely, that you learned how to tap into the Power from him."

Jhan jumped on that information "Then it might be possible to turn it off?"

Gregory seemed reluctant to give Jhan that hope. "Yes, maybe. You must come here to me, in your body, so that we can discover what can be done."

Jhan shook his head. "No. You want to control me, just like everyone else. You want me to learn

how to use the Power. I want it shut off, forever and completely. Can you do that?"

Gregory was silent for some time. He lit his pipe again and puffed on it thoughtfully. Before Jhan could repeat his question and demand an answer, he stirred and replied. "I never said that I wanted you to learn to use the Power. If you truly want to shut it off, you will have to sacrifice a great deal. Are you willing to do whatever it takes to turn the Power off inside of you completely?"

Jhan laughed bitterly. His body floated up towards the ceiling, weightless. "What can you do to me that hasn't already been done by the Dark King?"

"There are things..." but Gregory stopped and sighed. "If you are agreed to this, then come. I will be waiting."

Jhan aroused briefly from sleep, disoriented, as the dream faded away. His last thought, before falling into true sleep again was, '*I have a map, but I don't know what of!*' and cursed himself for not asking Gregory.

Chapter Nine

(White Waters)

“This is disgusting!” Jaross turned his head and violently spat out breakfast.

“Thank you!” Jhan growled back sarcastically and threw the spoon into the pan of burned mush that he had attempted to cook.

“It doesn't even taste right!” Jaross tossed the contents of his bowl off to one side. “I think that you did this on purpose! No one could ruin porridge that badly!”

“I can!” Jhan fished the pan off of the fire as it began to smoke and flame. He gingerly carried it to the stream and plunged it into the water.

“No! Don't do that!” Jaross shouted, but it was too late.

The hot pan met freezing water and there was a loud pop and sizzle that startled Jhan so badly he let loose of the wooden pan handle. The pan sank under the water.

Jhan exclaimed at the loss and then looked nervously to see how Jaross was reacting.

Jaross had a hand over his mouth as if stifling obscenities. He strode to the water and looked down, trying to see where the pan had gone. The swift water, strong enough to move boulders, had already carried it downstream.

“Lady Jhan!” Jaross shouted at last and clenched his hands. “Have you no sense at all?” Jaross turned and strode towards Jhan with his fists still clenched.

Fear overwhelmed Jhan and he stumbled trying to turn and run. Jaross didn't have time to remember his injured arm as he grabbed Jhan to keep him from hitting the ground. There was an audible pop and Jaross howled in pain as he released Jhan and clutched at his shoulder.

Jhan backed away, terrified by Jaross' anger and his shouted curses. The expression on Jhan's face must have been shocking. Jaross stopped cursing and simply looked at Jhan in amazement, perhaps seeing himself reflected in Jhan's wide blue eyes and not liking what he saw of himself.

“I wasn't going to hurt you,” Jaross protested quietly. “I was going to the baku behind you. I didn't trust myself to speak, so I was going to do something until I calmed down.”

Jhan was breathing in gasps, arms wrapped about himself as he stepped away from Jaross. “I don't trust any man,” Jhan panted, but his fear was receding, replaced by a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. “I'm always going to expect to be hurt, no matter how well I know you.”

“You told me about this before, but I didn't believe it.” Jaross replied in a strained voice. There was dead silence and then he made a poor attempt to lighten the mood and calm them both down. “I should have believed you couldn't cook as well.”

Jhan knew Jaross didn't expect him to laugh. He nodded instead, letting Jaross know that he was in control of himself again. "Your arm...?" Jhan asked, both fearful and guilty.

Jaross looked down at it, flexed it, and opened and closed his hand. "Better. My shoulder must have been out of the joint. When I grabbed you, it must have popped back in. I guess that's something we can salvage out of this morning." Jaross couldn't keep an accusing tone out of his voice.

Jhan didn't blame Jaross for being angry, but, as they mounted their baku and began to ride, he couldn't help feeling angry at Jaross in return. He felt that the man was, again, attempting to make Jhan the woman that he imagined that he loved. Wrapped up in youthful selfishness, the pain Jaross was causing Jhan in the attempt didn't seem to matter.

Jaross reached over the space between their baku to hand Jhan a piece of dried fruit bar. Jhan took it in a manner that didn't even allow their fingertips to touch. He chewed on it while Jaross stared at him.

"You're still upset. I didn't meant to frighten you." Jaross began to apologize, but Jhan shook his head, frowning, and Jaross fell silent.

"You just reminded me of my fear. It's always there, Jaross. Once in awhile I can forget, but it always returns."

"This Dark King... I would kill him for what he has done to you," Jaross said and he was grimly serious.

Jhan felt himself going pale at the mere mention of the name. "Promise me, Jaross."

"What, Lady Jhan?"

"That you will run away as fast, and as far, as you can if you ever do see the Dark King. My revenge isn't worth so much."

"You are noble as well as brave, Lady Jhan."

Jhan looked away at the rolling hills, growing furious at Jaross' obstinacy in making him something he definitely wasn't. "No, not brave, not at all, and being noble doesn't have anything to do with it. I'm simply being realistic. You can't kill someone like Dagara Ku Ni. He's a nightmare. Nightmares are unstoppable."

"Is that his name?"

Jhan blinked and looked at Jaross, unaware that he'd used the Dark King's real name. "I think it is. Duke Yhenni used it."

"Dagara Ku Ni. It is good to know the name of your enemy."

"Do you recognize it?" Jhan wondered.

Jaross shook his head with a frown as he rubbed his throbbing arm. "I've never heard of any king

named that, or even a prince.”

“Could he had come from another land other than the ones you showed me yesterday?”

Jaross shrugged. “I don't know. I suppose. I think it's more likely that he gave himself the title of king and used his Power to make it true.”

Jhan shivered, recoiling from the subject. “Let's not talk about it anymore. It doesn't really matter.”

“Not to you,” Jaross replied shortly . “But to my people, who must fight him, it's everything.”

There was a long silence. The snow had stopped its powdery downfall and the sky was a cloudless, royal blue. The crisp, cold air made their breaths steam and the baku had ice sparkling the hair under their muzzles.

“Will you leave me as soon as we cross the Vaha River?” Jhan wondered, voicing a new fear.

“Missing me already?” Jaross joked with a half smile. “To be serious, I don't think that you should attempt to go to Jujido alone.”

“I'm going,” Jhan replied, stubborn.

“Let me say it in a better manner,” Jaross amended, almost apologetically. “You won't make it on your own. If your own cooking doesn't kill you, then running out of supplies will.”

“I'm not going with you,” Jhan was firm. “I can't- I won't get that close to the Dark King.”

“I wasn't suggesting that you should.” Jaross motioned up ahead absently. “Across the Vaha is the Tamaran Road. If we go a little East, we'll reach the road and Lake Rheho. I've heard there are some villages there. We might find traders to take you to Jujido from there, but I'm certain they'll want to take you by the Ankar Road. It's closer to Petrath than I know you're comfortable with, but the alternative is taking the Tamaran Road to Shunagra and going through the marshes to Jujido. I wouldn't advise a man to go that way, let alone someone such as you, Lady Jhan.”

Jhan digested that information slowly. The enormity of the journey overwhelmed him and he chewed on his lip viciously to stop himself from crying. Without money, he was left to either find his own way, something that he doubted, as much as Jaross, that he could accomplish, or rely on strange traders to get him to Jujido safely.

“There is a third alternative.” Jaross had been watching Jhan's rising panic. “You could go with me to Petrath and I could give you several ladies and a few honorable men to escort you.”

“Why would you do that?” Jhan was amazed even though he knew that he would never take Jaross up on the offer.

“Because you are a lady and you know my reasons.”

Jhan did and he swallowed. “Thank you, Jaross, but no.”

“I expect nothing in return -”

"I hope not!" Jhan was really angry now, the heat of it burning up his fear of the journey ahead of him.

Jaross colored, but continued doggedly. "See some sense. Coming to Petrath with me is the only safe way."

"No." Jhan turned his eyes to the way ahead. "I'll take your Tamaran Road to Shunagra myself. I might- I might have to stop there and try and make some money for supplies. After that, I'll find a way to Jujido."

"This is madness!" Jaross erupted, but Jhan held firm. "I told you that I would protect you. You dishonor me by doubting it!"

Jhan felt the anger flowing out of him as quickly as it had come, to tired and stressed to sustain it. There was only one way to make Jaross stop begging him and give him rest. Jhan swallowed hard and then held up his hands for Jaross to see.

"What's wrong?" Jaross wondered, puzzled.

"Are they beautiful?" Jhan asked in a voice gone husky with painful memories.

"Yes."

"The fingernails are like pearls, aren't they?" Jhan persisted. "Perfectly shaped and shimmering."

"Jhan." Jaross was at a loss. "What are you trying to say?"

Jhan swallowed again, fighting for resolve, knowing that he was going white. "I remember some things about being Dagara's victim. The terrible parts I've wiped from my mind to keep me from going insane. Still, the things I do remember aren't nice either, not at all."

"You don't have to -" Jaross began, but Jhan cut him off.

"I do, so that you understand." Jhan closed his hands and clenched them tightly on the reins of his baku. "You see, Dagara was never satisfied with me. He kept changing me with Power, wanting me perfect. My fingernails... They used to make him particularly angry. He would... pull them out, one by one, and then create new ones with his Power. He did this over and over again, like a compulsion."

"Stop!" Jaross had gone white as well, putting his hands over his ears and turning his face away. "Forgive me, Lady Jhan."

"So, you see, I can't chance falling into Dagara's hands again. I won't go anywhere close. I will risk everything, even my life, to get as far away as I can."

