

Diadem From The Stars

Diadem, Book 1

Jo Clayton

1977

Aleytys The Fugitive

Far out among the stars the masterminds of the spider people had placed their mightiest mysteries in the scientific device called the diadem. And when that coronet was stolen, they were prepared to pursue it throughout eternity.

The thief crashed among the nomads of Jaydugar, a semi-barbarian world... and the diadem found its way into the hands—and onto the skull—of the girl Aleytys.

She was herself a strange one—daughter of a sky wanderer, outcast among the people who had raised her out of fear and awe. And the diadem was to prove both her bane and her treasure. For she could not remove it once it had sunk its electronic web into her brain and nervous system—and she did not know how to control the powers that were contained within it.

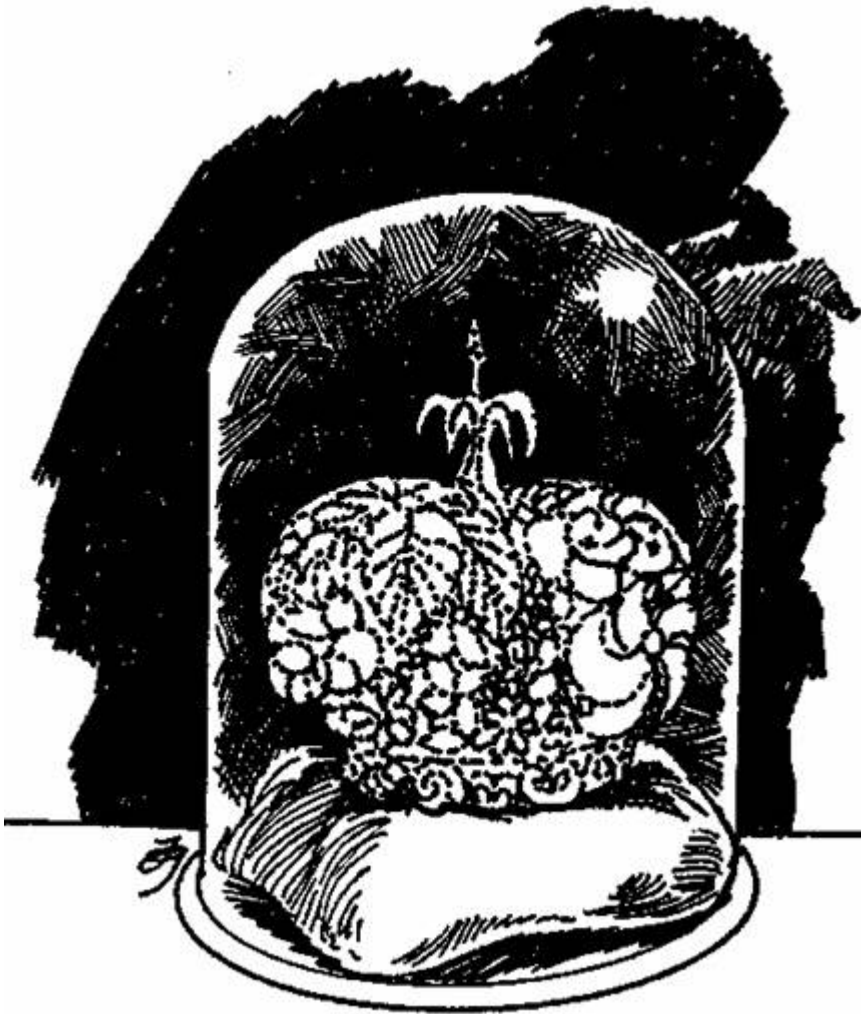
Yet every moment she wore it, she would be a target for the vengeance of the spider race and the avarice of a thousand worlds.

Treasure Of Treasures

The thief stood in front of the arching crystal and stared at the thing inside. Pale gold metallic threads spun into flower forms curving around pulsing red, purple, blue, green, and deep orange gems... like a garland of golden lilies they shimmered with a rich seductive glow. He lifted the glass bell with exaggerated care and set it gently on the floor. With his breath coming fast and tight off the top of his lungs, he lifted the diadem, touching the exquisite thing gently, carefully, fingertips only, even though ten thousand years of legend testified to the indestructibility of those hair-fine threads.

As he held the diadem it sang to him in a faint ripple of single pure notes. He stroked his hand across the flowers, the agonizing beauty of the notes that answered his touch curling around his mind until, half tranced, he almost settled it on his own head. He wrenched his numbed brain free and hastily folded the

supple circlet and shoved it in the special insulated pouch hanging on his belt....



[Contents](#)

[A Beginning: The Loosing of the Diadem](#)

[Part I: The Fireball](#)

[Part II: Dragonseed Tries Her Wings](#)

[Part III: The Diadem](#)

A Beginning: The Loosing of the Diadem

The thief walked through rolls of milky fog, advancing warily to the base of a wall that rose until the fog swallowed it; his chameleon-web bodysuit mocked the opaline mist until he was a pale shade in the shadows. He touched his belt and a circle of light sprang into being under his feet. Another touch. Like a soap bubble he drifted silently up along the flickering force-fields surfacing the wall with the fog ceiling retreating above his head and closing in again under his feet as he slid silently upward. Muffled sounds, broken and anonymous, slipped past him, too natural and arrhythmic to trigger taut nerves.

The wall broke suddenly into a wide plane-surfaced top, but he kept rising until his feet were a handspan above the edge, then he touched the belt again and began drifting sideways, smooth and silent in his milky room of fog... one meter... two... touch the belt... down sliding in a long slow slant toward the unseen ground....

Gliding over the soaked, crumbling earth, feet a handspan from contact, body bent tensely forward... the circle of light flickered, faltered, and the thief's breath rasped hoarsely. Using the last moments of stability he plunged forward....

The black stone rasped faintly under his toes. For a minute he stood perfectly still, eyes closed, forcing his clamoring body into a more responsive quiet. Stripping the glove from his right hand he pressed a palely glowing ring against the lock sensor and waited for the massive door to slide aside.

The solid blackness vibrated, swaying snakelike black on black, strangely perceived. His shadow-figure crept snake slow, twisting, turning, cutting back on his own tracks, bodysuit blending black on black, narrow ice-blue eyes glinting winter-cold in the odd nonlight dripping through the thick greasy air. On the groping hand stretched out in the murk before him, on the middle finger, the ringstone glowed fire-green—flickering, innocent, lovely, and deceptive—not simply decoration but a key and a map, Ariadne's thread to the RMoahl maze... a key bought at the cost of two years' cunning and five men's lives.

The ring flared blue. The thief froze. After a minute he thrust his hand into the pouch dangling invisibly from his belt and pulled out four suction cups, which he strapped to hands and feet. With a sinuous splayed-out leap, he threw himself high up against the wall, slapping the cups hard against the glassy surface. Armstretch by armstretch, clinging, swinging, aching muscles trembling, he inched along fifty feet of stinking wall.

The huge domed room caught up and magnified the tiny sounds he made as he strode—long legs scissoring nervously fast, excitement heating his blood—toward the crystal dome housing the diadem. Plunder from a hundred suns lay heaped in glowing piles on either side of carpeted aisles crossing and recrossing the vast ellipse. A fugitive glitter sparked in the corners of his eyes... silken sheens, rich colors glowing... his eyes fixed on that solitary dome at the very center. Inside, the diadem lay curled in delicate modesty. Breath bitten behind his teeth, the thief half ran across the crowded room.

He stood in front of the arching crystal and stared at the thing inside. Pale gold metallic threads spun into flower forms curving around pulsing red, purple, blue, green, and deep orange gems... like a garland of golden lilies they shimmered with a rich seductive glow. He lifted the glass bell with exaggerated care and

set it gently on the floor. With his breath coming faster and tight off the top of his lungs, he lifted the diadem, touching the exquisite thing gently, carefully, fingertips only, even though ten thousand years of legend testified to the indestructibility of those hair-fine threads.

As he held the diadem it sang to him in a faint ripple of single pure notes. He stroked his hand across the flowers, the agonizing beauty of the notes that answered his touch curling around his mind until, half tranced, he almost settled it on his own head. He wrenched his numbed brain free and hastily folded the supple circlet and shoved it in the special insulated pouch hanging on his belt. . . .

The light winds curled and spit around him, slamming his tiny stingship end over end. He took a deep breath and slowed his body down, relaxing the tension that was bouncing him against the crash-web with bruising force. Behind him the stink of the laboring computer naked with small metallic creaks of overburdened metal. . . ahead, the screen howled with savage colors, a fantastic whirl, demon-haunted, three suns revolving about a common center of gravity passing hydrogen from one to the other in ragged golden rivers, the fields of forces battling there twisting and distorting even the tough fabric of space itself.

The black midge danced and fluttered, edging along, pushed to the limit of its very special capabilities.

Pain sat at the base of his spine like a spiked pillow. Sounds beat in his ears and scratched at his brain, aborting his spasmodic attempts to pull his mind together. He clung to consciousness with a determination dredged from the marrow of his bones, yelling a long, soundless scream to dominate the pain and noise inside his ballooning skull.

Faster and faster they spun, man and ship. The air around him grew thick with the effluents of strain. . . the argrav console whined and shuddered. . . points of electric-blue fire danced among the circuits. . . the violent hungry forces swirling around the suns battered and wrenched at the tough metal splinter. Suddenly the ship lurched sideways, plunging down and around into a wild corkscrewing tumble. The overworked crash-web popped loose, banging his jaw against the support bar. His eyes glazed over and a trickle of blood oozed out the corner of his mouth. . . .

A long satin slide into a pool of calm. . . the stingship purred along at cruise speed, spit out like a plum seed from around the edge of the bronze-green sun. With clumsy fingers the thief tripped the lock bars and let the crash-web flip to rest. Hands on armrests, he pushed himself painfully upright, the pressure couch following the movements of his body. He rubbed his hands together, smiling, bruised but intact, though the ship had been driven far beyond her remarkable capacity.

In front of him the console breathed scattered spurts of blue and stinking smoke. When he frowned and ran his fingers over the board, the ship responded sluggishly. Currents of air tugged by uneven gravity flows carried the blue smoke in stinging tatters around his face. Coughing and sputtering he rubbed his running nose and screwed up his aching eyes.

“Luv!”

“Yes, Stavver?” The computer’s soft contralto voice sounded a little ragged around the edges.

“Scrub this air, will you. Can’t see a thing.”

“Stavver, I’m badly damaged. I’ll try. . . .” A sharp screech stabbed at his eardrums. “Pardon me,” she said hastily, the human qualities of the voice eroding under the strain of her injuries.

Stavver chuckled. He thought, *Trust Luv to maintain the proprieties* . He peered into the flickering

screen, which showed the triple sun ebbing swiftly behind. Bending tautly forward he scanned the image with haunted care. The irritating blips that had dogged his trail since he'd left the RMoahl world two days before were gone, all five of them. Sighing, he leaned back, feeling the soreness of his body all the more since the tension supporting him was sliding away. "No hurry, Luv. We lost them."

The air began to clear. Stavver looked around and grimaced at the mess in his polished bridge. "The rest of the ship like this, Luv?"

"Worse." The voice sounded steadier. "Dirt, stink everywhere. A slum," The sourceless voice sounded gloomy and rather prim, like an old woman whose dog had an accident in the middle of her best rug. "The generators are in deplorable condition." For the hundredth time he wondered what the long-dead builders who'd constructed and programmed the computer were like and why they'd given it such a prim and proper personality. He laughed. "Check it out, Luv, and let me know the worst. I think we'll find a place to set down for a rest."

"Stavver, if you'd stop getting us into these messes, I could keep my decks clean."

He grinned. "Now, Luv, if I retired, you'd sit in a field and rust." He could almost hear the computer sniff, then, with a sigh, he stretched out cramped muscles and rubbed tired gritty eyes.

"Stavver!" The calm voice escalated to a shriek. "Three follow!"

"Wha—" The thief jerked up, wincing at the ache in his head. Blinking to clear his vision, he peered into the screen. Three small black blips shimmered against the glowing hydrogen. "How?" he whispered. "They couldn't track us. Not through that mess." He looked again. "Three. At least we lost two of them." A minute later—"Two of those... look, Luv. Am I dreaming or—"

"Two drop away." The computer sounded rather complacent, as if she were preening imaginary feathers. "We've beaten four."

"You're a good girl, Luv. Now if we can just shake the one... You're sure it's RMoahl?"

"A RMoahl hound."

"How the hell do they do it...?" He shook his head, then tried to think. "We better get lost fast. Luv!"

"Yes, Stavver?"

"Evasive action right now. Then head for... mmm... Drex. Let me get lost in the Exsashi and—"

A pained silence.

"Luv?"

"Stavver..." The voice croaked and cracked, then sputtered to a shrill hiss.

"Luv!"

"Warning. Warning. Warning." The personality was leached out of the warm voice until it was a thin thread of sound half drowned in a sudden spate of sharp crackles and snaps. "Breakup."

“How long?” he demanded.

“Insufficient data.” The voice faded, strengthened, faded again.

“Drex?”

“Too-oo faaaa-aar.”

“Then anything possible.” He stared grimly at the RMoahl ship. “Long as I can breathe the air.”

There was an odd little sound rather like a sigh. He felt a nudge that changed rapidly to a hard continuous twisting shove. In the screen the field of stars turned sluggishly until a double star—blue dwarf, red giant—was centered. Slowly, painfully slowly, the stars grew larger—

Then the ship gave a little hiccup. The lock bar of the crash-web suddenly flipped loose and the web sprung free. Stavver was thrown forward so that he slammed his head into the hard glass of the screen. The ship hiccupped again, throwing him back into the chair. A harsh brittle sound bored through the haze in his head as the floor drove up and then dropped away. Then the crash-web flipped back and locked again.

He strained through the sloshing in his brain to see what was happening while small crashes mingled with the thrumming of the generators. The air filled with smoke again.

A long, stretched-out minute passed.

The ship wobbled, hesitated a heart-stopping second, then plunged down faster, faster... while the bottom dropped out of the thief's stomach. The ship wobbled again... into a wild tumble down down down until it caromed off some bottom and swooped up up into a steep curve and plastered his body against the pressure couch.

A purple-green glow crawled in a jagged lump over one wall... and opened a long-lashed eye that winked at him. Control pretzeled out, stretching way out, twisting, twisting... His feet were distant lumps on legs pulled to threads... The glow shut its single eye and burst into an aching red that assaulted his senses like a hot rice curry... fading, fading, in green... ice cream pulsing cool jazz into mint ice cream darkening into coffee tart with sharp soprano peaks...