They rode for an hour, saying nothing. Jhan regained his composure and the blue sky and the bright sun seemed to have the power to melt the darkness away and to clear his eyes and mind.

"I'm going with you," Jaross spoke at last and he had a tone in his voice that didn't encourage argument. "My land has been under siege for a long time. I don't think that they will miss the sword of

Khun Ji Nava's fourth son a little while longer. Once I see you safely in Lelita in Jujido, I only have to take the coast road home. My honor will not allow for less. “

It didn't require a response. Jhan felt glad and relieved. A weight lifted from his soul. Yes, now he would truly get away from Dagara Ku Ni and his tortures. Safe in Alatha, he might even begin to forget.

Two days of travel found them by the Vaha River. Shallow, but wide, it rushed at an incredible speed carrying ice and debris from some tributary higher in the mountains. Warmer the farther South they traveled, it was still cold enough to huddle inside their cloaks, but warm enough to melt the ice whenever it rushed high enough to reach the riverbank.

The baku balked and Jhan didn't blame them. He leaned in the saddle to look from one end of the river to the other as far as sight would allow. He couldn't see any way to cross.

Jaross wasn't ready to give up. “Bheni and Lhiddi must have had a plan! We will ride along the river, as best we can, until we reach the Ankar Road crossing. We may find something yet.”

Jhan balked as stubbornly as the baku. “I'm riding the other way. I've explained...”

“But, if we find nothing?”

Jhan gave Jaross a cold, uncompromising glare. “I don't care. You can leave me, if you like. I won't go back the other way.”

Jaross wanted to argue, jaw working, but he knew the uselessness of it and held his tongue. He led the way to the West, both baku slipping and sliding in the mud of the riverbank. It was dangerous going, but necessary. Jaross was watching the water intently, trying to gauge its depth every few yards as he fought to control his nervous baku with only one good arm, his other nearly healed, but still stiff and awkward.

“We're going North again!” Jaross swore and pulled up his Baku. It was late in the day now and clear to them both that there would be no crossing.

Jaross pulled his baku away from the bank, shaking his head in defeat, but Jhan refused to give up. He sat, staring at the rushing water and measuring the distance to the far bank with his eyes.

Jhan knew that if he suggested the madness that he had in his mind, Jaross would refuse and try to stop him. There was only one thing to do. Without a word, Jhan took a steadying breath and then threw his weight abruptly sideways.

The baku had been standing on the very edge of the bank. Already loaded down with awkward

packs, Jhan's sudden shift in weight was enough to send it off balance and crashing into the water. They went under like a stone.

The water was so cold, that Jhan felt as if his heart had stopped. It seemed an eternity before they broke the surface again, Jhan with a gasp and the baku with a panicked honk. Wrapping his hands in the pack harness, Jhan jerked the halter and forced the baku to follow its nose towards the farther bank.

The baku was strong. Its legs thrashed the water, carrying it forward despite the fierce current carrying them downstream. Jhan hooked both arms into the harness when his hands went too numb to hold on any longer and he closed his eyes against the bone chilling cold.

A little further, Jhan promised himself every other minute. A little further and the baku would get out of the water. Hold on. Hold on. To let go was death. He could swim, but not in water like that! The baku was his buoy. Hold on. Hold on.

At last! The baku climbed onto the further bank and stood, dripping and head down, breathing like a bellows. Tangled in the harness, Jhan was carried along with it, dangling like a wet rag doll. He pulled his arms out of the harness with a last effort and fell to the muddy bank in a heap, retching water that he had swallowed and shaking from head to foot with the cold.

Hands knotted in Jhan's clothes and dragged him up from the mud. Jaross was kneeling over him, just as wet and shaking too, face furious. "How c-could you do such m-madness?" Jaross shouted into his face. "We could have both died!"

"You followed," Jhan was incredulous, dazed.

"Of c-course I followed!" Jaross retorted through his own chattering teeth. "I-I thought that you had fallen in! It wasn't until I s-saw you heading for this bank th-that I knew!"

Jhan pushed at Jaross' hands and the man released him as he sat up, but Jaross' hands balled into fists as if he longed to strike out with them. "I-I knew that y-you would try to s-stop me," Jhan managed with chattering teeth. "I-I didn't expect you t-to follow. I'm s-sorry."

"Sorry?" Jaross tried to stand, couldn't. He was as weak as Jhan from fighting to hold onto his baku. "W-We almost died in that water! Th-This is twice that you have almost k-killed me!"

Jhan was stung and then angry. "I don't deserve that! You ch-chose to follow both times."

"To s-save you!"

"I didn't ask -" Jhan swallowed as the world spun and he lay back in the mud, spent. "I had to c-cross and you know w-why," he whispered through the dizziness

"You are most s-selfish, Lady Jhan of Pekarín."

"What?" Incredulous, it was all Jhan could utter coherently.

Jaross was wide eyed, disbelieving. "Y-You don't even understand w-what you were doing! You

have the p-pack animal! I wouldn't have had any s-supplies to reach Rheho Lake! Don't I even enter into y-your thoughts? Is saving yourself so important t-to you that you would consign me to starvation t-to achieve it?"

Jhan's hands went to his cold face in sudden comprehension. "I- You're right. I didn't think- I didn't th-think of you at all. I was s-so frightened..."

"You didn't even give me the benefit of the doubt!" Jaross raged on. "I was about t-to suggest that we f-follow the Vaha all the way to Elphata and t-take the ferry over, when you took matters into your own hands. You risked our lives f-for nothing!"

Mortified, Jhan placed a shaking arm over his eyes, unable to bear the look on Jaross' pale, shivering face. "I thought you were g-going to force me to go back t-to Rheho Lake," Jhan explained, ashamed.

"After all that we said to one another? After m-my promise? Again and again you doubt my honor." Jaross' voice sounded wounded as well as angry. "I would have had us swim th-the river as well, if there hadn't b-been another way. I wouldn't have t-taken you back, Lady Jhan."

Jhan listened to Jaross stand and heard him lead the baku away. Baggage hit the ground with sodden thuds and Jhan heard Jaross swear explosively. "Everything is s-soaked through! It'll take a day, maybe two to dry it all out. I hope th-that the weather holds. It doesn't snow down this far often, but it's famous for f-freezing rains."

Jhan continued to lay where he was, going numb. He was punishing himself for his selfish stupidity. Jaross had been right. He had only thought of himself, his deep seated fear overriding everything but an instinctive need to flee at any cost.

Smoke came to Jhan's nose and he heard wood pop and crackle. Jaross didn't call to him, so he continued to lay where he was, arm still shielding him from facing his own foolish actions and the man that he had twice almost killed.

Jhan could hear the man moving about, branches snapping and something wet being tossed about and rung out. When a shadow blocked out the sun, Jhan moved his arm and blinked up at Jaross. The anger had been replaced by a frown of embarrassment.

"I suppose that you did warn me that you were nearly mad," Jaross said at last.

"Th-the difference between m-mad and nearly m-mad becomes small and almost impossible to see s-sometimes," Jhan replied softly. "I am sorry, J-Jaross. I know it isn't good enough, but please believe it."

Jaross nodded stiffly and then shrugged as if his embarrassment was growing and he was trying to throw off the weight of it. "We have to..." He tried again. "We have to get out of our wet clothes."

Everything in the baggage is soaked. We don't have a ch-change so we have to... to sit about until something dries.”

Jhan sat up slowly, every muscle and inch of flesh screaming for warmth. Still, he tried to deny them, looking about frantically. The rolling hills had been replaced by a sparse forest of tall, spindly trees devoid of leaves. There wasn't privacy to be had anywhere.

Jaross had made a lean to of broken tree limbs and wet blankets about the fire, leaving a hole at the center to vent the smoke, but that afforded as little cover as the open countryside if they both were going to shelter there.

“You have to undress or you'll f-freeze.” Jaross explained as if he were speaking to a recalcitrant child, reading Jhan's expression clearly.

“No!” Jhan clutched at his wet clothes as Jaross helped him to stand, walk to the shelter, and settle down by the fire.

Jaross sat down beside Jhan, face anxious and not liking it any more than he did. “I will t-turn my back to you and you to me. That's the best th-that can be done.”

“No!” Jhan repeated, frightened and obstinate.

“You will or I will undress you m-myself,” Jaross insisted sternly, nodding at Jhan's look. “Yes, risking my life again for you, I know. That Power of yours might t-take offense and cook me well done!”

If Jaross saw that Jhan was a man, he might begin to guess who Jhan's body used to be. Jhan imagined an ugly, dangerous scene, but Jaross' eyes caught his and they were level and full of strength of will.

“Trust in my honor, Lady Jhan,” Jaross said. “I will not l-look, not even at your back.”

Still fresh with guilt from having doubted him before, Jhan surprised himself by consenting. “Not even at m-my back,” he warned.

Jaross nodded firmly and stood. “Th-throw your dress out of the shelter and I w-will lay it out to dry with the other clothes.” He left the shelter to do just that and Jhan slowly began pulling the wet material off with his shaking, fumbling fingers. After throwing the sodden dress out of the shelter, Jhan huddled by the fire. The blankets were steaming from the heat and it was quickly becoming a tepid sauna.

“I am coming back in,” Jaross warned and Jhan turned away, clutching his knees against his chest and shivering, not from cold this time. Jaross stirred up the fire and Jhan had a quick flash of skin before he turned his face away. Jaross was naked as well.

“P-Please, stay calm,” Jaross sounded as fearful as Jhan, but for a different, more deadly, reason. “I

have never compromised a woman's honor. I have never compromised my own. You are as safe as m-my sister.”

Jaross had only to turn his head, Jhan thought, to know that Jhan had nothing in common with his sister! True to his word, though, Jaross never allowed himself even a glimpse, turning his head sideways to avoid it as he tried to salvage the baku grain and their food supplies.

Jhan slowly began to relax, his teeth ceasing to chatter with cold, as the shelter warmed up and the blankets began to dry out. The ground was remarkably dry and free of stones. A soft padding of dried leaves made a soft bed. Even the sudden drafts of cold that managed to creep under the blankets or through the center when the fire flickered, didn't shake the overall warmth of the shelter. Jhan remembered his crude attempt of long ago, outside of Pekarín, to do the same thing with his clothes and coat and found this one far superior.

Jaross cooked the food that couldn't be salvaged. “Better to eat it and store it in your body than to let it go to waste,” he told Jhan as he put a bowl behind him without turning.

Jhan turned to take it and caught sight of Jaross' strong, lean back. He paused, staring, and then remembered himself. He took the bowl, turning his back once again, and felt an embarrassed flush. He knew Jaross had heard him pause and wondered what the man was thinking now.

“Are you calm?”

Jhan was caught off guard. Jaross was only thinking that he, Jhan, had been afraid. “Yes,” Jhan replied. “Don't worry, Jaross.” That sounded like useless advice even to Jhan. In Jaross' place he would have been just as afraid. Jhan was a bomb, sensitive and ready to explode with Power at any unknown provocation.

Jhan ate. The food was cloying, too much of a mixture of many different things to be pleasant. He forced it down, very hungry, and managed to finish the second bowl that Jaross handed him as well.

“We'll save the rest for breakfast,” Jaross decided and poked at the fire until it was banked. “Try and get some sleep while I tend to the baku. They will probably need their legs rubbed down.”

Jhan almost nodded and turned to lay down, but then stiffened. “You'll get cold, walking around like that.”

“The baku are standing near the blankets to get warm. It won't be too bad,” Jaross responded, but his tone revealed that he knew Jhan's concern wasn't entirely about his health. “Stay awake until I return and then we will both sleep. I doubt if any sane man would be out in this wilderness to threaten us and we couldn't do much to defend ourselves even if there were one.”

“I didn't think a man's fighting skill depended on whether he was dressed or not,” Jhan yawned back absently, fears neutralized by Jaross' matter-of-fact tone of voice.

“Was that a joke?” Jaross seemed incredulous. He chuckled and Jhan was glad. The man's anger had left him. “I only meant that one man, naked or otherwise, is little defense, Lady Jhan.”

Jhan, who knew how deadly his small hands could be, clenched them and frowned. “You would be surprised what one person could do, Jaross.”

Jaross didn't understand, of course. “Confidence in me at last? I am heartened, my Lady.”

Jhan heard him go out and sighed. Sometimes he longed for a quiet moment, or even a joke, that wasn't burdened by the awful weight of his memories. There seemed to be no rest from them, ever. When Jaross returned and sought his bed, Jhan found that those memories had robbed him of sleep as well. He sat up, long into the night, and listened to Jaross breathe in sleep. He didn't trust Jaross, despite what he'd said to the contrary.

It did take a full day for their clothing and supplies to dry. After awkwardly getting through that day, their nerves were frayed, Jhan's from lack of sleep and worry, and Jaross from constantly keeping himself turned away. He had taken over all the camp duties to spare Jhan from exposing himself needlessly, but he had to enter the shelter constantly and there was always the call for entrance and the nervous, strained interaction between them.

Jhan was relieved when Jaross finally brought him his clothes and he was able to put on their warmth and protectiveness. Jaross had already dressed. When he turned about to look at Jhan after Jhan had signaled that he was through, the man looked just as relieved as Jhan.

“I don't think that we need to speak of this to anyone,” Jaross announced stiffly. “It wouldn't do for our honor for people to know that we had spent a night and a day... naked together.”

Jhan laughed. It was rough at first, unused, but then it rang true and clean and he couldn't stop. Their situation was so ludicrous that even he couldn't miss the humor in it. Jaross joined in after a moment of making certain that Jhan's laugh was neither bitter nor hysterical.

They both quieted at the same time and stared at each other in the gathering dusk and the flickering firelight. Jaross swallowed and looked away. Jhan bit his lip. Why did the man still feel for him? Did he like the abuse that Jhan heaped on him? The way that Jhan had risked his life? Did he like Jhan's selfishness? Jhan knew that he was maddening at the best of times. What did this man find to love?

It made it that much worse for Jhan to know that he felt nothing in return and that it wouldn't help matters to tell Jaross that he loved only one man, Kile Helarion Dor. Jhan didn't want to continue to hurt Jaross, but he was making it impossible for Jhan not to.

Jhan thought of Kile Helarion Dor, as Jaross turned and lay down to sleep. Kile was very different from Jaross. Jaross seemed to be a sensitive man, young and inexperienced; flushed with innocence. Kile, a Lord's son, was a soldier as well. He'd been exposed to a soldier's roughness and he had acquired confidence and strength from the command of other men.

Kile's hard headed approach to everything, while just as maddening as Jhan's idealistic recklessness, had carried with it a feeling of security, of being wrapped in strong competent arms. Whereas Jaross had to beg for trust and confidence, Kile had never had anyone doubt him.

Idealistic, indeed, Jhan berated himself. He was remembering all of Kile's good qualities and making his bad ones seem good. He was forgetting how angry all of that had made him back in Pekarín. How many times had Kile laid hands on him to force him, Jhan, to his will? Jhan couldn't imagine Jaross ever doing that, even when he had threatened it.

Still, it was Kile Jhan wished was sleeping behind him, breathing as easy as a sleeping child. He would have given anything for Kile's strength. He needed it, not Jaross' inexperienced good intentions.

Was that really fair? Jhan felt suddenly guilty. Without Jaross he would never have made it this far. Instead, he would have been either killed by the Duke's men, burned alive by his own unleashed Power, or lost and wandering the wilderness. Jhan felt that he needed to give credit where credit was due and stop letting his heart rule his thinking. Jaross was young, but he was a good and honorable man. It was Jaross, and not Kile, Jhan had to rely on to get him to Alatha.

Jhan slept, secure in his clothes, and came to a bitter realization just before tumbling off into sleep. It didn't matter about Kile or Jaross. He was thinking like a woman, as if he were free to choose between either man. The truth of the matter was brutal. He would never be able to choose either of them.

CHAPTER TEN

(The Heart of the Beast)

Someone was putting flowers into his hair. Red flowers. The thorns pricked, pulled, and drew blood. A white hand came into view and touched a trickle of blood that ran down the side of Jhan's face. The hand withdrew and the Dark King's face hovered near, fiery eyes examining the finger

covered in blood. Very slowly, he licked at the finger, sensual and indulgent. Jhan realized that the finger was his own.

“No more to do,” The Dark King said around his pleasure. “You are my masterpiece.”

Jhan felt himself caught up in a powerful embrace. Those eyes looked deeply into his, the Dark King's fangs catching the light as he smiled. One squeeze, Jhan knew, and his back would break. Those eyes knew it too and relished his pain and anticipation.

“Should I end it for you now?” Dagara was wistful. “You betrayed me, but you've paid for that a hundred fold. I could show mercy. I could forget my plans and keep you with me. I could enfold you in a final embrace and let you rest easy, finally. Would you like that?”

Jhan found it in himself to nod, once.

Those arms lifted Jhan off of the ground and Dagara laughed. He seemed ready to do it. Ready to give Jhan the peace that he desperately wanted. Then, the man paused, lowered him again and put a hand to Jhan's cheek.

“That's not right. Your face is trying to grow again. Are you trying to ruin my art?” He took hold of Jhan by his hair and pulled him along behind him as if he were a doll. “I see that we are not through yet. Your death will have to wait another day.”

“Jhan?”

Jhan sat up, tossing his blankets aside in a panic and wiping at his sleep encrusted eyes. Jaross was crouching a few paces away, face concerned. The blanket shelter was gone and the baku were packed and ready to travel. Jaross had a bowl of the last of the ruined supplies.

“What happened?” Jhan was confused, disoriented.

“You were pale and sleeping so deeply,” Jaross replied. “I let you sleep, but you didn't wake up and you seemed to hardly breathe.”

“I was dreaming,” Jhan wiped at his face and then reached out and took the bowl from Jaross. He ate slowly. “I seem to keep having a lot of... strange dreams.”

“Maybe it has to do with your Power?” Jaross suggested as he put out the fire by poking it with a stick and kicking dirt onto it. It was perceptive and Jhan wondered if it could be true. “Do you remember what the dreams were about?”

“This one was dark... blurry. No, not really.” Jhan finished his food and slowly stood up.

“Something about growing. The other dreams... I seem to be talking to someone. They're more clear.

This man wants me to do something, but I don't want to.”

Jaross was staring at him speculatively, looking him slowly up and down. “You have grown.”

Jhan didn't comprehend what he was saying for a moment and then his hands touched his body in alarm. “Growing?”

Jaross nodded and pointed to the hem of Jhan's dress. “Your hem is rather short of your ankles now. You shouldn't go into a town or city like that. It would be disgraceful even with your boots covering your ankles.”

Jhan looked down and saw that his hem, which had been stitched by Gruna with expert fingers, was now four inches from his ankle! Jhan felt himself going white and then red, as conflicting emotions warred with one another. On the one hand he had long ago wearied of looking like a child, on the other he feared his man's body might be starting to do more, terrible types of growing.

“You're only, forgive me if I'm wrong, sixteen? Of course you should be growing.”

“Eighteen,” Jhan corrected absently.

“Truly?” Jaross seemed glad to find out that Jhan was older than he appeared, perhaps having been bothered by falling in love with a girl so young. “I would not have guessed.”