He woke to thick black silence. Groggily he unstrapped himself and groped for the control console. One by one he snapped switches... dead... dead... dead... a faint flicker of light chased across the screen. He turned the gain full and caught the faint image of the lake water with a few startled fish swimming uneasily in the heated water.

“Water,” he muttered. The scanner moved up to the surface. “Not too far down... swim out. First, the diadem...” Painfully he straightened and slid out of the pressure couch. He stumbled heavily to the keuthos where the jewels lay hidden and stabbed his fingers in the complex pattern of the puzzle lock. As the pouch tumbled out he caught it and looped the strap over his shoulder.

The water was tepid and dark with moonlight a faint silvery glow overhead. As his head broke surface he saw a jagged rise of rock jutting black and formidable against the backdrop of the brilliantly starlit sky. Cautiously, being careful not to splash the water about, he paddled to the bank and slid into the shadow at the base of the tor. Behind him the spearheaded reeds stirred with papery rustles in the strengthening breeze flowing toward him from around the side of the tor, bringing with it a faint odor of burning wood.

Snaking on his stomach up the gentle rise beside the precipitous rock, he peered through the fringe of grass at a ring of camp fires lighting up low rounded tents and busily scurrying figures of short, stocky humanoids.

Part I: The Fireball

1

Red-hot light slashed through the double glass and burned away the comfortable darkness in the narrow bedroom.

“Madar!” Aleytys bobbed upright and shivered in the icy night air. Heart bumping, she rubbed her hands over the gooseflesh on her arms and stared at familiar walls that the glare turned strange, whitening out shadows, bringing cracks and stains into startling prominence.

For an eye-blink she thought she was back in her old nightmare, the one in which she woke in a cell with rose-pink padding on the walls. Then the light began to fade.

Beside her Twanit whimpered and dug herself farther under the quilts. Absently Aleytys reached out and patted the quivering lump. Then she pushed up onto her knees. With the bed quaking and creaking under her, she bounced up to the head and pulled herself to the tall thin window that rose above the headboard.

Set into the house’s three-foot-thick outwall, the double window with its inner and outer set of leaded panes was recessed a full foot back from the wall surface, forming a dust-catching ledge where Aleytys kept her clock and a heavy pewter candlestick that right now had a six-inch piece of candle stuck in it.

Impatiently she raked them off the ledge and wormed her body into the opening. Outside, a roundish blaze nearly as large as Hesh curved down the sky, swallowing the starlight and painting the glaciers of Dandan an ominous blood-red.

She pressed her nose against the cold glass and stared curiously at the sky. As the fireball slipped behind the mountains and the afterglow died away, she dropped back to the mattress, shivering from the cold air sliding around her body.

Twanit stirred and thrust her head out from under the quilts, blinking damply. “Leyta?”

“Yeah, hon?” Aleytys shifted around and brushed the wild elf-locks from her cousin’s wide-staring eyes, smiling gently down at her. “What is it, Ti?”

With a sputtering gasp Twanit scrambled up and clutched Aleytys around her waist, burying her face in the thick folds of the heavy nightgown. “Oh, Leyta,” she wailed. “Leyta...” Her voice trailed into incoherence while her frail body shook so hard the bones seemed on the verge of coming through the translucent flesh.

Aleytys sighed and patted her shoulder. “Hush, Ti,” she said softly. She stroked one hand lightly over the black curls while she kept up her soothing murmur. “Shh, baby, Mmm, no, I won’t let it hurt you... shh it’s gone... all gone... all gone... See, it’s dark again... nice and dark... mmm... mmm... I’m here, little Ti, aziz-ni... shh.”

She let her voice die away as she felt Twanit’s body relax. When she looked down, her cousin’s eyes were shut and her breathing was slow and even. She was asleep again, in that facile deep sleep that usually followed her hysterical outbursts.

With a quick grimace of distaste Aleytys slid her over onto her own side of the wide bed. “I wish it was that easy for me,” she muttered. Twanit’s soft mouth dropped open and she snored. “Duscht!” Aleytys straightened her out and turned her onto her side. “What a night.” She sat up and rubbed her arms again. “Cold as Aschla’s pity.”

She stretched out on the bed and dragged the quilts over the two of them, shuddering at the touch of the cold sheets. Funny, she thought, to get so excited about some stupid light in the sky. She wiggled her shoulders and turned over onto her stomach, nestling her head down into the quilts. Then she closed her eyes, sucked in a lungful of air and let it trickle slowly out, settling down to sleep again.

A minute later her eyes popped open again. “Madar!” she snarled into the pillow. Outside in the hallway, muffled somewhat by the thick walls, she heard loud excited voices, scuffling footsteps, door after door slamming.

“My family! My damn dear family. Sticking their noses out at last.” She heaved herself up and sat cross-legged on her pillow. “No sleep this night for me. Not till they shut their cackling mouths.” Tilting her head back she stared up at the enigmatic black rectangle. “Or maybe...”

She wiggled into the opening again and eagerly scanned the sky. The stars flickered placidly on the dark arch while big Aab’s pale sphere shone in the window’s upper right pane with tiny Zeb hovering just below. The capricious night breezes of early summer danced the horan leaves around just as they had every Gavran month she could remember. “By the Madar’s purple eyes...!” Aleytys shoved straying wisps of hair back out of her eyes. “I wish I knew—” She squirmed around and slipped off the side of the bed. Twanit muttered a chewed-up sound that trailed off into a gurgling snore.

Though the bed almost filled the narrow room, there was about a foot of space between its edge and the wall on each side. She slipped past the sliding doors of her closet and snatched down a fringed shawl, which she flipped around her shoulders. Cautiously she shoved the heavy door open.

The hall outside was patterned with shifting shadows cast by night candles stuck in iron frames beside doors marching in a steady line down the long corridor. The hall was empty now, but at the far end a pool of butter-yellow lamplight spilled around the corner. Voices bounced down to her like eerie disembodied spirits, echoes garbling the words into snippets of sound. She hesitated. *If I keep back in the shadows so they don’t see me ...*

Shivering a little at the current of icy air that flowed along the painted tiles, she pattered swiftly down the hall.

The square outside the Azdar’s door was filled with a milling throng hissing at each other in tense excited whispers, spinning a web of sibilance and secrecy that left her on the outside. Qumri’s sharp tones sounded suddenly above the rest “... Has to be...” Mavas’s discontented rumble drowned her out.

Hastily Aleytys backed farther into the shadows. “Has to be what?” she muttered. “Bitch. It would be her who knows something about that fireball. If she had her way I wouldn’t know alef from bayt.” She leaned forward, tensely curious.

The purple slab with a fine-line silver dragon incised in its center slammed open and the Azdar himself stood planted solidly in the wide rectangle.

Aleytys raised higher on her toes and peered past him, curiosity flaring hot in her. As she tottered in the shadows steadying herself with a hand planted on the wall, she could just see a dim shape sitting up in bed. She stifled a giggle, *Wonder who he’s got in there tonight. Bet Qumri’s livid*. She sniffed and ran her eyes over the bulky figure in the door. *Ha! Even stopped to comb his hair and put on a clean nightshirt*. Her eyes flicked over him again. *Look at the old buzzard suck in his gut*.

Wide mouth curled in a sneer, shaggy eyebrows drawn together into a hideous scowl, he moved his heavy head slowly around like a tars on the hunt.

A sudden hush. All eyes focused on him.

Azdar stood impressively silent, milking the scene for all the drama he could squeeze out of it.

Aleytys sank back on her heels, rebellion an itch crawling under her skin, wanting to yell at them all, “The old bastard’s a fake!” Her shoulders moved restlessly against the wall.

The tense silence was suddenly broken by Qumri. She took two steps forward and planted herself in front of Azdar. Aleytys held her breath as her heart started thudding again. She couldn’t see Qumri’s face but the set of her head shouted barely suppressed rage.

“Abru sar, the fireball.” Qumri’s voice was loud and hoarse. She clipped her words viciously short. “Her. What are you going to do about her?” The last word she spit at him like a pit viper spewing its venom.

“Her?” Aleytys repeated, surprised. She swallowed abruptly, pressing her hand over her mouth, eyes flickering warily over the backs of those closest to her. But no one turned. No one had heard.

Azdar glared at Qumri until she reluctantly dropped her head. Then his hard yellow-brown eyes narrowed and he roared at the rest of them, “Bunch of spineless mikhmikhha!”

Once again Aleytys stifled a giggle as the straggling hairs of his bushy moustache fluttered in the blast.

Slamming his hand against the doorpost, he boomed, “The house stands solid. Ai-Jahann, a lot more solid than the lot of you. Shiver in your skins at ghosts, will you?” He sneered and moved his massive head around again, pinning them with his eyes. “The witch is gone, fools. She won’t come back. We’ll call mulaqat tomorrow about this thing. Till then, act like grown men instead of whimpering brats. Clear out now. Let a man sleep.” He stalked over, grabbed the edge of the door, and shrugged it closed behind him.

For a minute the Azdarha fluttered around like a clutch of jittery chickens, their voices clucking in subaudible spasms, a rising and falling murmur that trailed behind Aleytys as she backed up a few steps, then spun around on her toes and fled down the hall. Panting lightly, shaky giggles simmering along with tears beneath her precarious self-control, she slipped past her door and eased it shut.

The leather lacing creaked loudly as her weight came down on the mattress, startling a shrill titter out of her. She clapped a hand over her mouth and glanced back over her shoulder, but Twanit's breathing flowed smoothly in and out without skipping a beat, so she stretched her hands out behind her and leaned back, her eyes focusing vaguely on the window's moon-cast reflection on the smooth surface of the door, a shifting tracery of shadow playing rhythmically across the pale squares.

A pleasant lassitude spread up through her. With a groaning yawn and a bone-cracking stretch she settled out flat on the bed. "Cackling hens," she murmured, then closed her eyes, grinning into the darkness. *Wonder who that was in Azdar's bed. Qumri saw, I'm sure she did. Hope I never get that obsessed with any man. Mmm, I better crawl under the quilt before I freeze.*

As she lay trying to work up enough energy to get back on her feet she heard the last door slam and a single pair of feet begin pacing down the long hall. Qumri checking up.

Aleytys stiffened. "Bitch," she whispered. She pushed up, hands squeezing the quilt until her fingers ached.

The footsteps came nearer.

Mouth twisted in an angry self-mocking grimace, she unclenched her fingers and rubbed her hand across her forehead. *I thought she'd have my skin off the last time she beat me*

Outside, the footsteps slowed, hesitated.

Aleytys sat very still.

A hand pushed strongly from outside. Aleytys heard the faint, dull thud as the door chucked against the stop. Then the footsteps clicked away down the hall.

"A perfect ending for a perfect day...." With a shaky laugh she twitched the shawl from her shoulders. Sighing, she muttered, "Better try for some sleep. I'll feel like a calf with scours tomorrow." She stretched and yawned, but there was a pool of restless energy inside her that made the thought of lying down sit sour on her stomach.

She shrugged and slipped the shawl back around her shoulders. Lifting the bar and latching it started the blood throbbing through her veins while her breasts fluttered with short rapid breathing. Cautiously she thrust her head out of the narrow opening. The shadows were thickening as the candles burned lower, but the hall was clearly empty. She padded across and groped her way down the curving flight of stairs.

The wood of the patio door was cold and solid under her trembling fingers. She slipped the latch and eased through, keeping a firm hold on the inner door. In spite of the careful balancing of the hinges that made it possible for her to move that chunk of wood, it had a tendency to slam shut with a boom that shook the whole house.

Inside the vestibule the glazed tiles burned like ice against the skin of her feet. "Ai-Jahann, I wish they hadn't put out the steam fires," she muttered.

The outer door was secured by iron-banded double bars. Aleytys swung them on their pivot bolts locking them upright. Curling up her toes against the cold she leaned against the door and shoved it open with a flop of the rubber weather stripping. More cold air poured in and she slid hastily outside.

In the middle of the patio the housetree glistened in the moonlight, its graceful fronds swaying and fluttering in tantalizing whispers. She ran across the short thick grass and pressed her hands against the silken bark while the enticing minty fragrance of the fronds dropped like incense around her.

She tilted her head and stared at the sky. For a minute she thought she could see a dusty yellow film streaking across from east to west, but the longer she looked, the less certain she became that anything was really there. With a sigh she leaned back against the trunk and let its gentle pulse nip at the back of her head and throb in growing strength up and down her backbone. Purring with pleasure she rubbed against the summer-smooth bark for a long warm minute until reality melted around the edges for her.

Then she sneezed and the dream crashed around her. Her body was shaking. Her teeth clattered together. Her eyes felt stiff and swollen. She sneezed again, patted the tree affectionately, and hurried back into the house.

Preoccupied by the cold that sent shiver after shiver pulsing through her tired body, she didn't notice the heavy black shadow that loomed at the head of the stairs.

"Soooo..." The low venomous hiss snapped head up. She gasped and clutched at the railing while her heart slammed into her ribs. Qumri. Waiting for her.

She leaned against the balustrade and tried to gather her wits, sick with the age-old terror Qumri had instilled in her and sick with anger at herself for letting the woman cow her so. All those years, she thought. All those years...

"Custom breaker." Qumri's voice was a hate-filled whisper. Aleytys crouched lower over the railing as it whipped at her. "Defiler. Whore-daughter." The last words were squeezed out in a shrill whine as though rage strangled them in her throat. Aleytys bit her lip and raised her heavy hand.

"Come up here!"

Stumbling on numb clumsy feet, she halted up the remaining steps.

A hard nervous hand came out of the dark and slapped with stinging force against her face, slamming her into the newel post.

"Stupid animal." Again and again, underlining the hate-filled syllables, the hand stung her face.

Aleytys whimpered and tried to cringe away.

Qumri jerked her onto her feet and slapped her harder, her breath going in and out in harsh squeaks each time she hit.

Something snapped inside Aleytys. As Qumri's hand pulled back once more, she wrenched herself free and scrambled away. Just out of arm's reach she stood up and tossed her head back, anger hot and strong inside her. She laughed.

Qumri froze, a ludicrous expression of surprise distorting her handsome features.

"Why, old woman, salkurdeh khatu..." Aleytys drawled out the words until they became an insult in themselves. "Can't you get the Azdar to bed you? That why you're prowling the halls?"

Qumri shrieked and leaped toward her, fingers curled into claws.

Hiccupping with hysterical laughter, Aleytys fled down the hall with Qumri squealing behind her. She reached her bedroom and dived through the door just a step ahead of the fury at her heels. Bracing herself, she shoved the door shut in Qumri's face and dropped the bar into its socket.

"Ahai!" She turned and flattened her back against the door, feeling limp as a wrung-out dishrag. "I damn sure better keep out of her way tomorrow."

Lifting heavy arms, she hung the shawl on its hook, then crawled back into bed. She lay trembling as her body slowly warmed, staring up at the thick blackness. Triumph flared up a minute, then grayed to ash as she realized that nothing was changed. Nothing at all.

2

Hesh bulged steel-blue over the eastern edge of the world a handspan north of Horli's squashed half-circle. Down in the valley the horans grew a second shadow while the dim red light brightened to a clear blue.

Under the scattered horans the blocky gav dozing in the pastures snorted and humped onto their feet, snuffling in air that had a liveness and a sparkle that sent the blood burning through one's veins.

The Raqsidan wound in leaping silver and green between the massive clan houses whose rings of second-floor windows flickered from black to yellow as the tarik roused the sleepers. As the harsh clangs of the tarik's bell faded down the hall, Aleytys tumbled out of bed, her feet hitting the floor before her eyes opened. She stretched, yawned, scratched her head, and leaned against the wall blinking gritty eyes.

Something hard touched her foot. The candlestick. She picked it up, lit it, and set it back on the window ledge. The candle was broken in the middle and tilted at a crazy angle dripping wax in a greasy puddle on the stone.

The door swung open. Twanit sidled through the narrow opening and padded over to her side of the room. Aleytys patted a yawn and leaned back against the wall. "Up before the bell again?"

Twanit smiled timidly over her shoulder. "I like the morning, Leyta." She pushed the panel back and set her hairbrush gently in its precise spot on the narrow shelf inside. Humming softly, she lifted a neatly folded ribbon from another shelf and tied her shining curls back with quick deft fingers. "You know how I hate being crowded and pushed around," she finished.

Sliding the panel shut, she pattered to the head of the bed and began stripping the quilts and sheets away. Aleytys sighed and scrubbed her hands hard across her face. "Huh!" she muttered. "Don't see how you do it. I hate waking."

She edged along the wall and slid her own closet open. Carelessly she rummaged through the untidy mess of bottles and wrinkled ties until she rooted out her own hairbrush. With a gaping yawn, she dropped on the naked mattress and began working the knots out of her fine red hair. "Ai-Aschla!" She jerked on the brush. "Ow! I swear I'll cut it all off."

Twanit chuckled as she folded the sheets together. “How many times’ve you said that, Leyta?” Aleytys smiled reluctantly and began working on another knot. “If you’d just braid it like I do,” Twanit went on. She tucked the bundle under her arm and elbowed the door farther open. “Trouble is...” She gave a tinkling giggle and flapped her luxurious eyelashes. “You’re just too vain, that’s all.” As the brush bounced off the door she whisked away down the hall.

Aleytys stood up and made a face at the door. She wriggled out of the nightgown and rummaged in the closet for a clean abba. As her fingers automatically tied the closings at shoulder, breast, and waist, she looked around the room. “Twanit’d have a fit,” she said, chuckling. She picked up the gown and tossed it into her closet without bothering to fold it. Then she picked up her brush, pulled a handful of red-gold hair from the bristles, and flipped it into the closet. Whistling breathily between her teeth, she slid the panel shut, dropped the wad of hair into the wastebasket, and strolled out into the hall.

Zavar backed out of a childroom and stood glaring at its invisible occupants. “Hai! You Mavashi! Get out of those beds. Now!” She shoved her tumbled brown hair back from her small harassed face. Shrill hoots of laughter answered her and she ground her teeth. “Oh, you wait!”

“Vari?”

“Leyta.” Her face lit up. “Madar bless. Jorchi and the Kur are impossible this morning. Give me a hand a minute, will you?”

Aleytys grinned. “Sure. I’ll kick their teeth in while you twist a few arms.” She walked briskly to the door and looked in.

The two boys were perched on their narrow beds, shrieking with laughter, wrapped like worms in woolen cocoons.

Zavar pressed her lips firmly together and darted back into the room. When she grabbed at him, Jorchi wiggled away, wrapping himself further into the quilts until all she could see of him was a pair of bright mocking eyes topped with a tangled mop of black hair. “Oh, fash!” she groaned.

As soon as Jorchi’s full attention was on Zavar, Aleytys pounced on him, winding one hand in his curls. She jerked him out of the covers with a practiced flip while he wriggled and howled and swung at her with his small fists.

“Jorchi!” She shook him lightly. “Quit acting like a one-summer’s baby. Stand there and shut up or I’ll put you over my knee and warm your bottom so you can’t sit from Aabkiss to Zebkiss.”

He squealed and clawed at her arm, flaring up in sudden childish anger. “Let me go! I’ll tell, I’ll tell... Bitch... red bitch... not ‘sposed to touch us kids... Get your stinking hands off me!”

Aleytys flinched and opened her fingers. Feeling sick, she rubbed her hand up and down her side staring dumbly at the contorted red face of the boy.

Zavar gasped. She bounced off the bed and slapped the boy’s face, her hand splatting loudly in the sudden silence. “Never let me hear you talk like that again, you hear!”

His eyes dropped and he stood abashed at his own daring and startled by the violent reaction from gentle Zavar.

“Say you’re sorry.” Zavar took the back of his neck in her hand and shook him. “Hear me?”

He shuffled his bare feet on the coarse runner.

“Say it!”

He shot a quick glance at Aleytys and mumbled a few words.

“Louder.”

“I’m sorry, sabbiyya.” His voice wavered uncertainly.

“Now.” Zavar straightened. “Get your clothes on.” She glared at Kurrah, who sat openmouthed on the other bed. “You! Get off that. Get into your tunic.” She tapped her foot gently on the floor. “Well?”

Kurrah scrambled quickly out of the quilts and thrust his head through the neck of the brown hooded tunic.

When the boys were dressed and shod, Aleytys helped Zavar strip the beds. As she bundled the sheets together, she asked curiously, “Where’s Kahruba? I thought she paired with you this month.”

Zavar shrugged. Then the corners of her mouth curled up. Her eyes flicked from Kurrah to Jorchi. “Well,” she said temperately, “you know Ruba.”

Aleytys eyed her for a moment, seething with curiosity. Then she sighed. “Yeah. Shall I get the clean sheets?”

Zavar chewed on her bottom lip, then she grinned. “No. Ruba can make the beds when she crawls out of her own.” She turned briskly and pushed the boys out of the room. Aleytys snorted, then kicked the sheets out the door and followed.

Half an hour later they emerged from the majlis for the last time, blown out on the winds of the morning chant to the Madar. Zavar shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair. “Almost time for breakfast. I could eat a gav raw. Come on, Leyta.”

Aleytys caught her arm and pulled her around. “Come on yourself. Stop teasing, Vari. What is wrong with Ruba?”

Zavar flicked a cautious glance up and down the hall. Then she faced Aleytys, hands on hips, mouth flashing into an ear-to-ear grin. “Morning sickness.” The grin erupted into a giggle and she leaned back against the wall shaking all over with little spurts of laughter. “Mad enough to set her hair on fire too,” she gasped.

Giggling helplessly, Aleytys leaned beside her. After a minute she wiped her streaming eyes and pushed the straggling hair out of her face. “That’s making the punishment fit the crime. Any idea who got her that rattled?”

With a derisive grin Zavar touched her forehead in a mock shalikk and tilted her head to look up at her taller cousin. “Since when does our regal lady bother to talk to us lowly babes? But I think it’s a Khug. I saw her down by the waterfall poking around the mills about midthaw. And I kept seeing Nar Khugson drifting around there a lot at the same time. You know what he’s like.”

Aleytys wrinkled her nose. “Huh! Think she’ll marry out?”

“A Khug? Not a hope.” Zavar stood up and shook out her abba. “No, indeed. You know damn well her aim’s higher than that. Haven’t you seen her snuggling up to Vajd? Give her eyeteeth to be consort. It’s enough to give you sweetsickness to hear her talk to him.”

The laughter washed out of Aleytys. Her stomach knotted into a cold hard lump. “What about him?” she asked as casually as she could.

Zavar caught her hand and squeezed it warmly. “She’s got about as much hope as Qumri getting Azdar back in the sack. Vajd’s Zeb fast to her dumb Aab. He saw through her years ago.” She gnawed on her lower lip and gazed seriously at Aleytys. “Be careful, will you, Leyta? If she ever suspected. . . .” When Aleytys said nothing, she smiled and dropped the subject. After stretching and groaning, she said, “I nearly forgot. You go on down, Leyta. I better roust out the little mother and tell her she had a dozen beds to make. How she’ll love me. . . .” Trailing a laugh behind her, she danced away down the hall.

Whistling cheerfully, Aleytys clattered down the stairs. The patio doors stood open to the warming morning air and the corridor was a highway for darting, busy figures. Two asiri brushed past her, huge bundles of dirty sheets balanced on their heads. Aleytys wrinkled her nose with distaste. *Laundry*, she thought. *Hate those damn soggy sheets*. She pulled the hood up over her head and sauntered into the patio.

With affectionate gentleness she slid her hands up and down the silken silvery bark of the housetree, letting the life-pulse tingle into her fingertips. As she purred with pleasure, she lifted her head and looked up at the sky. It was curving into a vast crystalline bowl of translucent blue-purple. Horli’s crimson edge was just beginning to poke over the top of the steep roof. The clean clear sky showed no trace of last night’s violent eruption. Aleytys rubbed her feet over the grass and stared up at the secret sky, curiosity a small hot point burning under her heart. The nashta bell rang and she turned back into the house.

3

Aleytys poked at the steamy lye-sour water with the poundstick. “Ai-Aschla,” she muttered, putting muscles into shoving the sheets around in the boiling water. The humidity in the low-ceiled room turned her hair into damp strings that slid into her eyes and mouth.

She leaned on the poundstick for a moment and watched the asiri laughing and gossiping, her mouth twisted in a bitter smile at the well-marked area of silence separating her from that happy camaraderie. She sniffed and pushed the soggy strands of hair out of her face.

Across the room Urdag looked up and frowned. As Aleytys met the cold hostile gaze, rebellion flared in her. She jabbed viciously at the sheets, then set the stick down on the floor, wiped her face and hands on the sweat rag, and calmly walked out of the room, ignoring Urdag’s angry shout.

As she left the shelter of the building, Hesh’s radiation hit her face. Hastily she twitched the hood over her head and tucked in the stray ends of her long hair. The square was hot and peaceful, with a few stray currents of air pouring down the roof to shift the housetree’s fronds lazily about, their papery rustle emphasizing the hush. She leaned against the tree and sighed as the minty fragrance from the fronds drifted gently around her. “Aziz. . . muklis. . . .” she murmured, closing her tired eyes.

A sudden burst of angry shouting jerked her onto her toes facing the door. *I'm not about to wait for this*, she decided. With a last wary glance in the direction of the growing clamor, she fled across the grass and plunged into the entranceway.

As she passed the heavy planked doors, which were shut only in winter at the first snow, she slowed to a walk, breathing more easily now that she was out of the house. She ambled through the dappled shade from the twin rows of horans marching down each side of the roadway, scuffing her feet so that small explosive puffs of white sand spurted up in front of her sandal toes. The four-fingered horan leaves were curling into loose rolls now, with their smooth silver under-surfaces turned to the suns' light, so that their shadows were flickering rectangles, long and narrow like thickened branches.

In the middle of the high wooden arch over the river, she stopped and leaned over the railing to gaze down into the crystal water tumbling past, pleased by the irregular shadow shapes of subtly varying shades of green and blue. In a kind of timeless trance she melted into the water going *swhhsshssswesshsshssh* beneath her as the edges of the world drifted away, drowning in green and blue, drowning in the musical susurrus of the water's voice.

Aleytys... something... rippled, flowed, leaped, sensed the hard resistance of stone and the lesser barriers of the aging pilings, sensed the bending of the submerged grasses, and the tickling intrusion of scattered schools of fish. Far out at the edge of the expanding bubble of awareness that was-and-was-not-Aleytys, fugitive sparks of crimson caught at her, pulled her... it... whatever... and suddenly she was avid eyes fixed on a succulent worm crawling through sun-streaked shadow.

Drifting... floating like an errant soap bubble... trickling back into herself... Once again she felt the hot press of the suns on her neck and the glide of the railing under her hands. She slid her fingers over the rail in a delicate caress, delighting in the time-worn smoothness of the hard wood.

Feeling warm, contented, at peace with herself temporarily at least, she moved on, the sand creaking cheerfully under her sandals. She lifted her head and smiled at the part of the Mari'fat she could see rising above its surrounding flounce of trees, its vivid eccentric splashes of orange, yellow, red, blue, and purple glowing in the quiet clarity of the morning light. She laughed with delight and kicked at the sand so that it flew up and sang in time with the joy beating in her veins.

A path split off the main road, its mouth marked by tall thin Heshan daisies. She brushed her hand lightly across their blue-petaled heads, sending the heavy blooms dancing. The bell trees lining the path tinkled as the morning breezes shook their seedpods and the muted whisper of the river blended with the darting drones of shash, szuhm, and khasrat. Suddenly the gentle morning sound drowned in the rich harmonies of a barbat.

Aleytys threw up her hands and danced exuberantly down the path, joy spurting like a fountain through her body, joy so intense she felt it exploding out of her, spraying the morning with its golden glory. The morning's colors intensified, while her skin vibrated to sounds like the taut membrane of a drumhead. After a few more steps, her hood flipped back and her hair streamed out, each separate hair tingling with life.

She rounded the last clump of zardagul bushes and saw the majestic old horan. Vajd was sitting on a huge smooth root, his back fitting into the curve of the trunk. Aleytys smiled tenderly at him, watching unseen as he danced music out of the barbat. He wore a dark blue and silver abba that fell in graceful folds around his lean strong body. The barbat he held was his favorite, an eccentric crescent of hand-oiled ballut inlaid with silver in the intricate naizeh patterns. As he let his fingers wander over the

strings, he stared dream-caught into the water flowing past his feet. The gentle breeze drifting along the water ruffled through the fine black hair barred with streaks of white that straggled in shaggy curls around his thin sensitive face.

“Vajd.”

He looked up and saw her. “Leyta.” A warm smile lit his sunburned face. He patted the surface of the large flat rock that nestled against the root. “Come sit down. I’m working out a new song.”

“Not working too hard, I see. Is it for a dream?” She knelt beside him.

He chuckled. “It comes. A dream?” Humming lightly, he stroked the tips of his fingers over the back of her hand. “No. A marriage blessing.”