Jhan reached down and began a methodical ripping out of his hem seam. Well practiced in the art, he soon had the hem of the dress covering his ankles once more, only a crease to show where the stitching had been. It felt like a foolish exercise when Jaross was impatiently waiting, but it gave Jhan time to compose himself.

Dagara had made Jhan what he was. A masterpiece, he recalled from his dream. Changed with Power and shrunken to half the size of the original Jhanian, was it too hard to believe that his body was struggling to finish growing or return to what it had been? Jhan touched his face, but it was as smooth as ever. That gave him a modicum of relief, but his worry didn't leave him when they mounted the baku and continued their journey.

Jhan tried to get his mind off of it. He thought about Bheni and the women, instead. They would be far out of reach by now, he knew, and it saddened him. He hadn't even been able to say goodbye. He wondered if they had missed him or if they had been glad to be rid of him. He hadn't been the best of companions, Jhan knew, but he had felt part of the group nonetheless.

Once he was in Alatha, Jhan thought, he would find Bheni and Lhiddi. They were kind. Bheni would help him. And know what he was, Jhan realized with a sinking feeling. Wasn't that what he was running away from as well as the Dark King? Hadn't he dreamed of finding a place where he had complete anonymity? Better to travel to one of the other islands and forget Bheni and Lhiddi altogether, Jhan knew, and rely on himself and find his own way.

Memory pricked, memory of another dream. Jhan had promised someone something. He recalled a face. A man with white braids on the top of his head and ice blue eyes. Gregory. The man had told Jhan that he could take the Power away from him once and for all. Wasn't that as important as getting away from all who knew him?

Jhan shrugged, realizing that it was moot. The mental map sat as if it were a bit of dust in the corner of Jhan's eye. Whether it had been a dream or not, he couldn't follow it. Jhan still didn't know where the map pertained to. It was a bit of madness for which he constantly cursed the Sahvossa. Jhan supposed a Sahvossa might have been able to figure the map out, but they had over estimated his ability.

“Khor, in Shunagra, is a week away,” Jaross was saying.

Jhan roused himself from his wandering thoughts to pay attention. “That far?”

“Not so far,” Jaross replied. “but the land is rough going. I don't know whether our supplies are going to hold out. I might have to take time to trap some game. We might be forced to eat some unpleasant things to keep us alive, Lady Jhan. Not much grows in the Winter, even as far South as this.”

His fault, Jhan knew and realized that Kile was probably thinking the same thing. “Don't worry about me,” Jhan replied stoically. “I won't complain.”

Jaross snorted. “I'll be complaining. I don't see why you can't also.”

Jhan managed a smile, but it was tight and full of guilt.

The land turned difficult quickly. The sparse trees caused them to ride in a zig zag fashion and the land was punctured by shallow gullies with slippery sides. Again and again they were forced to ride along these gullies until they could find a spot to safely get across. That also took them back and forth across the landscape. By the end of the day, they hadn't traveled far and they were both exhausted.

“Give me one of your dresses.” Jaross ordered suddenly, as he dismounted and felt along the legs of his baku.

“Why?” Jhan was pulling a dusky gray dress from the baggage strapped to his baku as he dismounted as well.

“I'll need to rip it up. We need to wrap the legs of our baku, for support, tomorrow.”

Jhan clutched the dress to him, eyes wide in shocked protest. “No! Use one of the blankets or some of your clothes!”

Jaross was patient, his voice calm and reasonable. “This is no time for vanity, Lady Jhan. My clothes are too small to make many strips. We need the blankets. Your dress is wide enough to do the job. You have others.”

Jhan colored and slowly handed the dress over to Jaross. "I am not vain," he replied, irritated.

Jaross slung the dress over one shoulder as he led the baku to a spot where he could tend them.

"No, of course not. I misspoke."

Jhan put hands on hips. "No, you didn't! You really think that I'm vain!"

Jaross scowled. "If you will not accept my apology -"

"I didn't hear one."

"Then, I give it."

Jhan scowled now, too. "I still didn't hear it! I didn't want to give you my dress because I don't know when I'll be able to afford another."

Jaross clenched his jaw and said nothing as he unloaded the baku and began rubbing them down with both hands, his injured arm no longer bothering him. "I keep forgetting that you are not like other women," he said at last.

Jhan had been turning to gather wood for the fire. He half turned back so swiftly that he felt a pain in his side. "What do you mean by that?"

"I expected you to be vain," Jaross explained absently, his mind on the baku. "I expected you to argue because you didn't want me to ruin your dress. Any other woman would have."

Jhan let out a slow breath. He had thought Jaross had guessed at his true gender. Relieved, he was still angry. "I don't think that you have much experience with women if you think that, Jaross."

They continued to argue so loudly that they didn't see the troop of soldiers walking their imala into their camp. The leader sat his black imala and watched Jaross and Jhan shout back and forth for a full minute before interrupting.

"Hold!"

Jaross started, reaching for a sword that he no longer had. "Stay back! Jhan! Behind me!"

Jhan had dropped the two pieces of firewood he was holding and stared with mouth open. The leader held up a hand to show that he wasn't holding a weapon. He was short and straw blonde, brows making a blonde bar over brown eyes. His face was set in grim lines and his uniform was of Pekarín.

"We are peaceful, boy!" the soldier announced in a booming voice. "I am Captain Jaryn Haroldaven of Pekarín. I and my men are scouting the borders of Shunagra in the name of King Shaven Kel Nurien."

Jaross kept his stance, considering Jaryn's words. Making a decision, he straightened and raised his chin defiantly. "Pekarín soldiers in Shunagra? Why?"

"King Tekhal sent us to deliver and receive reports of Shunagra. When we discovered Shunagra woefully undermanned, we requested to stay and shore up their defenses. We have kin here. We felt

duty bound.”

“Most honorable.” Jaross gave the man a little bow of respect. The man returned it. “I am Jaross Ke Nava, fourth son of Lord Khun Ji Nava of Petrath. This woman is Jhan of Pekarín. We are traveling to Jujido so that the lady can take ship to Alatha. We were separated from our companions and we are short on supplies. May I request your assistance?”

“At your service, Lord Jaross.”

More bows were exchanged, but Jhan had hardly heard any of it. He was busy scanning the men with the Captain. Some of them, if not all, must recognize mad Jhan from Pekarín. It was useless to think that they wouldn't.

“How long have you been securing the border?” Jaross was asking.

“We spent a year in Shunagra gathering news and waiting for a shipment of goods that we were to escort to Pekarín,” Jaryn replied. “When I began hearing of a warrior King attacking Karana, Camaroe, and Petrath, I sent half of my contingent home to report to the King. “

A year? Well before Jhan had arrived on the scene. So, these men didn't know him. Jhan unclenched his hands and began to relax.

“You were making camp?” Jaryn asked. He motioned to his men and they all dismounted, imala milling and men, ten of them Jhan counted, beginning their assigned duties. “Excellent choice of campsites. We will have a separate fire and give you and your lady privacy.”

“She is not my lady,” Jaross quickly corrected the man. “And we have been too much alone, as you heard when you arrived. I will make a partition for Jhan's modesty and join your men at your fire, if you will have me?”

More nods and bows. Jhan watched, feeling invisible. Everyone was looking everywhere but at him and no one walked in touching distance as they set up their camp. Jaross seemed different as well. A man among men, Jhan thought as he watched him stake broken tree branches into the dirt and hang their blankets on them to make a wall. He made a small fire behind its protection and settled their baggage in easy reach of Jhan.

“I'll get some food from the soldiers and bring it over,” Jaross was saying as he gathered up his blanket.

“Eager to get away?” Jhan accused softly, acidly. “Did I make you that angry?”

“No,” Jaross replied, but he wasn't looking at Jhan and he seemed nervous and unsure. “I spoke too freely with you. I am a Lord and you are a Lady. I haven't been giving you the respect and courtesy that you deserve. It was dishonorable of me to have treated you so familiarly. Can you forgive me?”

After so long with only women for company and Jhan, who didn't act as he thought women should,

Jaross had allowed himself to treat Jhan as casually as one might have a man. These soldiers had reminded him of his station and the courtesies expected of him.

“Don't be too hard on yourself,” Jhan replied, wanting his words to sting. “You can't spend a few nights in a shelter with someone naked and not be familiar afterward.”

Jaross actually flinched and he looked about as if he feared that the other men might hear. “Please, never speak of that again. You have a free tongue, but it will only get you into trouble with the soldiers if they come to believe that you are shameless.”

“Oh,” Jhan nodded, understanding and going cold. “Are you saying that they might try to rape me if I'm less than genteel?”

Jaross turned as red as a Pekarín coat and stammered, shocked. “No! I did not mean that! I meant that they will treat you as a lady if you will only act as one!”

Jhan shook his head, bitterly amused. “I've always considered myself a very feminine woman. I don't think speaking my mind makes me less of one.”

“Your tongue is like a viper!” Jaross protested, growling low so that no one else could hear. “Why must you always argue? Don't you realize that you are only making things more difficult for yourself?”

Jhan sighed and sat down on top of the baggage. “I think that you are the one with the problem, Jaross. You seem to think that I should just be meek and mum and let you tell me what to do. I have a mind of my own. I will discuss things with you or anyone who tries to make plans for my future. You asked those soldiers to come along without even consulting me. You acted as if I wasn't even there. I won't stand for that.”

“You are a woman,” Jaross replied, as if Jhan needed reminding. “You are supposed to allow me to protect you and make your way smooth. You shouldn't have to worry about anything! I will do the arguing and the planning. You only have to sit your baka and follow along!”