Smiling, she rubbed his hand against her cheek. “Who is it? Do I know?”

“Yara’s youngest daughter and Nilran Gavrinson.”

“Oh.” Swinging her feet around, she dropped them over the edge of the rock and watched her dusty toes wiggle. She lowered her head and smiled at him from behind the curtain of her hair. “Coming here it happened again.”

He set the barbat down and touched her forehead. “No heat. Strange... When I started dreaming... I was younger, of course. What did you see?”

“Well...” She stared dreamily into the water rushing past her feet. “I looked into the river and it was like... like I melted... I felt a part of... of everything, trees, grass, water; then it broke.”

“You’ve been doing the exercises?” He caught hold of her arm and pressed his fingers over the pulse. “You’re too excited, Leyta. Calm yourself. Can you?”

Aleytys sucked in a long quivering breath, then let it trickle out again, concentrating on the soothing rhythms of the water until her body slowed, breathing deepened and slowed, heartbeat slowed, and she felt calm and tranquil. “Yes,” she said softly. “Every day at the beginning of khakutah.”

“Have they helped?”

Aleytys lifted her shoulders and let them fall. “Some,” she said slowly. “I think so. The... the experiences are coming more often now, but I’m not afraid anymore.”

He gently brushed the hair back and turned her face toward him. “You’re gifted, Leyta. I don’t promise peace or happiness; you know that. But your horizons will spread far beyond the narrow limits of the ordinary. Don’t ever be afraid to use your gifts, Leyta.” Suddenly he frowned and measured the height of Hesh. “It’s not khaladkar yet. Aren’t you supposed to be in the laundry now? You said yesterday you had...” He held her facing him when she tried to pull away.

“I walked out.”

“Tell me,” he said grimly.

“I just got fed up.” A faint irritation stirring in her, she jerked away from his hand. “That’s all.”

His hand dropped limply onto his knee. "Leyta, Leyta," he said wearily. "You know better."

"What can they do to me? Beat me?" She shrugged "What's new about that? No matter what I do, Qumri manages to find something wrong, so why should I try?"

He was silent, his face grimly troubled.

"You tell me, my love. If nothing I do can ever please why should I try?"

"Leyta... ah, Madar! You just don't understand."

"Understand?" she said tightly. "How can I? I don't know... there's nothing more I can do. Look." She spread out her hands. "I work harder than the asiri. All the creams I can beg... beg! A daughter of the house and I have to beg for hand cream, for... oh, everything. Thanks to the kindness of a few... I can count them on the fingers of one hand. And this morning Jorchi... a baby... he cursed me... called me red bitch. I know I live here on sufferance. But why? Why? Tell me, Vajd."

"Leyta." He looked harried and unsure of himself. "I... don't ask me. I am forbid. The shura'..."

She shifted impatiently. "Even you. Even you."

"Leyta..."

Her mouth twisted bitterly. "You slept with me. Aren't you forbid to do that too? But of course that was secret."

"Leyta..."

Stubbornly she ignored him and kicked her heels against the rock.

"All right, aziz." Capitulating suddenly, spreading his hands out palms up, he said, "With the fireball stirring up old hate and old fears you should know what you're facing." She slanted a glance at him past the curtain of her hair.

"The fireball? She frowned. "Last night Qumri called me whore-daughter."

Vajd caught hold of her shoulder and swung her around. "Why? What did you do?"

"I went outside to look at the sky." She wriggled under his bruising grip. "You're hurting me."

"At night?"

"Vajd, you're hurting me."

"Answer me."

"I wanted to see the fireball, or at least..." She pushed at his hand. "Vajd..."

He closed his eyes and let her free her shoulder. "Aleytys."

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of this.”

“No wonder, aziza-mi.” He smiled at her and touched her cheek. “It’s a long troubled story.”

“Vajd, stop it. What’s so bad you keep putting off telling me?” She beat her fist impatiently on her thigh. “Tell me! Tell me why Qumri hates me so much she goes crazy whenever she sees me? And why am I the only one in the valley with red hair? Why did the shura’ shut me off from love until even you don’t dare touch me out of shadow? And Azdar... only time he’ll stay in the same room with me is mealtime. Why?”

He stroked her shining hair gently, running his fingers through the springy red-gold mass. Stray tendrils blew around his wrist and curled into a bright bracelet. Aleytys slowly relaxed and leaned back against his shoulder. “There’s not time now, muklis,” he said softly. “Someone could come along any minute and see us.”

“Well?” She closed her eyes, her body purring with pleasure as he continued to caress her.

“Tonight. We might as well take double care. Come here. Thirty hour. Can you?”

“If I have to jump off the roof.”

He laughed and tilted her head so that she was looking up into his face. With a warm affectionate smile lighting his eyes, he said, “Will you bless the Madar with me this night, muklis, mashuq?” Without waiting for an answer his mouth was warm against hers, his hands moving over her back. Then he shoved her onto her feet and jumped up. “Go on, Leyta. Get out of here.”

4

Aleytys dawdled down the roadway, moving slower and slower as she neared the black rectangle of the entranceway with its huge plank doors angled out like clumsy wings. She edged cautiously up to the opening and peered inside.

The tunnel looked empty. Aleytys suddenly realized she was holding her breath and let the air out in an explosive puff. She darted into the tunnel and ran as fast as she could toward the patio.

The air whooshed out of her as she slammed into the elastic resistance of a body. She bounced off and stumbled back against the wall. When her eyes cleared, her stomach muscles twisted painfully. “Qumri,” she whispered.

“Bitch.” The word hissed malevolently. “Bitch in heat. Who were you with today? I told him...” Her face contorted into an ugly mask as the poisonous rage seethed inside her while she quivered all over so that her abba fluttered like a horan in a winter gale. “I told him it wouldn’t work. I should have strangled you the day you were born. Rusvai... Haya... slacking taklif, sneaking out... You dare... you... after last night...” The low venom-filled words stumbled out from her writhing lips with spattering drops of spit.

Aleytys felt sick and disgusted. She pressed her hands against the wall finding a kind of comfort in the cold rough solidity of the stone.

“I told him...” The whisper went on. “I told him... he couldn’t keep your legs shut... like your mother... aaaahhhh!” She shrieked and leaped at Aleytys.

Frozen for just a minute too long, Aleytys tried to duck away but felt fingers sink like claws into the flesh of her shoulder. Qumri shook her until tears squeezed out of her eyes.

“Like your mother... filthy beast witch-woman... whose man did you take... who’d you poison so he wouldn’t look at me... at her again... like your mother... with that hell-fire hair... Haya!”

Aleytys twisted away from the hot breath stirring in her face. Her paralysis shattered and she fought until she broke away. Ducking under Qumri’s whirling arms she fled out into the patio, halting by the housetree.

Hands opening and closing spasmodically, her pale gold face flushed an ugly mottled red, Qumri stalked out of the entranceway. Her eyes fixed on the object of her hatred, she demanded again, “Rusvai, who is he?” Each step she took toward Aleytys she spit out another phrase. “Who woke the curse... who breaks our house? Curse... you... your bitch mother...”

“Salkurdeh khatu!” The man’s deep voice broke into the ugly scene, startling Aleytys so that she bumped her head hard against the tree as she whipped around toward him. “Ahai, Ziraki!” She blinked and shook her head to clear it. Then she looked at Qumri and gasped. The angry woman’s body wilted and the color drained from her face. She looked back at Ziraki. His face was as red as if the color had leaped from Qumri to him. Frown lines ran in tier on tier of wrinkles from the corners of his eyes to his nose, from his nose to the corners of his mouth, from his mouth down under his pointed chin.

“Come here,” he snapped, crooking his finger at her.

Puzzled and a little apprehensive, she edged over to him, still watching Qumri out of the corners of her eyes.

“You. Qumri.” She lowered her hooded eyes and wouldn’t look at him. “You’ve said too much already, woman. Taklif waits for your hands. Azdar may want to see you later.”

Walking like a tired old mundarik Qumri plodded across the grass and vanished into the house.

Aleytys scrubbed the end of her sleeve across her sweaty face. “Thanks, Ziraki.”

“Follow me,” he said in a colorless voice. He turned and strode for the nearest door. Inside the house he stopped in front of the records room. “Go in and sit down.”

She hurried past him and stood beside the long table.

“Sit down.” He watched her from the doorway.

Nervously she pulled out the chair and dropped into it. She glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes, then set shaking hands on the table, folding them together.

“Aleytys.” He said her name sharply, spitting it out as if he found the syllables upsetting.

“Yes?” She kept her eyes on her hands.

“The shura’ have called a mulaqat in the finjan Topaz.”

“Yes?”

“You’re not to go.”

She jerked around and stared at him in astonishment “What?”

“Azdar commands. Forget about your assigned work. Go to your room now and stay out of sight. I’ll send an asiri with your lunch.”

“But...” She jumped to her feet. “I have the right.”

Ziraki pinched his lips together. “Aleytys, don’t argue. This is no time to stand on your rights. If you try to go...” He shrugged. “You saw Qumri. You want to face that multiplied by hundreds?”

Aleytys swallowed. She stared stubbornly down at her clenched hands. “He should tell me himself.”

“Sabbiiyya,” he said brusquely. “You’re not stupid.”

“Hah!” Her laugh was short, shaky. “Ziraki...”

“I can’t answer any questions, Aleytys, so don’t ask.” He moved closer and touched her head lightly. “Be sure to keep out of the way for the next few days. Just to be safe.” He stepped back until he was out in the hall. “Just give us a little time to settle down.”

After he left the room Aleytys sat down again. “What a day,” she sighed. She leaned back and let her tired arms dangle. Softness flowed past her ankles, then brushed back again with a small *mrowrr*.

“Mooli,” she said with delight and got an answering *mrowrr*. She scooped the vibrating furry body into her lap. The gurb twisted around in her hands and swiped her small rough tongue over the fingers holding her. “Mooli, Mooli,” Aleytys crooned, stroking Her fingers across the thick russet fur, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until her anger and tension drifted away.

5

Aleytys sat up and leaned over Twanit. She was breathing deeply and steadily and seemed likely to continue that way till dawn. Every third intake was a low gurgling rattle, a semi-snore no louder than a mouse-squeak.

As Aleytys swung her legs over the side of the bed, the leather lacing supporting the mattress creaked loudly. She dived off onto the floor and held her breath, a muscle twitching at the corner of her mouth. Twanit didn’t stir. Her breathing clockworked on, in-out, in-out, without a break. Aleytys sighed with relief and pulled the heavy nightgown over her head. Shivering in the cold air of the room, she folded it up and tucked it neatly under her pillow.

Bare feet flinching from the cold floor, heart bumping, she slipped along the wall and slid the panel back. She scrambled into the first abba that came to hand and fastened the ties with shaking fingers. Then she closed her eyes and leaned against the wall. “Plenty of time...” she whispered. “There’s plenty of

time....”

She shoved her hair back off her face. “Perfume... got to have perfume...” She rummaged in the closet, running her hands lightly over the bottles, jumping slightly each time they clanked together. At last she found the right one and pulled the cork. With fingers trembling in excitement she rubbed the scent every place she could think of, her blood heating up again as the prickle of the liquid started shivers in her skin.

Her sense of the ridiculous suddenly reasserted itself. As she shoved the cork back into the bottle, her stomach was rippling with suppressed laughter. *You could track me by smell alone*, she thought. *Idiot*
....

Out in the hall the night candles were burned halfway down. Twisting shadows danced on the walls like nightmare monsters hunching over her. She swallowed nervously. Running on her toes, she slanted across to the stairs and bolted down them. Even the almost soundless patter of her bare feet sounded like gong-strokes in her cringing ears.

In the patio she stopped for a moment by the housetree and stroked the glistening bark. “For luck, aziz,” she whispered. Reluctantly she pulled away from the tree and sped through the entranceway tunnel.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped onto the roadway. The cold soggy sand, wet from the evening rain, squished between her toes while above her head the horan branches flickered back and forth in the light wind and whispered words at her just beyond the threshold of hearing, as though she could understand all the terrible things they were saying if she just listened a little harder. All around her the moon-shadows danced phantomlike across the pale earth and she fled through them, the rhythms of her ragged breathing a discord in the quiet pattern of night sounds.

Her bare foot splatted down on the bridge with a sound obscenely loud in her straining ears. She gasped and ran up the arch. In the middle of the bridge she paused to catch her breath and leaned against the smooth rail, shaking like those wind-tossed leaves.

The murmur of the water drifted into her head, comforting her now as it had done so many times before. She sighed and rested on her elbows, watching the water. The river at night had a strange fascination... silver swirling current lines, deep black on black layers of shadow, moving, altering, sliding away beneath her. It whispered to her, the sound flowing like balm over her quivering nerves and melting into the marrow of her bones. She seemed to dissolve through her skin, scattering along the jewel-bright water like moonbeams dancing on the surface... insect wants and busy hungers caught at bits of her... and the long cool thoughts... lives... of the trees... and far-off feral greeds.... Time... time stretched out... out... out... and snapped!

She gasped and swung around to look at the black bulk of the house. It rested solid and silent against the diamond-bright dust lighting the night blackness of the sky. She shivered again as the whispering leaves rasped across naked nerves. Moving swiftly she slid into the concealing shadows of the trees growing on the far bank of the river.

At the old horan she put her hand on the gnarled trunk and called softly, “Vajd?”

The river murmured past and the night around her was filled with mysterious creaks and rustles.

Aleytys hugged the tree and closed her eyes. “Vajd?” Still no answer. Fear was a cold and growing lump in the region of her stomach. If he didn't come...

“Leyta?” The whisper hissed past her ear.

She clutched at the tree, pressing herself tight against the rough bark.

“Hai... ” He scrambled down to her and lifted her into his arms. “Poor little gurb.”

Gentled against his chest she tried to answer, but her teeth chattered so loudly she couldn't force the words past them.

“Just be quiet, love. Relax... we've the whole night. ...” He held her close and stroked gentle hands over her hair and down her back.

Gradually the chill warmed away. She sucked in a long unsteady breath and let it trickle out again. Lifting her head from his chest, she touched his cheek with her fingertips, then sighing with intense satisfaction, she snuggled down against his strong warm body. “It's been a hellish day.”

“I know, Leyta, I know.”

She tilted her head back. “What happened at the malaqat?”

He didn't answer but his face looked grim.

“As bad as that?”

He tightened his arms around her and dropped a light kiss where her hair parted. “As bad as it could be.”

“Um. Hadn't you better tell me?” She trailed her fingers back and forth across his hands, slightly distracted by the hard strong feel of skin and muscle. “Vajd-mi?”

He nodded but seemed reluctant to begin. She could hear his heart beating fast under her ear,

“Well?” She wriggled impatiently. “Azdar kept me shut up in my room all day. Twanit was too scared to say anything. After she came back from mulaqat, every time she looked at me she started crying, poor baby, but I found it very frustrating.” She shivered. The cold was beginning to slide up her legs.

“You're cold,” he said sharply. “Your hands are shaking.”

She pushed away from him and frowned. “Vajd!”

He laughed. “Not here, love.” He pushed her onto her feet and stood beside her. He stretched and yawned, the vertical stripes on his black and silver abba shifting back and forth in the moonlight. “The finjan's out. Too far. Shall we join the horses?”

“Better horses than some snoopy idiot. Lot better.”

Vajd's teeth gleamed as he grinned down at her. “I forgot.” He reached for her hand. “You like animals.”

As they picked their way over the roots, Aleytys tightened her fingers around his and moved closer.

“They’re mostly nicer than people. At least to me.”

He slid his arm around her waist and propelled her ahead of him up the ramp to the stable door. When she tensed at the low rumble as he slid the door back, Vajd chuckled and rubbed his hand on her side. “Relax, love. All sensible people are warm in bed.”

She snorted and stalked into the stable. After sliding the door shut, he followed her. Around her she could hear soft snuffles and thumps as the horses shifted in momentary dreams. Although a little light crept in through dusty double windows high on each side of the long narrow building, she could see almost nothing except vague bulks rising here and there on either side of a central aisle. The air was—rich with animal smells, warm from their body heat. She felt the wavy shivers that were crawling up and down her body begin to subside. “Vajd. . . ”

“Up the ladder.” He gave her a little shove, his hands warm on the small of her back.

Aleytys groped her way into the loft and slid over the loose slippery straw to one corner, where a window permitted a few stray moonbeams past spider webs and hay dust to light the downslope of the small hill. Sighing with pleasure, she dropped down on the straw and rooted around until she had a comfortable hollow, then she leaned back and sniffed. “Smells good here.”

Vajd slid down beside her and she smiled up at him. “Leyta. . . ” His eyes glinted in the moonlight as he bent over her and slid gentle exploring fingers down the side of her face. “Soft. . . ” His voice trailed off as he settled beside her and touched the sensitive hollow at the base of her throat with her lips. “Bless. . . ”

She rested fingertips on the shallow curve of his neck, pleased by the soft springy feel of the shorter hairs there. His cheek was faintly rough against her skin. She brought her hand around and pushed his head gently back so she could see his face. “I couldn’t steal any pills this time—”

He laughed, his lips vibrating against her throat as he settled his head against hers. “So the prophecy begins tonight—”

Aab slid down across the window, shining softly on the two golden figures, her opaline glow highlighting changing portions of their bodies as they moved. Then they stilled into an abstract design in chiaroscuro.

After a long warm while Aleytys stirred. Vajd sat up and touched her cheek with a forefinger. “Leyta?”

She pulled his hand over her mouth and kissed the wide palm. Then she flung out her arms and stretched luxuriously.

“Mmm.”

He laughed and pulled her abba around her. “Before you freeze. No, don’t move.” He tied the ties and smoothed the material over her body. She sighed with pleasure and watched as he shrugged back into his. He caught hold of her hand. “Happy, love?”

“Very—” She sighed and sat up. “Prophecy?”

He pulled her closer until her head rested on his chest. She felt his heart beating strongly beside her ear. Somehow, in spite of a vague apprehension hovering at the back of her mind, she felt warm and secure and only half listened to the words ruffling through the hair on top of her head.

“Blood and violence,” he said, his voice soft and slow. “I’ve dreamed the same dream the same day every year since... Blood and violence. Whichever way I turned...” The words seemed to drag out of his mouth. “People falling dead around you. The Raqsidan raped by strangers. Not now. I felt that. Not now but when our son...” He felt her jerk in surprise against him. “The son we make this night... when our son will be grown. Men spreading fire... a redheaded man with angry green eyes laughing fiercely at the destruction...” His hand slipped from her breast to stroke the incurve of her waist. For several minutes she felt his breath stirring in her hair in time with the smooth rise and fall of his chest. “Then a strange image expanded all through my dream. A blackness shot with stars spreading out, out, out... so far it seemed to encompass the whole of the universe, and wheeling slowly in the middle of this all, you... your body misty, a thousand suns tangled in the tossed-out strands of your hair and a thousand suns glowing through the translucent smoke of your body. I felt a vast sadness in you, a terrible power... you had traveled far in ways I couldn’t begin to comprehend and you had a long and complex journey before you.”

“Haia!” She was silent a minute. “You dreamed... did you sing that at the mulaqat?”

“The important parts. Leyta, I’m dream-singer for the Raqsidan, what could I do?”

“I understand.” She sighed. “That’s not going to make my life any easier.”

“You’re at a node point in your life, Aleytys; you’ve a decision coming up. There are too many in the valley like Qumri.” He shifted, his body rippling under her. The straw rustled slightly. “I think you’ll have to leave the Raqsidan.”

She shivered. “Vajd, I’m afraid.”

“I know.”

“No!” She jerked away and sat up. “I won’t! Aschla’s bloody claws, what *can* they do to me? I’ve got my rights. Clan law...”

“Aleytys.” He shook his head, negating all she was trying to say. He reached out and touched her cheek. “Even as my consort you wouldn’t be safe. You see, Leyta, you don’t really count as one of the clan.”

“Huh?” She stared at him, astounded.

“Your mother wasn’t clan. I can feel the hate and anger growing. And the fear. The fireball stirred it all up again like a storm wind stirs the sludge at the bottom of a stagnant pond. Soon, too soon, it’s going to explode and burn you to ash if you’re still here.” His deep voice dropped into his compelling persuasive mode and he continued to explain, but she wasn’t listening any longer. Her mind kept going back to the word *consort*. Even the news of her outclan status paled as delight, joy, and triumph drove away anything else. She interrupted him. “You want me as consort.”

He laughed and hugged her. “Leyta, Leyta—”

Excitement exploded in her. “Then... then that’s the answer.” She leaned back tautly against his encircling arms. “If we were wed, no one could touch me.”

He shook his head. “You haven’t been listening, Leyta.”

“But...” She tugged at his arm. “I wouldn’t be outclan then. Would I?” She scanned his unresponsive

face. "Would I, Vajd?"

"You would be safe then. Except for one thing, Leyta. And that one thing negates all the rest. Your mother, Leyta."

"My mother." She broke out of his arms and sat back on the straw, her hands falling loose in her lap. "I keep hearing about my mother. You. Qumri. And Ziraki was shaking to the bones afraid I'd ask him about her."

"I'm breaking oath even to say her name."

"You've already broken shura' law by loving me. What's an oath? Anyway, you already said you'd tell me."

He laughed. "Trust a woman to see the practical." Crossing his legs, resting his hands on his knees, he let his face go slack, his eyes blank as he sank into the Mutrib's memory trance. His voice was quiet, remote, as it recounted the history of the curse.

"It was in the year of the Azdar in the Yarazur month of high thaw in the red days when Horli occluded Hesh. In that hour of subsurud when Horli's disk had just cleared world-edge the sky spat forth a ball of fire. It whistled over the valley and skimmed the teeth of Dandan, where it split into two pieces. The larger disappeared behind the mountains and the smaller skimmed the ridges southward.

"We huddled in our houses muttering to each other in whispers, too frightened to speak aloud. The day passed. The night passed. On the third morning we ventured out, creeping through our work with necks permanently bent upward. Badr, my master, tried to dream, but the shapes were so twisted he couldn't read them. I tried. Nothing. But the Sha'ir of the herders came ranting about evil and doom. He read it in the smoke. He tried to stir the shura' to the Atash nau-tavallud. But we weren't quite that afraid.

"Day faded into day and our necks straightened; even the aches passed away as nothing happened. Then, in the month Gavran, the caravan came to the valley.

"That night Aab and Zeb rose early, kissing, and the clouds piled high around Dandan were whipped to rags by dry and roaring winds so the night rains were aborted before they were born. On the common the bonfire leaped red and gold into the silver-sprinkled sky, painting warm highlights on the tawdry fair booths and the posturing slave women and the drovers selling their flesh to the curious mardha.

"Azdar, heated by his ever-ready lust, strolled between the wagons and watched the slave women dance in the firelight. I wandered about by myself watching everyone but was too shy to join the revelry. Finally I came around the end of one of the wagons. It was set off to one side and I was curious about it.

"A woman dressed in black and white sat on the steps of that caravan. Her hair was long and straight, curling only at the ends, shining like avrishum fiber in the light of the small silver lantern that hung just above her head. I stared and stared, feeling utterly bewitched.

"She was a glowing woman with eyes like greenstone, glittering with fever. Her hair was redder than the crackling fire, red as Horli. Her bones were delicate as a bird's, but she was richly curved. And she was beautiful... There is a beauty that catches you in the throat, stirring your whole being until each beat of your heart calls out in answer.

"She sat very, very still, looking at nothing, her hands, long fingered and slim, resting in her lap. I edged

along in the shadow, but before I got courage to speak to her, Azdar came. He stared at her, the pale tip of his tongue moving around and around his lips.

“I crouched in the shadow of a second caravan—I think it was one of the fodder wagons—and watched them. I had leaped puberty seven months before and found my dreams. I had left my father’s house, broken my ties with my brothers and sisters, and gone to sit at the feet of Badr. It was a lonely, difficult time for me and I was terribly vulnerable to her then. Azdar saw her hair and her body and wanted her. I saw something else, some strange wild thing in her that drew me with cords stronger than life.

“Azdar stopped in front of her. She looked him over coolly, then dropped her eyes. As the lantern struck fire from that glorious hair I saw her riding fire between the stars, riding fire down to the turning surface of Jaydugar. While I was still shaking under the impact of that vision, Azdar reached out and caught the woman’s head with his big hand.

“ ‘What’s your name?’ His voice was a fierce growl, more like a beast than a man. Without waiting for an answer, he said, ‘Come with me. I pay well.’

“She hardly seemed to see him, even when he wound his fingers in her glorious hair and forced her head to tilt up to him. Her hands lay still in her lap and her eyes looked through him as if he weren’t there. I shivered, suddenly cold from head to foot. Danger whirled around the three of us like smoke oppressed to earth by coming rain.

“He jerked on her hair to pull her to her feet. Her arms came up. I stared. A thin steel chain was wound around and around her wrists and locked with a heavy padlock. I knew that steel. What was she that she required chaining strong enough to bind a tars? But Azdar was sunk too keep in shavat to do more than grunt in surprise and frustration. He pulled her off the steps.

“She fell sprawling at his feet and her skirt came up past her knees. I saw that her legs were chained together too. Azdar growled in rage.

“A man came into the circle of light cast by the silver lantern, a short dark man with hard black eyes. He was muscled like a bull gav and had a soft fleshy mouth that was small, tight, and greedy. He smiled. If I’d been Azdar, I’d have killed him on the spot for that smile alone. Shavat-blind, Azdar ignored him and tugged futilely at the chains.

“ ‘The key is for sale, if you have the price.’ The voice of the caravan man was oily and smug. Azdar wheeled around and surged to his feet in a single fluid movement. His hand on the knife stuck in his belt, he glared at the man.

“ ‘Her key is for sale.’

“Azdar straightened, relaxed. When he spoke, his voice was thick and hoarse. ‘How much?’

“ ‘Twenty horses and ten full bolts of avrishum.’

“I almost betrayed myself then, but swallowed the exclamation in my throat. The price was ludicrous, would have bought a score of women. It would have brought this caravan clan twice over.” Azdar hesitated.

“The caravanman let two keys tied to a twist of risman dangle and clink suggestively. The woman sat up and smoothed her skirt. She folded her hands in her lap again and stared past the two men into the

darkness. The silver lantern cast its light on her cheek and slid down over her shoulder onto the soft mounds of her upper breasts. Her skin was strangely fair, milk white. She sat without a word, without even a sound, without a movement other than the slow rise and fall of her breasts.

“‘Can she talk?’ For a moment the trader-blood in Azdar cooled his lust. ‘A mute’s no use to me.’

“The man stepped around him to stand in front of the woman. From his belt he pulled loose a sharag. He dangled the jagged strands in front of her face. ‘Speak, woman,’ he said softly. Tell this fine gentleman your name.’

“The indifference left her face and the fever glitter in her eyes turned to red-hot hate that sent shivers up and down my spine. He was a brave man—or a very unimaginative one—for he didn’t flinch from that burning gaze. The change that animation made in her was startling. Suddenly, instead of a marble and copper goddess, she was a vital passionate creature. She was magnificent. Azdar’s breath groaned out of his throat while the shavat brought sweat glistening on his face.

“The man of the caravan bent forward slightly, the evil oily smile coming back to his face. ‘Speak,’ he whispered to the woman.

“‘Shareem Atennanthan di Vrithian.’ She spit the words at him. Each husky syllable of her dark-toned voice caught at my ears—and enchanted me. Azdar pushed past the man. He picked the woman up and slung her over his shoulder. Turning to face the man, he held out his hand for the keys. ‘Done,’ he said hoarsely. ‘Collect the goods tomorrow. Word of Azdar.’

“The man flipped the keys casually into Azdar’s palm. Take my warning, noble gentleman. Don’t unchain her hands. I might find it difficult to get her price from your heirs.’

“Azdar grunted and marched off into the darkness. The man sauntered away, whistling contentedly. I crept to my room and wept for her, watching the night away in my misery and pain, sick to my stomach from the black wings of foreboding that hovered around my soul.

“In the morning Azdar sent the cloth and the horses.

“That morning Shareem lay deep in fever, screaming in delirium, shaking with chills. The women were frightened to tend her but even more frightened of Azdar’s hard hand. He kept Qumri away from her altogether. He had just sense enough left to know the bitch would have poisoned her. He’d bedded her, but he wasn’t fool enough to trust her. Anyway, he was through with her. He couldn’t see any woman but Shareem. Whispers ran through the house that she was a witch who put a spell on him to get herself free of the caravans. Though I said nothing of my vision, another whisper followed the first—born out of the Sha’ir’s festering hatred—linking her with the fireball, calling her demon-born, a bane on the valley.