“How can you have fallen in love with me?” Jhan asked in angry wonder. “I'm nothing like the woman that you really want.”

Jaross stammered again, caught totally off guard. “I'm -” Not in love with you, Jaross wanted to say, but Jhan saw that he couldn't. He *was* still in love with Jhan. Feeling sorry for him at last, Jhan waved him away impatiently.

“Go and get me something to eat,” Jhan told Jaross stiffly. “I'll play the lady and allow you to wait on me hand and foot, if that's what you want, but don't try and argue with me anymore. I'll only argue back and make a scene in front of your new friends.”

Jaross, red in the face, still wanted to argue, but Jhan had defeated him by his sudden compliance. Confused and not certain what to do, Jaross turned and left, his feet stomping angrily like a little boy.

“Your lady is fiery,” that was Jaryn, speaking low, but Jhan could still hear. “Forgive me for listening, but you made it impossible not to.”

There was a pause. Imala honked and shuffled. Dishes rattled together. Men talked in a low buzz. “She is not my lady. I am only her escort. She is only impatient with my inexperience,” Jaross replied in a voice tightly controlled.

“You are young,” Jaryn agreed. “You need to take the reins more tightly with her. Women need direction.”

Jhan felt his face go as hot as the campfire. His fists clenched as he took several harsh breaths to steady himself and keep from bolting around the blanket and shouting at Jaryn.

“Like a wild imala, you have to break in their spirit and show them that you are master. They will love you for it after,” Jaryn continued. It was obvious that he thought himself very wise.

Jhan actually stood now, mouth falling open in outrage. Only Jaross' careful reply stopped him cold. “You are not wed, are you, Jaryn?”

“No, Lord Jaross.”

“Then your technique has not actually brought you a wife?”

Jhan sat down again and smiled in relief, imagining Jaryn's irritated face. The man's reply was chill. “Ladies in Pekarín don't choose, Lord Jaross. We gave up that custom when we left the coastal countries and settled there.”

Jaross made no reply. After an hour, Jhan heard his footsteps and he came around the partition with a bowl of rich stew, real stew, not reconstituted dried meat strips and dehydrated vegetables. Jhan took it eagerly and began eating, but Jaross didn't leave right away.”

I suppose it's too much to hope that you didn't hear that?” Jaross whispered.

“I did,” Jhan replied around a mouthful of stew.

“Then I commend your restraint. I nearly punched him in the jaw.”

“Didn't know how ridiculous you sounded until you heard someone else say it, eh?” Jhan couldn't help goading Jaross.

“He's crude. A soldier. I don't think like he does.” Jaross sounded outraged that Jhan would think so.

“Oh, but you do,” Jhan replied and pointed a spoon at him. “You just put it into more '*courtly*' phrases. You call it '*being a lady*' and your '*honorable duty*'. It's exactly the same, Jaross. Exactly.”

Offended, Jaross hunched his shoulders as if Jhan had tried to hit him, and left once again. Jhan hated to be so hard on him. The man had done so much for him, but, in this, he couldn't give an inch. It was his freedom Jaross was trying to take from him.

“She is from Pekarín?” That was Jaryn again. “What is her family? I was a guard in the palace before I was put into the field.”

What would Jaross reply? The truth was, that Jaross didn't know who Jhan was, yet he had claimed that Jhan was a lady of Pekarín. Now, Jaross was probably thinking that he didn't have a family name to back up that claim. Jhan saw it very clearly. Without a title, Jhan was a nobody. A Lord wouldn't be escorting a nobody. They would probably laugh and think Jaross had been covering up the fact that Jhan was his woman. It wasn't something that Jhan could imagine Jaross accepting.

“She is a cousin of my family.” Jaross had decided on the truth as he knew it, or believed it to be. “The Nava have kin in Nangia and Pekarín. She was a maid to Princess Mageritte.”

“Jhan -” Jaryn mercilessly prodded.

“Jhan Yu Nava, actually. She is a lady, after all.”

Three names signified upper class, Jhan knew. Jaross had resorted to a small, two letter lie. Jhan wondered how the man's honor was bearing up under that.

“Jhan. It isn't really a name,” Jaryn persisted.

Perhaps Jaross didn't have a good poker face.

Jaross wasn't willing to try yet another lie. “Unconventional, yet it is her name.”

“Jhanus, Jhanika, Jhanynia, maybe, but just Jhan? Where did you meet this lovely woman?”

“On the road,” Jaross explained, his voice betraying his relief to be on more honest ground. “She was traveling with five other women, weavers by trade, I believe. I felt sorry for them and offered them escort. Unfortunately, we were separated.”

“So you said. How was that?”

“We were detained by Duke Yhenni in a fortress just South of the Tath mountains. He allowed the other women to go, but he held Jhan and myself to question us further, “ Jaross sounded angry now, reliving the shameful event. “By the time that we left the Duke, the women had traveled too far for us to catch up to them.”

That was leaving a lot unsaid and Jhan wondered at Jaross's reasons.

“So you don't truly know Lady Jhan?”

Again Jaryn returned to that and Jhan felt suddenly wary. “No, I suppose not,” Jaross replied cautiously, perhaps becoming wary as well. “but she is kin to me. You can see the likeness yourself. It would have been dishonorable to allow her to finish her journey alone and undefended.”

“Of course, Lord Jaross. It simply seems strange that a lady of Pekarín would have been allowed to travel with only other women for company.”

“Lady Jhan has much of her own mind and does as she thinks fit.” Jaross couldn't cover his

irritation at Jhan as he said it.

“As I said, Lord Jaross, a tight rein. She would make a man a grand trophy once she was shown some discipline. She is quite beautiful. Is she.. spoiled? Is that why her kin cared so little for her leaving?”

Jhan bit his lip, imagining Jaross turning every color of red under the sun. “Do not ask such questions in my presence, Jaryn! She is a Lady and I am her escort.”

Jhan hissed angrily. Why hadn't Jaross denied the accusation? Because he didn't know, Jhan realized, and he wasn't about to discuss or vouch for Jhan's unknown virginity.

“Forgive, Lord Jaross, I merely wished to know her status so that I could treat her as befits her station.”

“You will treat her as well as you would your Queen, in my presence. Is that understood, Captain Jaryn?”

“Yes, Lord Jaross.”

Jhan went to bed, feeling confident that Jaross had taken care of things. When he awoke in the morning, and slipped from behind the blanket, he was greeted by quick bows of deference from the soldiers and a stiff bow by Captain Jaryn. Jhan ate a hot bowl of some cereal grain near the baku and helped Jaross get the beasts ready for travel.

Jaross tried to push Jhan's hands away. “You are a Lady. Allow me to do this.”

“No. I won't let you treat me that way,” Jhan replied stubbornly.

Jaross stared with wide eyes. “You don't wish to be treated as a lady?”

Jhan made himself more clear. “I don't want to be treated as if I'm a-a doll. An empty headed doll. I could hear every word that you said last night. I could hear Jaryn being crude and I could hear you defending me. I appreciate that, I really do, but I don't appreciate that Jaryn should only treat me decently because I'm a lady! That's ridiculous. I can help with the animals. I should be allowed to do so without seeming less a woman and I should still be respected afterward.”

“You can't have grown up in Pekarín or in any land I know of if you think such things,” Jaross replied, at a loss.

Jaross had come so near to the truth and yet he would never guess at Jhan's true origin. It was too incredible even for Jhan to understand. “I don't remember where I'm from, I've told you.”

“I wish that you could remember,” Jaross growled. “I never wish to go there!”

“That's harsh,” Jhan shot back, but he turned and began buckling harness straps, glad when Jaross didn't argue about it any further.

The soldiers had loaded their gear already and begun to mount their imala. Jaryn approached and

his brown eyes rested on Jhan as he spoke, voice thoughtful. “We will travel two days with you and then we have to turn to the West. There is a little village called, Oneskoi. We will pass it on our journey. You can get supplies there and continue on your way.”

“Thank you, Captain Jaryn. Your help is most appreciated.” Jaross responded with a bow.

Jaryn bowed in return, but his eyes still did not leave Jhan. “Why are you traveling all the way to Alatha, Lady Jhan?”

Jhan tensed, suddenly disliking Jaryn even more, if that were possible. “I think that it is my own business,” Jhan responded. Jaryn didn't have the bad taste to frown. He merely nodded, as if it were only small talk and nothing of importance. Turning on his heel, Jaryn strode back to his men.

“I can see why they expelled him from guarding the court of Pekarín,” Jaross muttered irritably. “He is mannerless and crude.”

Jhan agreed, not frightened of the man, only as irritated as Jaross. What could the man do in front of his soldiers, anyhow? They at least looked dutiful and friendly. Jhan couldn't imagine that they would allow Jaryn's crudeness to overstep any bounds of propriety.

The baku spent a long day again picking their way through deep ravines and cold, trickling water courses. The air was definitely getting warmer, but the sky was lowering and rain was threatening. Jhan wondered what the land would be like with all the ravines filled with water and the hard earth turning to mud. A week's worth of travel could easily turn into two.

Camp was again divided for Jhan's modesty. He felt lonely and isolated. After eating the evening meal, he decided to end his forced isolation. Walking around the blankets he watched the eyes of the soldiers go wide and Jaross look very uncomfortable. Jhan pushed a rock near the fire with his foot and sat on it with hands clasped in his lap.

Jaryn was frowning and looking at Jhan's ankles. Jhan looked down as well and felt himself go pale, tingling with the shock of seeing that his hem was again short of covering his ankles. Jhan had grown again! Modestly, Jhan hunched and pulled his dress lower, holding it there with his hands clasped tight in the material.

“Something wrong, Lady Jhan?” Jaross asked at last, voice heavy with all the arguments and orders he longed to shout at Jhan.

“I only wanted company, Lord Jaross,” Jhan stressed the 'Lord'. “Continue with what you were

speaking about. I don't wish to interrupt.”

They didn't, at first, and then Jaross made a concerted effort, turning to Jaryn and talking about the road ahead and the possibility that Petrath may have already fallen to the enemy.

Jhan was now too caught up in himself to care. He had grown inches! When had it happened? Jhan had felt neither sore nor awkward. It had sprung on him and his body had adjusted easily, never revealing its secret growth spurt. Jhan touched his face. Still no beard. He could almost relax then, relieved, but he was beginning to wonder how much more he would grow. Would he become freakishly tall, or worse, never stop growing?

“Who are some of your relatives, Lady Jhan?” Jaryn's question jogged Jhan out of his self absorption.

“Why?”

“I might know of them,” Jaryn said, his false concern obvious and condescending. “I could send word back with some of my soldiers and put any fears they might have about your safety to rest.”

“That is kind, but there isn't anyone I would want to reassure.” Jhan had replied without thinking it through, not liking Jaryn's smile in response. It said too much without saying anything at all.

It was Jaross who saved Jhan. “Lady Jhan is going to some friends and relatives in Alatha,” Jaross explained. “Lady Amelina Yu Nava and Theyor Ki Nava, cousins of mine, live in the islands.”

Jaross had said two different things, but someone, who didn't know any better, would have considered them attached. Jaryn did and he shifted in his seat irritably, as if some idea or plan had reached a dead end.

“You should return to your fire, Lady Jhan, unless you are most immodest. My men have personal things to attend to.” Jaryn motioned with a hand as if to guide Jhan back to his partition of blankets.

Jhan stood and was actually glad to comply. He needed to be alone now, to think about his new found height and to wonder what it meant for him now.

Once safely behind his blankets, Jhan lifted his dress hem and stared at his legs. They seemed normal, still slim and as shapely as the Dark King, his sculptor, had intended. His waist did seem a little longer, looking less like a boy and more like the gentle curve of a woman.

Jhan felt even more relieved, having feared to find ugly, unacceptable changes. He smiled bitterly. Vain. Jaross had been right after all.

The baku gave a plaintive honk. Jhan looked up to where he had tied them for the night and noticed one gone. He swore under his breath, imagining Jaross' scathing comments already.

Quietly, thinking to get the beast back before Jaross was aware, Jhan left his fire and crept into the forest. Squinting into the gathering darkness, he softly called to the baku that he had some grain for it.

Yes, there. The beast had only wandered across a shallow gully and a few yards beyond that to munch on the half green leaves of a bush. It flapped ears at Jhan, intrigued by the notion that there might be some grain to be had.

Somewhere, back in camp, someone was playing a flute. The music drifted to Jhan, slow and mournful. A small drum began a counter beat. The soldiers must have begun to play to pass the time and relax. It made Jhan feel a little less afraid of them. Music spoke of a gentler side to these uniformed soldiers.

Between one step and the next, Jhan entered into a dream. It engulfed him like a cloak wrapping about him, velvet folds taking hold of his hands and leading him in a dance.

“Yes, very graceful,” a voice whispered into his ear. “I’ll teach you a dance, my Moon Flower, a deadly dance. Yes, stay on your toes, as light as a feather. You’ll float through the air and kill them in the most beautiful manner imaginable.”

That frighteningly familiar, musky scent filled Jhan's nostrils as the music pulsed behind his eyes. Jhan felt the arms about him tighten and lips fasten onto his. A tongue went into his mouth, searching and devouring. Jhan's back touched the ground and someone was pulling at his clothes... clothes... that wasn't right at all.

Hands touched flesh and greedily groped. The music halted and Jhan's eyes slowly cleared, part of the dream releasing him. Laughter drifted from the camp. Night was almost complete, but Jhan could still see the flushed, lustful face of Jaryn hovering above him and his red, Pekarín coat.

“Sweet!” Jaryn growled low. “I have been aching to be between your legs since we first met! Lay quiet or I will pull the reins very tight, my spoiled lady. I might even get out the whip!”

The darkness still kept Jhan's secret. Jaryn was just now beginning to go that far, relishing the moment. Jhan could feel his excitement hot against his bared flesh.

The dream captured Jhan again, pulling him under as if he were drowning in a deep, dark lake. Another man was touching Jhan, kissing with devouring kisses, red coat hanging sloppily on his brutish body. “His Majesty is rewarding me,” the man was saying and it echoed in Jhan's head, triggering something deep down in the darkness.

Jhan reached up, deadly arms and legs wrapping about the dream man as if he were eager for his hard, calloused caresses. The man laughed, unaware and drunk on lust, until Jhan squeezed with his Power enhanced muscles. Bones cracked and snapped loudly. The man's eyes, staring down into Jhan's, became sightless and filled with blood as he died.

Jhan broke the surface of the dream once again, but reality and dream had transposed themselves. It was Jaryn who was staring with lifeless eyes down into Jhan's own, spine snapped by Jhan's powerful

squeeze. Blood was trickling onto Jhan's dress from the man's mouth.

Jhan scrambled to free himself, head throbbing and dress and underthings pulled almost off of him. He tripped on the fabric and went sprawling. Scrambling to his feet again he pulled his clothes into order frantically, staring down at the crushed body of Jaryn. The man had his pants down and it was obvious what he had been about to do just as he had died.

The dream refused to release Jhan entirely. He couldn't tell if he were in the forest outside of Shunagra or in the Dark King's fortress. Panic and horror spurred Jhan to flee and he bolted for the baku. Snatching up the fallen lead, Jhan scrambled onto the animal's back and kicked it into a gallop, not caring where it took him.

The baku, smelling Jhan's fear, obliged, sure hooves taking the dangerous landscape at a full gallop. Jhan clung like a burr, fear giving his fingers and legs the strength to keep his body on. At last, the baku failed, frothing at the mouth. It missed a sharp ravine and went down, the sound of bones snapping audibly.

Jhan rolled with the landing and managed to get out of the way of the animal's dying, flailing hooves. It went still at last, like a string breaking, and Jhan let fall the arms that he had raised to protect his head.

The dream faded away completely and Jhan sat dumbly, gasping for breath and wondering what had possessed him. The recent, horrible events were a jumble of stilted images and Jhan's surroundings were dark and unfamiliar.

Jhan stood on shaky legs and looked down at the dead baku. The faithful animal had given its life. Jhan hadn't even given it a name. He wept, hands tearing at his hair; feeling filthy, used, and mentally raped.

Jhan climbed up the ravine as if his legs had a mind of their own. He continued to walk into the night, his mind roiling and his hands outstretched to keep himself from running into trees. He had only one thought and that was a deep instinct to flee and keep fleeing away from the death that he had caused, once again, and the horror of Jaryn.

Jhan walked until the sun rose above the trees and lit the landscape in dappled sunspots. A stream wove through a changed forest. It sparkled and rippled like a silver serpent against the dark gray of ancient trees. Those trees were gnarled and bent under centuries of growing to meet the sky, their dark shelter of winter resistant leaves beckoning, promising a place to hide from all the horror behind Jhan.

Jhan found a place to lie by the stream, taking a drink of cool water and washing the touch and taste of Jaryn from him. Face clean, at least, he slept a little in a bed of leaves and felt strangely safe.

Jhan awoke to the gurgling sound of the stream around mid-day. Disoriented, he sat up, looking about him. He recalled the previous night and all its terror and he shuddered despite the warm sun.

Jaross must be crazy by now, wondering where he, Jhan, had gone. Jaross had probably discovered Jaryn's body. What was he thinking now? Jaryn's attack would be easy to figure out, but how he had died... Jaross would never believe Jhan's little hands could do such damage and Jhan's type of Power left uglier marks.

Jaross must be looking for him, Jhan supposed and stood up. His dress was bloodied and ripped at the shoulder. He didn't have any supplies and he had no idea where he was. Jhan tried to figure out the position of the sun, but the trees diffused the light so well, that short of climbing a tree, he couldn't tell its position.

Stay put until he was found? That made sense, or would have, if Jhan had been actually heading in any one direction when he had fled. He could have been traveling in circles for all that he knew. Jaross wouldn't have any idea where to start looking.

Jhan was looking about him, growing more confused and uncertain, when it struck him that he was looking at the mirror image of the map in his head. Jhan froze and compared them, a slight focusing and un-focusing of his eyes that gave him an instant headache. Yes, it was exactly the same. This was the stream that lead to Gregory's house!

A dream came to mind as if it were a video replayed in Jhan's head. In the dream, Jhan had promised Gregory that he would come to him so that the man could take away his Power. Had it all been just a dream or had Jhan really spoken with Gregory on some strange dream level?

"Not much choice," Jhan muttered aloud. He was lost and in dire straights.

Jhan's mind felt sensitive and deeply shaken. There was no telling how long this moment of clarity would last. He might, at any moment, slip back into the waking dream of the Dark King and the trauma of Jaryn was an open, bleeding wound. Jhan could feel both horrors as if they were trains on the same track, in imminent danger of colliding. He needed help.

Was Gregory the man to help him? Jhan wondered. Recommended by the Sahvossa, wild beings who knew nothing of Humans, Gregory could be just as bad as Jaryn. Jhan recalled his dreams of the man. Gregory had seemed a soft spoken, wise person, but were his dreams to be trusted? Were they even real? In the light of day, it was almost impossible to think so.

"No choice at all," Jhan repeated and began walking along the stream. It was as if he were walking along the map in his mind as well and he stumbled and shook his head to dispel the double vision.