“She lay almost dying for three months. In the middle of high summer she opened knowing eyes for the first time and found that Azdar that first night had got her a child. She lay in that bed, little more than brittle red hair and milk-white skin stretched over bird-like bones, looking fragile as a desiccated leaf. Azdar visited her daily. He would drag a chair beside the bed and sit staring at her, hands planted on his knees. And he would ramble on and on at her and stroke her thin dry arms and fumble with her hair, while she stared at the wall and ignored him.

“She kept putting him off, refusing him, pleading her frailty. But the flesh came back on her bones, her skin softened, her hair regained its glow, so he didn’t listen to her any longer. Once more he bedded her. He came again and again, night after night. She was a thirst that grew each time he drank. She bided her

time, waiting for her full strength.

“I remember she used to stand for hours on the bridge staring down into the Raqsidan. If anyone tried to speak to her she turned blind unheeding eyes on him for a minute, then returned to her contemplation of the dancing water.

“The months passed and the child grew. Still Azdar wouldn’t let her alone. He seemed to hate his own child because the time was coming fast when Shareem would go into tanha and when that happened she would be barred to him.

“I watched her when I could, but she didn’t seem aware of my existence until one day when she was standing on the bridge as usual. It was early morning, the air cool and clean and clear... one of those days when a man’s blood itches to create things. I was sitting by the old horan, letting my fingers walk the barbat to sooth the itch. She followed the sound. Without a word she lowered herself onto the rock beside me and listened to the music. I trembled and rejoiced. Glory flowed into my hands.

“After a while she leaned over and put her hand on mine, stilling the music so I could rest my aching fingers. We sat together listening to the sound of the wind shifting the leaves and the gentle susurrus of the water speeding past our feet. For the first time I felt peace blooming in her, a resolution of the conflicting mélange of emotions that had been pulling her around and around in an endless vortex.

“We sat there for a long while until we heard voices coming down the river path. She put out her hand again and I helped her to her feet. She smiled at me and said, in that dark velvet voice of hers, ‘Give you grace, my friend.’

“As the days passed, she came often to hear me play. At first she just listened, but in time she came to trust me and we began to talk, little things at first, the kind of trivia that turns strangers into friends. The days of summer mellowed and slid off the high fire down the gentle slope to fall.

“When the month Chang came, it was time for tanha. Late one night Azdar came sneaking into the Mari’fat. I woke with a nervous chill and followed my itch to Ikhtshar the doctor’s room. I heard Azdar’s growl alternate with the doctor’s tenor in a low-voiced argument. I listened. Azdar coaxed and threatened. In the end he won. The doctor agreed to abort the child.

“When Shareem came to the river next day, I told her. She walked away from me and looked down at the clear green water. I felt extraordinarily helpless, just stood there with my hands hanging down and my tongue twice the size of my mouth. She turned and walked back to me. An affectionate smile on her face, she drew her hand gently down my cheek; I could scarcely breathe.

“ ‘Don’t be afraid of me,’ she said softly. ‘I need you, young friend, I’m so alone here....’ Her voice trailed off and her eyes grew sad.

“I swallowed, feeling a fool because the words stuck in my throat. With great clumsy hands I reached out to her. She touched me fleetingly, then walked away. I watched her until my stupid brain began to work again. I ran after her.

“Azdar found us in the patio of his house, sitting quietly on a bench under the housetree. That bench is gone now. Qumri burned it. He told her what he wanted. She sat silent with her hands clasped in her lap, her face a calm mask.

“She turned those greenstone eyes on Ikhtshar and he shivered, although the morning was already hot.

Then it was Azdar's turn to blench. Her eyes fixed on him, cold as winter mornings, she asked very softly, 'I've got nothing to say about this?'

"With a visible effort Azdar pulled free from the spell and nodded grimly. The doctor stared at his toes and said nothing.

"Shareem stood up. I can remember thinking how graceful she was in spite of the child's added weight. Her eyes were glittering again while power swirled around her so thick it was hard to breathe. 'For your greed and for your fear,' she said to Ikhtshar, her mouth curling scornfully. 'Greed that makes you deny your deepest beliefs.' The words vibrated in the air so that it was hard to hear them. 'For your dereliction, I have this gift.'

"She lifted her hand and pointed her forefinger at the shivering and paralyzed doctor. A bright glow like golden honey gathered about that hand. With her mouth fixed in that curling, contemptuous smile, she flicked her fingers so that the glow flew in a glittering arc and splashed over his rigid face. As it struck, a thin keening burst from his throat. Before the sound died he crashed to the grass and shattered. Like brittle glass he broke into a hundred hard jagged pieces.

"I swallowed and turned my eyes away, unable to look at those horrible fragments.

"Shareem turned her green gaze on Azdar. 'So,' she said, her voice chillingly soft. 'You want to kill my baby to keep on using my body.' The smile vanished. 'I didn't ask for this baby. But it's *smine* ; nobody takes what's mine. I am Vryhh.'

"She lifted her head proudly. 'Vryhh. I swear to you, if you so much as brush against my hand, you'll never be a man again for any woman.' She flung out an arm, pointing at the gory shreds by her feet. 'I should put you with him. For our child's sake, you live. The child you want to kill. Bless her, Azdar, she has saved your life.' She cupped her hands so that they filled with that honey-amber light. It eddied out from her fingers, diffusing like smoke into the charged air.

"That terrible smile curled her lips again as she lifted her head. Her hair stirred with a life of its own, tendrils floating out from her face into air that twisted around her like heat waves at high noon. She lowered her hands slightly and bent her head over the pool of light. Her lips moved, dropping silent words into the slowly seething glow.

"As her eyes left him, Azdar tried to move. I watched him strain and saw the terror born in his face as he found he could not. I looked around, avoiding with my eyes the dead lumps of flesh a foot from my toes. Qumri stood just behind Azdar, her own face a mask of terror. Slowly, one by one, the asiri and the folk of Azdar stumbled out of the house onto the patio and stood like frozen statues in front of the bushes.

"Shareem kept staring down at the golden light cupped in her hands. I swallowed and shifted my cramped legs. Shareem turned her head toward me and for a second I thrilled with fear. Then she winked and her mouth curled one side up in a wry grin completely different from that terrifying smile she'd worn on her face seconds before. This took only a fraction of a second, but I relaxed and watched the rest of the show with intense interest, and, I must confess, more than a little smugness.

" 'Hear this,' she said in a voice throbbing with power. 'I lay this curse on the house of Azdar and on the head of Azdar. Seed of mine will lay waste this house. Seed of Azdar will bring him down. As long as the child in my womb lives happy in the house of Azdar, so long shall that house prosper and be fruitful. So long shall the valley of the Raqsidan be blessed. But I hang this like a sword of power over your heads. Should my child meet pain or death, the hearts and minds of the house of Azdar will crumple like the

stones of the house. The house will fall until not one stone remains on another. And this I hang like a sword of power over your heads. Seed of my child will shatter this house.’ She laughed, a high keening wail, cold as the wind in a winter storm. ‘Watch, you clods. Keep fearful watch for a red-haired man with angry green eyes. Shiver in your shoes, you world-bound dirt-eaters.’

“Even now I remember how I trembled at the sound of her voice and the terrible exaltation in her face. Shivered even when I knew she was putting it on, making fools out of them all for some purpose I couldn’t understand.

“‘That you may know...’ Shareem separated her hands, the golden light clinging around each of them. She pointed a finger and the inner wall of the patio crumpled with a roar, opening out the majlis like a stepped-on box.

“‘And that you may know I have the power to bless...’ She flung that glow from her left hand at the tumbling stones and they lifted, sailing into place till the wall was intact again. Then she walked quietly away.

“After that she lived at the Mari’fat. The Raqsidan settled into an uneasy peace and she went into tanha. When her time came she gave birth to a daughter just as she had said. She called the child Aleytys, which meant *wanderer* she said. Her labor was long and hard, but her strength was too great to be drained. Azdar came in to see her, hoping that in her weakness he could conquer her once more. But she laughed at him, her face shining with the sweat of her travail. He swerved from her and bent over the child’s cradle. When he reached down to touch the baby, Shareem laughed. A deadly weakness spread through his body, sending him crashing to his knees. He left hastily and didn’t come near again.

“Summer yellowed into autumn and the harvest brought delight. On the rows of vrisha bushes the pods hung bursting with fiber, their weight so great the branches swept the ground. Most of the gav dropped twins. Zardal, hullyu, and allucheh sagged under the weight of their fruit while the nut trees dropped meter-high piles onto the raked earth. Even the breadgrass doubled the number of seed stalks. As food, meat, and fiber piled in the houses, a wild hilarity streamed through the valley. We labored in the fields by day and danced half the night, wrapping ourselves in straw and drinking rivers of hulluwine.

“As the months passed, the child Aleytys grew like a little weed. She had the red hair of her mother but her eyes were bluer than green, shining like jewels in her small round face. She was a laughing baby, blessed with charm to call the mice out of the walls. But even then there was a kind of bewilderment in her as all but a few backed away from her friendly advances.

“At the Mari’fat Shareem spent long hours with the books and records. Because I had to be there much of the time myself since I was learning the songs, we were together hour on hour. After a while we started talking again, but she never said what she was looking for and I never asked. The months slipped away in front of the library fire while the storm winds piled the snow deeper and deeper up the sides of the house, ten... twenty meters until the attic doors were opened and the mardha slid from house to house on the crust. Inside, though, it was warm and comfortable. Small Aleytys lay on her quilts and gurgled and played with her toes while we read and studied.

“Unfortunately the quiet winter months passed. In the turbulence of thaw when the roads were rivers of mud and the Raqsidan a battering ram of broken ice, Shareem found the thing she was looking for. As I fought the damp inside the walls with the other apprentices she came to me and showed me an old leather-bound book. Pages were falling out of it and a green mold was eating a malodorous hole in the first part. She opened it in front of my nose and I winced away from the smell. The ink of the handwritten text was so faded I had to strain to make out the words. Excitement glowed in her brilliant eyes as she

shook this shabby remnant under my ignorant nose.

“ ‘Keep this, Vajd-mi,’ she told me in a tense whisper, her eyes darting past me at the others ironing the walls dry. Even when it was a tiny thread of sound her marvelous voice thrilled through me. ‘Show this to Aleytys when you think the time is right. There’s a letter inside for her.’

“ ‘But...’

“ ‘She put her hand across my mouth. ‘Hush,’ she said urgently. ‘Promise me.’

“ ‘But how will I know...’

“ ‘Promise me.’

“ ‘I swear. I’ll give the book to Aleytys when the time comes.’ I took the book carefully, suppressing my distaste at the crumbling filthy thing. But...’

“ ‘Don’t worry.’ She smiled and patted my hand. ‘I trust your understanding. You’ll know.’

“Reluctantly I tucked the book inside my abba, resolving to scrub both it and myself as soon as possible. I looked at her then, struggling to find the words to express the confusion and questions churning inside me. I looked at that gently sweating face, hair straggling in tiny wisps around it, and got a sense of barely controlled urgency. ‘Why...’ I stumbled out.

“ ‘Why won’t I be here?’ She put her hand on my arm again. Her fingers were hot and trembling slightly. ‘I’ll be back with my own.’ She laughed nervously and wiped the strands of hair back from her damp face. ‘Or I’ll be dead.’

“ ‘And Aleytys?’

“ ‘She shook her head. ‘Please understand, Vajd-mi, my friend. It’s only half a chance I’ve got. I can’t take a baby with me.’

“ ‘I looked past her at the black and empty fireplace where we’d spent those happy hours with the baby playing at our feet. A cold sorrow bloomed inside me then as a dream died for me.

“ ‘She felt my withdrawal and shook her head. ‘By tomorrow I’ll be gone. Don’t be too disappointed in me, young friend. I’m only doing what I have to do. I do love her, my baby. I do. I’ve done the best I could for her. I’m sure you didn’t believe that nonsense I spouted in the patio, the curse and the blessing. I did it to protect her. I don’t want her marrying one of these worms. Tell her to come to me. When she’s old enough, tell her... no, if there’s enough of me in her, she’ll understand. I can’t live here, Vajd. I’d die. I need the empty reaches of space to renew my spirit like a plant needs water to live.’

“ ‘And so she disappeared. Within a summer’s passing, thanks to Qumri and the Sha’ir, thanks to fear and bigotry, the baby Aleytys lost her laughter. She grew up apart, bewildered by the difference she felt inside her.’”

Vajd blinked and stared at his hands, opening and shutting them several times. He stretched and yawned. “ ‘Well, Leyta, that’s it. Now you know why.’”

She rolled over and stared at the wall, biting her lip so he couldn’t hear the sob in her breathing.

“Leyta?” He leaned over and touched her shoulder.

She shrugged his hand off. Tears stung her eyes and a pain like a sore tooth gnawed around her heart, sending lump after lump traveling up her throat.

“Leyta?” He pulled her around. Puzzled and a little angry, he scanned her sullen, miserable face. “What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s my mother you wanted all the time,” she spit at him, her anguish coming out as anger. “I’m what you get. It’s my mother you wanted.” She shoved at him with all her strength, sending him crashing against the wall as the slippery straw acted like rollers under his body. Slipping and sliding, blinded by the tears streaming from her eyes, she clawed frantically across the treacherous straw toward the ladder.

With an angry exclamation Vajd sprang after her, his thin strong hand closing around her arms. For several minutes they struggled in tense panting silence over the unstable straw. She sank her teeth in his arm and he slapped her. All the time she fought she was crying steadily, the pain inside her almost too much to bear.

Finally Vajd pinned her down with the weight of his body and a forearm pressed across her throat so that the trickle of blood from the bite slid down her neck. Anger stiffened his face into a harsh mask.

Suddenly she was inside. “No, Vajd,” she whispered. “Let me go. Please let me go.” She closed her eyes and let her body go limp. After a minute she felt his taut muscles relax. The pressure of his arm went away and she felt his hand brushing gently across her face, pushing her hair back, touching her eyes, her lips. “You’re wrong, Leyta.” His voice was tender and caressing. “No. I was a child dazzled. That’s all.”

Once again she felt his fingertips walking spider tracks across her face, trailing warmth behind. “Not Shareem. You. Always.” His hands moved over her and her body’s urgency drove everything else way out to the edges of her awareness.

They lay locked together for a long time. Aab dipped below the edge of the window.

The sudden darkening of the loft woke Aleytys from her dreamy languor. She turned her head to look at Vajd. His face was full of peace and he seemed years younger as he lay beside her, the dim light masking the laugh wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth. His hair was full of straw with wispy curls plastered down over a forehead wet with sweat. Tenderness was a warm river inside her. “I wish...” she murmured. “I wish we could stay like this forever.” She looked at the dark window with its sprinkling of stars. *Almost moonset*, she thought. *I suppose I should get back*. As she moved restlessly, the straw crackled and squeaked under her. Vajd’s eyes opened. He sighed and stretched. “Leyta?”

“Mmm.”

He looked at the window, then sat up hurriedly. “Moonset!”

“I know.”

“You have to get back. If Qumri found you again...”

“Let her.”

“Don’t underestimate that hate, my dear. It’s had as long as you to grow. She’ll get you flayed.”

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, the pleasant glow that had illumined her body deadening to ash. “Ai-Jahann. There’s just no way. I’ve got to get out of this valley.”

“I know. Better than you, Leyta. I know the Atash nau-ta-vallud.” He slid down to the corner and dug in the straw. “Here. This is your mother’s book. I brought it for you.”

She took the battered volume and examined it curiously. “You think she planned for this to happen?”

He spread out his hands and shook his head. “I never knew what was in her head.”

She tucked the book inside her sleeve so that it rested in the pouch that formed part of the sleeve hem. Tilting her head, she looked him over and chuckled. “You look like a worn-out satyr, my love, with that straw in your hair. “Here, let me. . . ” She pulled the hay out of his tumbled curls, delighting once again in the feel of his soft springy hair.

He grinned at her. “Should see yourself, muklis.”

Below, a horse snorted and moved restlessly in his stall.

“Dawn’s coming,” Aleytys said slowly. With a sigh, she teetered onto her feet. “We’d better go.”

6

“Leyta. Ay-mi. Leyta!” Twanit’s agitated voice bounced around in the fog numbing her brain. As small strong hands shook her violently, she groaned and swatted feebly at the air.

“Wake up, Leyta. Wake up.”

“Go ‘way,” Aleytys mumbled. As waves of tiredness sloshed over her head she pulled the quilts tight around her body and tried to ignore the sharp little voice sawing at her ears.

“Oh, Leyta!” Twanit snatched the quilts off and buried her hands in Aleytys’s tangled mop of hair. She gave a wretched little gasp and tugged hard.

As pain exploded in her head, Aleytys flopped up and swung wildly at her tormenter. Twanit let go and backed away, her face pale and resolute. “Leyta. Get dressed. Quickly.” Her mobile lips twitched nervously. “And wash your feet,” she blurted. “I. . . I won’t say anything, but Qumri’s. . . she. . . she’ll be here soon if you don’t. . . ”

Aleytys rubbed her eyes and tried to scrub the scum from her brain. “Thanks, Ti,” she muttered. She swallowed a yawn. “What time’s it?”

“Almost sa’at humam. You wouldn’t wake up.”

“Yeah.” Aleytys stretched and suddenly realized she wasn’t wearing her nightgown. She closed her eyes and smiled a long contented smile as memory after memory spread warmth gently through her.

“W-wash your feet, Leyta. Be sure. Before Qumri sees—” Twanit blushed and stared at the floor “A-and... and if you go out again at night, please don’t throw your clothes in a heap, Leyta.” The words, whispered and hesitant, tumbled out in an agitated rush. “I-I pushed them in your closet. I hope you don’t mind, but I could hear Qumri’s feet I barely got back in bed before she pushed the door open and stared in at you, and I yelled, and she backed out, but she saw you like... like you were... without your nightgown, and her face was awful. Be careful, please be careful, Leyta. She...” She made a helpless little sound and fled from the room.

When Aleytys slipped into the hall a little later it looked empty. She sighed with relief and headed for the stairwell.

“Aleytys.”

She grimaced and turned to the sound. Ziraki walked down the hall, his footsteps booming ominously. She clutched at the carved knob on top of the newel post, not afraid exactly—he’d always been a friend as far as he dared—but he looked serious enough to start shivers climbing her spine.

“Aleytys, stay in your room today.” His lined intelligent face crinkled into a sad smile. “Azdar said tell you.”

“All the damn day? Again?”

His dark eyes sank into their net of laugh wrinkles. “All the damn day.”

“What about Qumri? If I’m not scrubbing floors in a little while, she’ll come looking for me. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Azdar said he’d take care of her.”

“First time, if he does it,” she said scornfully.

“Aleytys, just do what he said, will you?”

“Hai! She’s crazy, you know.”

“So-so. It’s only a few days, Aleytys. I’ll see you get food, bring you something to read.”

“Thanks. I—Keep Qumri off my back?”

“A promise, Aleytys.”

She slid a forefinger along the deep grooves in the knob. “I never did have a passion for scrubbing floors.”

“Thanks, Aleytys.” He rested his hand on hers for a moment. “I’m sorry.” She watched him walk away. Halfway down the hall he looked back at her. “I wish...” He spread out his hands helplessly.

“I know.” She watched him walk away.

Back inside the small room, Aleytys pulled the quilts up and flopped down on her back. “What’m I supposed to do, count the cracks on the walls?” She turned restlessly onto her stomach, then over again

on her back. “Ai-Aschla.” She bounced up and down until the leather lacing shrieked in protest. “Aaaaagh!” She slammed her fists down on the mattress. “Why the hell was I born?”

But the walls held no answer to that. They closed in around her until her head threatened to burst; the blood throbbed, beat, beat across her temples; her skin twitched restlessly; invisible bugs crawled over her, stirring the fine hairs along her arms; her fingers and toes jerked and trembled. . . . After a while she straightened out her cramped legs and sighed.

Slowly, raggedly, her racing body gentled into a heavy lethargy. She linked her hands behind her head and stared at the ceiling. “I could catch up on my sleep.”

Winding across one corner of the ceiling’s plaster was a crack whose path she’d traced a hundred times before, a pleasant echo of the course the Raqsidan took through the valley. She sighed. “I’ll miss my river. And Vajd—”

She slid off the bed and turned the mattress back. The old leather book looked squashed but otherwise intact. As she picked it up, crumbs from the binding powdered her fingers and drifted in a rusty cloud to the floor. She let the mattress fall and rubbed her hands over the disintegrating cover until all the easily dislodged dust was knocked off.

As she leafed through the pages she wrinkled her nose at the remnants of the mold stain and stared curiously at the pale brown writing scarcely darker than the age-discolored paper; then she settled back onto the bed and stretched out on her stomach and rested the book rather precariously on her pillow. On the end pages there was writing in much darker ink. *The letter*, she thought. For a moment she looked up, conscious suddenly of an odd feeling of foreboding that made her reluctant to start reading. She pressed her lips together resolutely.

Aleytys—

Good start, she thought, *gets right to the point*. She closed her eyes and swallowed the bitterness of abandonment for the thousandth time.

My beautiful baby. . .

Not so beautiful you bothered to keep me, she thought.

At least, when you read this, you won’t be a baby anymore. Try to understand, my dear. I want you with me, I really do. You’re the only child I’ve ever borne, a part of me. But. . .

Aleytys gritted her teeth. *If you gave a damn for me*, she thought, *you could have taken me. This 's for Vajd. He needn't think I believe everything he says, he's still got you on his mind, always will have. You won a bigger piece of him than any woman ever will.*

Aleytys, I'm a selfish woman. When I want to make excuses for myself, I say it's a racial trait, inborn in every Vryhh that ever was. Unfortunately, my dear, that's not just an excuse. It's something you're probably going to have to face in yourself. It's not an attractive feature, I admit.

Since you're reading this, you must know I left the Raqsidan to get back to my own people—or, more precisely, to the kind of life I'm accustomed to leading. If I were any kind of mother, I suppose I'd try to come back for you.

Aleytys rubbed her fingers across the last words. *That's me*, she thought, *everybody wants me*.

Well, daughter, I won't be coming. I can't stand the thought of ever coming back to this valley. Once I get off this revolting piece of dirt, I'm going to forget it ever existed.

We're wanderers, we Vrya, spacefarers. It's a proud name, child, a grand thing to be a Vryhh of Vrithian. The stars are our sea marks, the universe our home. To be trapped on a single world—the very thought makes my hand shake. I have to get back, Aleytys, I've no choice. If you have anything at all of me in you, you should be raging to get out of that day and day and day agony of boredom. With all those blind and deaf clods stifling you.

Aleytys rested her hands on the pages and stared at the wall, remembering the times her soul had slipped from her body and spilled along the water. *From my mother*, she thought, *some of it ... I wonder what else ...* She blinked and smoothed her hands over the old musty paper.

Enough of this. When you can't stand the valley any longer, come find me. . . I hope I scared them enough so you weren't given to some earth crawler. . . . Come find me. It won't be easy. But you'll get there if you've enough Vryhh in you. Enough Vryhh. That's a question. Aleytys, there aren't many Vryhh-worldbound hybrids around. We're proud of our blood and chary of spreading it around. However, with this limited data source, here's what you *could* expect.

Chances are your life will be extended considerably beyond what's normal for your father's people. Vrya. . . never mind. Take my advice. Even if you decide not to look me up, if you find yourself with the years passing looking like a fledgling maiden, don't spend too much time in any one place. People tend to show their nastier side to those they envy, those having gifts, talents, wealth, or anything else they crave, especially—oh, especially—long life and unfading youth. Time will show if you've got this from me, my dear. Take care.

Aleytys blinked. *Hmm*, she thought, *maybe I do have something I owe her after all. I wonder what other little surprises she has for me.*

Memory, faster than ordinary reflexes; a thirst amounting to an obsession for knowing; an instinct for constructs, machines of all kinds; a translating ability—you learn new languages in minutes rather than weeks; strength of body beyond the ordinary, at least among people of comparable planet size; and endurance. I could extend this list for pages, but you'll find out from living what you've got from me. And from your father's people. Those dream-singers of yours... there's a strong esper strain in your people.

I am Shareem Atennanthan of Vrithian. That means, my dear, that I was born to clan Tennanth on the world Vrithian, which swings around a sun we call Avennar. I won't say where that is. Too many greedy men want to know.

“Ai-Aschla!” Aleytys snorted in disgust. “Shows just how much she really wants to see me show up.”

The Vrya are wanderers. I named you Aleytys, my dear, with the hope in my heart that you were born true to the blood I gave you. I must be honest. I don't want to see you if you're all Raqsidan.

You'd have no place on Vrithian. We're a claustrophobic race; ties turn us vicious like trapped rats. Another terribly unattractive trait, but we live with it. I'm afraid, my dear, that you're sure to inherit this because it seems to be just about our most outstanding character trait. I'm sorry. It's a difficult thing to accept about oneself. No ties ever. No real sharing of life. We have our communion, brief touches mind to mind, body to body, but we can't endure continued closeness. Marriage—at least as you know it there in the valley—that's impossible for us. I tried to protect you from that, my dear.

But what about how I feel about Vajd? Aleytys thought, staring blankly at the headboard. “I could live with him,” she whispered. But deep down inside her an uneasy uncertainty stirred to life. *How can I know?* she thought. She shivered and went on reading.

If you feel this in yourself, come to me. You may think I'm cruel because I demand you make your own way across the stars to a world whose precise location is perhaps the best-kept secret in the universe. But I have a reason. If you can't fit in, there's no use your coming here. I told you before, if you're not enough Vryhh, I don't want to see you. Come. Love, even affection, I don't promise. How can I? I don't know the person you've become. My fault, I know, but there it is. I do promise understanding and help. First thing, get off Jaydugar. I'll talk about that later.

Assuming you make it off planet, there're other things you need to know. Memorize these figures, 89-060 Duhbe-Thrall 64 Aurex Corvi 1007.47. With these any spaceflyer can get you to Ibex.

I can't give you the coordinates of Vrithian, just the thought of those numbers lying around is enough to

turn my blood to ice.

When you get to Ibex, go to a man in the port city Yastroo called Kenton Esgard. Tell him your story. Convince him. That's up to you. If you can do this, he'll arrange for the next Vryhh happening by to take you to Vrithian. Ibex is one of our nodes of passage. By the way, keep that secret, my dear. It's not news we want passed around.

I wish I understood what you're talking about, Mother, Aleytys thought. She reread the last passage. *Maybe it'll make sense when I'm actually walking through it.* She shrugged and read on.

Now. How do you get yourself off Jaydugar? More or less the same way I do—I hope. Far as I can tell sentient life here on this damn ball of dirt is all imported. You can't possibly know how unlikely that is, my dear, all these different peoples scattered over the face of this mantrap world. The caravan came, I think, from the Callan-Sedir. The nomads from Kiraguz and Shanshan. Your own valley people from the Parshta-Firush before the star Ahazh went nova. The sea people from Yill. And then there are the desert hounds on the other continent, and the marvelous kaleidoscope of multi-shaped and talented sentients in the cities on the eastern coast. As if this world were a huge magnet for people. Fascinating. I hope I never see the place again. I crashed here on Jaydugar with no way to get off. I think *that* more than anything else brought on my sickness. You should remember that sickness of mine because that's the only reason you were conceived, my child. Funny, that crash. I got a very odd feeling from this place. Almost as if it tickled my ship off course. A feeling of purpose. Strange. But to get back to what I was saying. Some three thousand years ago—a thousand of your triple-years—a ship fled precariously ahead of an exploding sun. The book this letter is written in is the logbook of that ship, a Romanchi empire trader that came stuffed with refugees and almost inevitably dumped itself and them on this flypaper world. A Romanchi trader—luck for me. And you. Fire, flood, the battering of years—nothing destroys one of those. Even after this time the emergency beacon should be working.

Aleytys blinked. Once again she reread the passage and got little more from it the second time. *I don't have enough information to understand*, she thought, and that was frightening to her. If she couldn't understand the words, what about when she was in the middle of the actions...? She shoved the thought away and turned the page.

It took a while to get through all that archaic language—my gift, child—but I finally managed to find out where the ship landed. This damn world. I've got to make my way across half of it to get to the ship. Seems the nomad clans chased your people out of the western mountains and clear across the central plain. A good thousand stadia of hostile territory!

Besides reading the book, I've talked to the caravan people. So in a few days I'll start off along the trade road, going south until I reach the vadi Massarat. There I'll wait for Khatarnak when the caravans come to that valley. Then I'll go with them up the mountain to a pass called the tangra Suzan. On the western side of the mountain is a small lake almost perfectly round. From that lake flows a river called the Mulukaneh Rud. I'll follow that until it reaches the tijarat, which is, my dear, the trade fair where the caravans and the nomads meet. The only place where these gentle people—the nomads, I mean—meet

any stranger without slaughtering him on the spot. If you follow my route, don't get to the tijarat before Khatarnak or you'll have a hungry wait. If you get there, even at the right time, you'll have to persuade one of the nomad clans to take you across to the western mountains. Don't ask me how. I haven't the faintest idea. I'll fit my plan to the occasion when I get there. Be warned. Those nomads are obstinately hostile to strangers. Implacably hostile. Sounds impossible, doesn't it? I only know I'll manage. And so will you, my dear. Aleytys, we may be deficient in the warmer emotions, we Vrya, but we've more than our share of cunning.