There it was. Jhan caught sight of a low slung cottage sitting among the trees, a wisp of smoke streaming out of the chimney perched on the thatched roof. It looked homey and welcoming, the door propped open by a potted plant and a woven rug, with a merry ring of flowers stitched on it, at the doorstep.

Jhan half expected a round, apple cheeked woman to come bustling out with a broom and a smile to welcome him like something out of a fairy tale. Jhan frowned. Sometimes, in the fairy tale, the woman turned into a witch.

Jhan went to the door and peered in cautiously, hand raised to knock, but too nervous to do so. He froze. It was exactly like his dream! There was the leather chair positioned in front of a fire, bookshelves filled with thick tomes and bottles of strange liquids and powders, and a small kitchen full of hanging plants shinning with the bright sunshine coming through double windows. A door led into a bedroom where Jhan could just catch a peek of a wide bed with a quilted coverlet and a shining wood chest at its foot.

“Like it?” There was Gregory, chewing on the end of his pipe from where he was sitting at a small table filled with paper and writing quills.

Jhan was at a loss for words. He shook his head, shock setting in. It was all too unreal.

Gregory stood, but didn't approach. “I knew that you were coming so I cleaned up. It's usually a bachelor's disaster, I'm afraid. My late wife did the decorating, in case you're wondering.” He sighed a little. “She was always so proud of her home.”

Gregory put aside his pipe and went into the kitchen. He rummaged around and pulled out a plate and a cup. “I made a pie last night. Hungry? Yes, of course you are. A little cider too, I think, to give you strength. Please, sit down and relax.”

Gregory cut into a large, dripping meat pie and placed a slice onto the plate. He poured a cinnamon smelling cider from a pitcher and very slowly approached Jhan with both in his hands.

Jhan had sat down, legs unable to hold him any further. He had chosen the leather chair. He watched Gregory approach and his mind saw Jaryn. As if reading that image clearly, Gregory halted. His hands were shaking, Jhan noticed, and he narrowed down to that realization. Gregory was frightened of him!

“I'm not that bastard who forced himself on you, Jhan, and I am not your Dark King. I am only Gregory and I'm attempting to give you something to eat.”

The image of Jaryn fizzled. “Why -” Jhan swallowed and tried again. “Why are you frightened of me?”

“Because you could fry me in an instant, and the world as well, with your Power. I have no defense

against it. There is no need for you to fear me with Power such as yours. I wonder that you chose to kill Jaryn with your hands.”

Jhan looked down at his killing hands, turned them over as if he could see invisible blood there. “I didn't choose to kill him. I just did. I was dreaming. He became a part of that dream.”

“As we all might become a part of your mad dream if you don't calm down.”

“No, it's gone.”

“Never to return?”

“I don't know. I was walking and suddenly...” Jhan closed his eyes tightly. “What is happening to me? I felt fine! I was going where I wished to go and I had an escort and Jaross to take me there. Why now, of all times?”

Gregory stared as if reading Jhan's thoughts. Perhaps he was. “Music. There was music.” He blinked and went pale, as if the dark dream were touching fingers to him as well as Jhan. He placed the plate and the cup on a small table beside Jhan's chair and quickly retreated, perching on a stool a few feet away.

“Music, yes.” Jhan rubbed at his eyes wearily. “It made me remember something from my time with Dagara.”

“And Jaryn stepped in while you were confused, taking advantage.” Gregory looked sickened.

It was like talking to himself, Jhan thought. Gregory seemed to know everything.

“How?” Was all that Jhan could manage.

Gregory was reluctant to explain. “Eat first. Explanations are far better on a full stomach.”

The last thing that Jhan wanted to do was eat, despite his great hunger. He was too distraught, the darkness licking at the edges of his vision. He took up the plate and a spoon and moved the meat pie back and forth.

“You need to eat,” Gregory was more insistent. “Please, try. I am a fair cook.”

Jhan forced himself to eat a mouthful. It was thick, rich, and not bad, even cold. After the first swallow settled in Jhan's stomach it growled, demanding more. Jhan slowly obliged. He surprised himself by finishing all of the pie and drinking down the cider as well.

“Good!” Gregory was leaning forward on his stool, eyes examining Jhan. “Feeling better?”

Jhan nodded as he put cup and plate back on the side table. “Explain,” he said at last. “Explain all of this. I'm so confused.”

“The Sahvossa came to me and told me what I was going to do for them,” Gregory began, looking almost angry. “They didn't ask and I felt... not quite threatened, but that refusing would bring me no good.”

“Yes,” Jhan agreed, remembering how Whitefur had spoken to him.

“Well, after they left, I discovered that I was seeing you inside of my mind and that I could hear your thoughts to a certain extent,” Gregory continued.

“My thoughts?” Jhan felt alarm growing.

“Yes, when you came to me in your dreams.”

“I don't like that,” Jhan replied, but those words barely encompassed the wild emotions of anger and embarrassment he was feeling.

“Neither do I.” Gregory went on. “My Power only related to growing plants and seeing the weather. If I tried, I could cause things to move with just my mind, but that took great concentration. I'm mostly just an herbalist, puttering about the forest and selling my mixtures in Khor once a year. I'm certainly not the person anyone would come to take care of someone with Power such as yours!”

Jhan's alarm began to fade. He felt suddenly very tired and he settled deep into the chair, every muscle loosening a bit at a time from their numbing clench. “Why?” he wondered again and his speech slurred as if he were drunk.

“I suppose because they knew you would be coming this way and that I was the only person with Power in your path. They told me what to do. They gave me the skill to do it.”

Jhan wanted to repeat, why?, but he couldn't move his mouth, or anything else for that matter. He should have been frightened, panicking, but Jhan felt completely calm, accepting his condition.

Gregory was standing now, walking slowly towards Jhan, alert for danger. “I suppose too, that they picked me for my way with herbs. Your Power is triggered by your fear and stress. I put a mixture into your food and drink. It will keep you still and calm for as long as I need to accomplish the task that I was given.”

Gregory reached out and touched Jhan. Jhan couldn't respond. He was still trying to follow the thread of Gregory's explanation. Growing bolder, Gregory slipped arms underneath Jhan and lifted him up out of the chair. Carrying Jhan into the bedroom, Gregory placed him on the bed. That in itself should have made Jhan insane with fear, but he felt nothing, even when Gregory began removing his clothes.

Gregory examined Jhan minutely, hands touching and prying in a totally clinical manner that never hinted at anything sexual. He seemed awed and shocked at the same time.

“There isn't an inch of your body that hasn't been touched by Power,” Gregory spoke at last.

“Dagara Ku Ni has changed you completely from whomever you used to be. He gave you new muscles and extra joints. I can see minute rearranging of your bones. Dagara made certain that you have the edge in agility and speed over any normal man. He made you to kill and to look beautiful doing it!”

A masterpiece, Jhan remembered from his dream, and the dream threatened to take him down into its swirling depths again. The hard slap to his face stung and chased the dream back.

“Stay with me, Jhan!” Gregory snapped. “He’s set some sort of compulsion deep inside of your mind. I can hear it. It wants you to kill, or failing that, to kill yourself. You must be strong!”

Gregory leaned close. “I’ll tell you the truth, because you should know it. The Sahvossa didn’t ask much of me. They wanted me to drug you and they gave me the skill to quell your Power and kill you. I don’t want to have to do that! I didn’t lie when I told you that I could help you turn off your Power. I think, if we delve deep, we can exorcise everything Dagara has done to you, including the seeding of Power. If you remember your time with him, and I follow you closely, I can find when it happened and hopefully, reverse it. That would save your life and keep me from suffering with my conscious for the rest of my life!”

Jhan didn’t feel any horror at Gregory’s suggestion. He felt absolutely nothing, as if someone had suggested they go for a stroll in a garden instead of in the darkest memories a person could have. Gregory wasn’t even looking for assent or denial from him. He was simply going to do it, his mind made up, perhaps, long before Jhan had shown up at his door.

Gregory covered Jhan with a quilt and placed his head on a down pillow. Climbing onto the bed, he sat above Jhan’s head and settled comfortably cross legged before touching a hand to either side of Jhan’s face. Gregory wasn’t even going to wait. He intended to do it now.

It was as if Jhan fell. He found himself lying on a cold table, body coming back from the dead. Jhan’s journey into Hell had begun there and Gregory found what he was looking for shortly after that.

“Yes,” Gregory whispered into Jhan’s mind. “There! Do you see it? As soon as Dagara decided to use you he touched your mind to make it open to his. He opened the way to Power as well. This will be easy. I have only to -”

Close the door, Jhan thought. The door in his mind that Dagara had opened. Jhan felt Gregory doing just that as his memory of Dagara sank teeth into his throat and worried him there like a rabid wolf.

“Now, we can leave this place,” Gregory again, relieved. That relief turned swiftly into panic. “What’s wrong? I can’t find my way out!” Jhan felt pain lancing his mind and he cried out as Gregory struggled to free himself from his dream.

“Not so quickly,” another voice, dripping venom and laughter. It was the dark hidden at the center of Jhan’s being and it unfolded like a great bat being disturbed. Those wings of night closed about them both and dragged Gregory and Jhan deeper into the dream.

Jhan was still drugged. His time of torment with Dagara played before his mind’s eye and he was

emotionless, watching like a frozen spectator. Gregory wasn't so lucky. Without Dagara and his healer to keep his mind and soul together, he shrieked and writhed within Jhan's mind, feeling everything that Jhan had felt, yet unable to hide as Jhan had in a numb place inside his own mind.

Chained to a metal bed frame. The soldiers dressed in red approached. Jhan relived every sickening torture they had inflicted on him, always leaving him a broken heap of flesh for the healer to clean up afterward. He relived Dagara's torments to make him perfect, the pulling out of his fingernails, toenails, the constant bending and slicing off of flesh that didn't suit, and even the horror of having his bones broken again and again until they were shaped and worked just so.

Dance. Yes, Jhan had danced a dance of death. Twirl, bend, kick, chop, twirl, jump until the victim of the day was hardly recognizable as a man and the man's blood covered him entirely. A beautiful dance. The last beautiful thing those men had seen.

Stinking onion breath and a face that looked like a pig's, jaw bisected by a great scar. "Kill him." Those pig eyes had shown fear and Jhan remembered laughing with joy as his foot had kicked out and the man's head had left his body. "Too quick, my Moon Flower. You must have hated him particularly."

Warm hands cupping Jhan's face so that he had to look into great, flaming eyes. They had used to be black as night, but the man's constant use of Power had filled him like a glass and was escaping in flickering, burning tendrils. Dagara was using all of his control not to burn Jhan's lovely face.

"Time for you to go. You are perfect. I send you away like a gift, but a gift I will taste before any other."

Jhan had been spared that torture up until then, perhaps the fear of Dagara keeping everyone from sharing his toy that way. After everything else, it was a last shock that almost stopped Jhan's heart. That's when he had begun screaming and that scream had continued as Dagara had warped space with his Power and deposited him in the forest of the Sahvossa to meet Rehn, still screaming and completely out of his mind.

Jhan found himself standing, not knowing how he had managed to get into that position. He blinked, the drug receding, and slowly looked around. The clean, tidy room was covered in blood and vomit. The bed was ripped and the quilt was hardly recognizable. The same, stinking mess, covered Jhan and he stared at his filthy body in a prickling, growing horror.

Jhan remembered all of it. Every second. He tested his sanity. A weight was on him, a darkness that had wrapped about his soul, yet the memories had become a part of Jhan, never to be hidden again. The drug had helped him through it and, Jhan admitted, the slow leaking of memories over the past months. That had prepared Jhan mentally to bend, but not to break, under the strain.

Jhan swayed and almost sat down on the wooden chest before the bed, until he saw what was left

of Gregory on the floor. The man had -- Jhan turned and staggered from the room. The man had killed himself, ripping at his own flesh. Gregory had been unable to bear the memories that had become a reality for him.

Images shattered across Jhan's vision as tears tracked down his cheeks, turning everything into a blur as he fumbled for the front door of the house. The neat kitchen with its green plants. The rows of bookcases with their heavy tomes and bottled mixtures. The leather chair, scorched from the Power Jhan had not known he'd been leaking. Just like the Dark King, he realized in a daze. He could have killed everyone, maybe even everyone in the world as the Sahvossa had warned.

There, the door. Jhan stumbled out into daylight and ran straight into the stream that meandered by the house. The cold shock of the water blew away the last of the drug as it washed away the filth of Jhan's ordeal. Climbing onto the bank, soaked from head to foot, Jhan collapsed onto his back and shielded his eyes from the dappled sunlight.

"You tried to kill me!" Jhan shouted without looking at the forest. "Gregory died trying to save me! He wouldn't do your dirty work!"

'Anger does no good,' it was Whitefur's voice. Jhan refused to look even though he was stunned and frightened to get a reply. *'Our Power is great. To touch yours with ours would have tipped the balance and destroyed the world. We found small man with small Power and gave him the hunt and the kill.'*

"Gregory was not a small man!" Jhan shouted. "He gave his life! Can't you understand? He turned the Power off inside of me and died!"

'Not off,' Whitefur corrected. *'He closed a door. You can still open it again. That cannot be allowed. You cannot be allowed. You do not belong. You tip the balance.'*

Jhan felt like screaming, trying to understand, yet not wanting to at the same time. "Jhanian should be dead, is that what you're saying? Or is my soul not supposed to be here?"

'You do not belong,' Whitefur maddeningly repeated.

"Will you try to kill me again?"

'The season has changed. There will not be another.'

"That doesn't make any sense!" None of it did. Jhan felt that he was alone again, but he hadn't expected anyone to answer in the first place. He had been shouting his anger to the sky.

Jhan sat up, soaked to the skin, eyes scanning the trees. He almost hoped to catch sight of Whitefur, but didn't, of course. He was left as he had begun when he had first fallen under Dagara's spell; impotent and lost.

The plaintive honk of an imala startled Jhan. He slowly stood and walked to the rear of Gregory's

house. A white imala with a chocolate covered nose was stabled by a small garden. Saddle and tack hung from pegs, as carefully cleaned and polished as all of Gregory's things had been.

Jhan touched the beast's nose and it smelled him nervously. That contact with Jhan's skin sent a hundred evil memories rippling. Jhan shuddered, breathing hard, until they settled once again. Jhan was amazed when sanity remained firmly in his grasp. He had conquered the demons of memory, he realized, and the drug had helped him accept them and keep them chained.

“Gregory!” Jhan wept again, shaking. The man had, unknowingly, given Jhan the greatest gift anyone could have. Not only had he closed the door on Jhan's Power, but he had returned to Jhan the control over his mind that Dagara had taken away from him along with his innocence.

“I'm free,” Jhan realized quiet suddenly and he wiped the tears from his face. “I may still be trapped in a man's body, but everything else is mine again! I can live a life now, free of the madness and the Power!”

Go to the islands and fade into obscurity, Jhan thought, and liked the sound of that. For once it seemed truly possible.

Jhan forced himself to go back into the house and gather supplies. The smell was incredible and Jhan closed the door to the bedroom after retrieving his dress, refusing to look, but offering a little prayer for Gregory and a heartfelt thank you for his sacrifice.

Jhan almost felt that he should bury Gregory, but everything in him refused to go into that room again. It was ground zero for his nightmares and Jhan feared, if he lingered, they would grab hold of him somehow and pull him back into the depths of Hell.

Still choking back tears, Jhan dressed and carried his supplies to the imala and saddled the beast . It was high strung, knowing Jhan for a stranger and sensing Jhan's distraught mood, and it didn't like being taken from its stall. Jhan's shaking hands didn't help matters and he mounted the imala cautiously.

“I have to go on,” Jhan said aloud, trying to give himself strength. “Gregory gave me back my sanity and control over my life again. I can't waste his sacrifice by sitting down and giving up. I won't let the Sahvossa destroy me. I won't let the Dark King rule me or my thoughts. I'm going to live a life, despite them!”

Jhan took a last look at the neat little cottage and the horror it contained, and then urged the imala into the forest at a gallop. Jhan didn't know in which direction to go, but he was determined to go anyway.

It was by sheerest good chance that the imala had more sense than Jhan did. It took the bit stubbornly and found a well worn track it must have known well. Settling into a lope, it seemed eager

to get the journey over with and to find itself in a warm stall at the end of the road.

“Of course!” Jhan shouted. He vaguely recalled Gregory talking about selling his mixtures in Khor. The road that he was on must go to Khor. The imala knew the way!

It was a bit of good luck that Jhan wasn't used to having. He distrusted it, especially when the forest grew denser and the imala slowed to an uncertain walk. Did the imala really know the way? Was Khor up ahead or would he wander the forest until he ran out of supplies?

Jhan expected fear to rise up and overwhelm him, replaying dark memories to escalate his fears. When that didn't happen and Jhan's inner clamoring stilled, he found a core of steadiness that allowed him to continue, concentrating on the road and not his fears. It was liberating. Jhan knew he had only himself to rely on now and, for once, that was enough.

Thunder. Jhan hunched down nervously as it rolled over the treetops. The last thing that he needed in unfamiliar territory was a storm. Jhan tightened the reins on the imala, who had started and flared nostrils at the sound.

The sky filled with dark clouds and the forest was plunged into twilight. The road faded into gray and the imala's knowledge and sure feet were Jhan's only hope of staying on it. When the imala balked, that hoped faded.

“Get going!” Jhan shouted and kicked the imala hard. “Hopefully Khor isn't too far away and you can spend the storm in a nice stable!”

The imala flicked ears and let out a low honk of annoyance, hooves planted firmly. Jhan wasn't one to hit an animal, but he was fearful of being caught out in the storm and he didn't know how else to get the beast moving. He raised the long ends of the reins and brought them down hard on the beast's neck.

What happened next was a blur. The imala reared and twisted with an outraged honk. Instead of going forward, it spun to go back the way that it had come. Too quick for Jhan to compensate, he went flying forward as the beast unseated him.

Jhan landed hard on wood. His head hit something sticking up and he lay, dazed, for a full minute while pain radiated along his forehead. Slowly, he became aware of the sound of water. Jhan opened his eyes and saw it beneath him, rushing by with the deadly speed of a flash flood.

Wood creaked and Jhan heard an ominous popping sound. He realized, all at once, that he was lying on a bridge across a river and that slats in the bridge were missing. The imala had refused to go forward for a very good reason. The rushing water was destroying the bridge!

Jhan screamed in shock and scrambled to get up and off of the collapsing bridge. A strange hand

grabbed hold of him and helped him find land again just as the whole structure groaned and snapped, landing in the water.

A lantern flashed in Jhan's face and a familiar voice swore in surprise. Jhan squinted against the light and he slowly began to see. A square jawed face, wide blue eyes, and a fall of hair the color of the sun. Jhan sat down heavily in shock. His rescuer was Kile Helarion Dor!

End of Book Two

Book One: Dark King Rising

Book Three: Searching Souls: soon to be released:

Other books by Kracken on Kindle and Nook

The Ajay Kavanagh Detective series: m/m romance

Tapping Darkness

Fortune's Lightning

Science Fiction/Fantasy:

Shatterbox

Dark King Rising