Cunning, Aleytys thought. Looks like I'll need it. Hmph, what an unflattering catalog of virtues .

She yawned and rubbed her eyes. The air in the room was getting stale. Stretching aching arms and legs, she turned over on her back for a moment and sighed as her tired muscles relaxed in the new position. "Wonder what time it is?"

After a minute she bounced back onto her stomach and smoothed her hands over the pages.

When I get to the western mountains, I'll have to find a place called the Bawe Neswet. If the nomads get me that far, maybe they'll take me all the way. The place of fire, that's what the people of the caravan said. Must be a volcanic area, hot springs, open craters, and stinking air. If you make it there, you'll have no trouble figuring out which protuberance is the starship. It'll have a point on top—a metal object taller than a horan. Halfway up the side there'll be an airlock—that's simply a ship's doorway—round in shape on a Romanchi. So look for that round opening big enough for a man to stand upright in. Climb up. Inside, somewhere around the middle of the ship, you'll find a metal ladder passing up and down to the tip and tail of the ship. Climb up high as you can. This is an old, old ship. They were still putting the bridge in the nose when it was built. It'll be a long climb, I'm afraid, but the lift probably won't be working and you wouldn't know how to operate it in any case.

You'll know the bridge by the instruments—a lot of things that look like clock dials.

Any spots on this page, my dear, have to be drops of sweat running off my nose as I hunt up words to explain translight technology in horse-and-wagon terms.

In that room I was talking about you'll find the emergency beacon. Somewhere on the left of the main screen—a thing made of glass like a big window—there'll be a small square panel painted red. Open that. Inside there'll be a button also painted red. Push it. That sets the beacon going. That's all there is to it.

After that all you have to do is wait. Someone will come to answer the call. . . .

Aleytys scratched beside her nose. She read the last page. Then read it again. "Well," she grunted. "At least I know how to push a button." She turned the page.

What you do when he gets there is up to you. Persuade him somehow to take you to Ibex. Be prepared.

He'll want some kind of payment, probably be as amoral as a prowling tars and as vicious. I won't need the beacon. I know the Romanchi instruments and can work the sanchettia. I'll call one of my own and be home in a blink of an eye. It'll be harder for you, my baby. Find your way to me. That's the test I set you. The luck of the Vryhh be with you, my Aleytys. By the way, let me warn you. Don't tell anyone you're part Vryhh. You'll regret it quickly if you do.

Aleytys flicked up an eyebrow. "Luck," she groaned. "It'll take a whole flock of miracles. Don't tell anyone I'm Vryhh? Who the hell knows about them on this world!" She grimaced and scanned the last paragraph of the lengthy letter.

When—if—we meet, we'll meet as strangers. Part of you is mine, but... part of you is his. I hope I'll be cured of the sickness he woke in me when we meet. I hope I'll be able to greet you, accept you as yourself, without the distortion of the memories. Don't expect too much of me.

Shareem.

Never mind. Aleytys flipped the book shut and sat up, resting her chin on her knees. "That's interesting..." She stretched and wriggled around, working the stiffness out of her muscles. "Whew, it's hot."

A knock on the door broke her musing. She scrambled off the bed and thrust the book hastily under the mattress. As she smoothed the quilts again, she called out, "What is it?"

"Ziraki. With your lunch. Open the door, Aleytys, before I drop something."

When she pulled the door open, he shoved the tray at her. "Take hold, Aleytys. These damn books..."

She laughed. "Next time, bring an asiri. Where shall I... ah." She set the tray on the bed and turned back to him. "What's happening?"

He shrugged. "Nothing much. People still jittery and talking a lot in whispers. Hope you like these."

"Thanks." She dropped the books on the bed without looking at them. "Ziraki..."

He held up his hand. "No, Aleytys. You know I can't—"

"Relax, friend. How's Qumri taking it?"

"Funny." He looked at his hand, spread the fingers out, then closed them into a bony fist. "She hasn't said a word. I saw Rubhan riding out across the fields toward the foothills."

"Rubhan! He's Qumri's pet weasel."

Ziraki nodded and twisted his mobile mouth into a grimace of distaste. "The herdsfolk. That's where I think he was going. The Sha'ir... an evil man, crazier than Qumri even. Aleytys, I'll do all I can. But if he

and Qumri get together. . . ” He shook his head unhappily.

“I know.”

“Keep your heart high, Aleytys, you’ve got more friends than you know.” He took her hand. “The guilds are for you. All those not crazed with fear and envy. We don’t make much noise, but we’re with you, Aleytys.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked the tears back. Without saying anything she squeezed his fingers until he had to pull his hand loose. Putting his arm around her shoulders, he patted her comfortingly. “Just keep out of the way of the lusuqs, Aleytys. A little time. That’s all we need. People forget.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. The fluttery weakness in her chest began to subside. “Thanks, friend.”

He patted her shoulder again, then freed himself. “Eat your lunch before it congeals, Aleytys. I’ll take your advice and send an asiri for the tray. Aleytys, you can leave the door open a few minutes for some air. Nobody’ll be coming up for over half an hour.”

“That’s a good thought.” She moved past him and danced to the middle of the hall. Swinging around and around she held the abba out from her sides, letting the drafts that constantly flowed down the halls of the house swirl around her sweaty body. Ziraki grinned at her and strolled over to the stairhead. Then he sobered abruptly and looked at her with pity in his eyes. “One more thing.”

“What’s that?” She danced around to face him.

“Twanit won’t be up for khakutah today. Suja put her in one of the guest rooms.”

“Oh?” She frowned. “Why?”

“Suja made her go to bed an hour ago. She kept shaking and crying. Couldn’t hold on to anything and just kept crying harder each time she dropped something. But you know Twanit. She’ll be all right tomorrow. These things never last.”

Aleytys swallowed painfully, anger and a guilty conscience combining to damp down her rising spirits. “Where is she?” she asked. “Take me to her, Ziraki. I can help her. She is always better with me.”

“Not this time, Aleytys. Anyway, she’s asleep.” He started downstairs. “Eat your lunch. When you finish, leave the tray outside your door for the asiri. And, Aleytys. . . ”

“Hmm?”

“Keep out of trouble, will you?”

7

A shrill scream followed by hysterical sobs broke into Aleytys’s dispirited musings as she trudged upstairs from her solitary lunch in the sewing room. She tilted her head and stared. “Twanit! What now?”

She lifted the front of her abba and streaked up the rest of the stairs, touching wood about every third step.

Twanit crouched in a heap outside their bedroom door sobbing wildly, her fingers writhing like white worms through her straggling black curls. Aleytys caught hold of her and tried to pull her up onto her feet. Twanit shrieked again and hit out at her in panic. Catching the wildly swinging arms in firm gentle hands, Aleytys pulled her back against the wall and slapped her sharply. Twanit gulped and cowered back, tears streaming down her twitching face.

Aleytys caught hold of her hand. "What happened, Ti? No, no, little one, don't worry, I won't let it hurt you. Tell me."

Twanit buried her face in Aleytys's shoulder and clutched at her with her thin nervous arms. "In... in there, Leyta... It... it's awful. The blood... and... and the smell... oh..." Her body trembled against Aleytys until her knees gave way and she sagged toward the floor. Aleytys patted her back soothingly. "Hush, Ti. Shh. You don't have to see it again... forget it. Sh... it's only a bad dream. Think. It's a dream. Just a dream. Forget it. Just a bad dream. Shh, baby." Over Twanit's shoulder she saw Zavar's anxious face. "Vari," she said quietly. "Take Twanit while I see what scared her." She rubbed her hand gently up and down Twanit's spine until her trembling lessened. "Ti, look. It's Vari, your sister. You go with her while I take care of what's in the room. Shh."

Aleytys worked herself free and passed the still-shaking girl to Zavar. As she turned she saw someone standing like an ominous dark ghost at the far end of the hall. Qumri. Hovering in the background, a twisted triumphant smile distorting her handsome face. Anger flared through Aleytys and she took a step toward her tormentor. At that moment Suja came sweeping majestically down the hall, sending Qumri into retreat. Suja turned her calm questioning eyes on the young ones circling curiously about and they melted away like smoke before a high wind.

With a taunting smile at Qumri, Aleytys leaned against the wall and watched her efface herself. Suja was younger than she and theoretically had less abru, but she was also heir's wife and young heir's mother. More, she was a woman with considerable quiet strength of character. Qumri didn't quite dare rouse her anger and Aleytys knew it. As she watched, the older woman glowered and slipped away around the corner.

Aleytys hastily straightened and made the respect shalikk as Suja nodded to her. Without a word Suja swept past her and stood in the doorway. Her body stiffened and she turned quickly. "Do you know what's in there?" Her voice was sharp with distaste.

"No." Aleytys took a deep breath and steadied her voice. "I've been eating downstairs. You should know that. When the asiri took my tray down yesterday she told me you said eat in the sewing room after that. Kerde can tell you. She brought the tray." She scowled at Suja. "I haven't done anything."

Twanit's sobs had subsided. She turned in her sister's arms and stared blank-faced first at her mother, then at Aleytys. "Abruya Madar," she began hesitantly.

Suja stepped to her side. She drew her into her arms and looked over the girl's shoulder at Aleytys. "I sent no message to you, Aleytys."

"Qumri!" Aleytys stiffened and glared down the hall. "I shall send the bakra Shams and Auh for my daughter's things." Suja's quiet voice pulled her head back. She looked into the compassionate face and felt the anger wash out of her, leaving her weak enough to need to lean against the wall. "You permit they

enter your chamber?" Suja went on.

Aleytys bowed slightly, then straightened and looked proudly into Suja's face. "Of course, salkurdeh khatu. They are welcome." She touched her forehead and lips in the formal shalikk.

Suja hesitated. Reluctantly she said, "You've been a good friend to my child, Aleytys, and I..." She closed her eyes a moment. A quiet determined look stiffened her face. "I know you're not to blame for that horror in there." She paused and touched her lips nervously with her tongue. "But I'm afraid that and worse will happen again. Not your fault. I'm shamed that I can do nothing to help you." She stroked Twanit's hair with absentminded gentleness. "I've made my disapproval known to the house and to..." She tightened her mouth. Then her face sagged tiredly. "It won't do any good. As you know. But you're strong, Aleytys. What merely disgusts and angers you could really hurt my daughter." Her arm tightened protectively around Twanit's shoulders. "We haven't been friends. I don't make friends easily, as you know, and you and I have little to share. I wish you to believe, though, that I'll never be a party to such... such sickness as you'll find there." She nodded toward the half-open door.

Aleytys sighed. She felt a weary admiration as she looked at the slim plain woman with her strong, honest face and her quiet integrity. She spread out her hands helplessly and sought for words to express what she felt, but had to fall back on formality. Touching her head and lips in the formal shalikk, she bowed deeply. "I understand, abruya Suja. I honor your courage."

Suja nodded stiffly and moved away, pushing the bewildered Twanit ahead of her.

Aleytys looked around. The hall was empty except for Zavar. She took a step toward her door, then turned. "Still here, Vari? You better get out of here too, might catch something bad for you."

Tears gathered in Zavar's soft brown eyes. She flung her arms around Aleytys and hugged her so impetuously that she knocked the breath out of both of them. "Leyta," she gasped, tumbling the words out one over the other, "Twanit can have my bed and I'll move in with you. Just think, we could have so much fun." She danced back, her face glowing with sudden excitement. "I like you so much better than Misha; she's a giggling idiot."

Aleytys smiled reluctantly, but shook her head. "Your mother would have twenty fits, Vari."

"Mama?" Zavar giggled at the thought of dignified Suja throwing a fit. Then she sobered and peered anxiously at Aleytys past tumbling curls. "Don't you want me, Leyta?"

Aleytys reached out and stroked her fingers down the girl's soft cheek. "Dear Vari. I'd love having you with me, chuchik. But..." She sighed. "You're better off where you are. And..." She rested her hand on Zavar's shoulder for just a minute. "You know it's better for me to keep my head down so it won't be chopped off. Just let it be. Give me a little time." She turned away and stepped to the door, wondering what horrible mess waited for her. When she looked inside she froze.

"Ugh! How sick-making." Van's voice seemed to come from miles away, struggling through thick fog.

Blood. Streaked and dribbled around the room. A sickly sweet stench. Her eyes returned to... flinched away... returned to... to the small corpse... Mooli. Ah, Madar. Mooli. And blood. Red-brown crusts dribbled in a crossed circle on the immaculate whiteness of her pillowcase. Mooli. Curse her... curse her, damn jealous bitch.

The gurb was spread-eagled stiffly in the center of the obscene mandala with her belly slit open and her

throat torn as if something had worried her with its teeth—And around her, five tiny unborn kits, wrenched from the womb and arranged in a stiff-legged wreath.... Mooli.... Aleytys put her hand against the door to steady herself.

“Ugh.” Zavar wriggled past and went over to the bed. She touched the mutilated body. “Who could?” She wrinkled her snub nose and shuddered.

“Mooli,” Aleytys whispered and the name seemed to release something hard and cold inside her. “Poor little gurb, it should have better been me,” she said bitterly.

8

She stormed up the ramp and through the partly open door into the dim interior of the stable. At the far end of the long narrow room Azdar examined a black stallion that was backing around skittishly, discussing his points with Chalak, Mavas, Yurrish, and three o’amalehha from the fields.

“Azdar!”

He whipped around at the sound of her voice. She saw his face whiten, met his astonished stare with her own hot blue-green eyes. Chalak stepped around him, mouth tightening. He started toward her.

Aleytys tossed the hair back out of her face and glared at her father. “Just leave me alone,” she spit at Chalak, thrusting out a hand to fend him off. “I won’t contaminate the precious old maimun.”

Chalak sighed and shook his head. “Aleytys... ”

She ignored him. “Azdar!”

Her father didn’t answer; as she watched he seemed to shrink. With a low growl he turned his back on her. The three o’amalehha stepped in between them like a chunky wall, protecting the Azdar and defying the daughter. They were wide stocky men with deep-set fanatical yellow-brown eyes and straggly moustaches that covered their mouths. Twisted bast fibers ran in triple circles around their heads, pinning the sweat-stained headcloths close to the round skulls. Their abbas were made of heavy pan cloth and swung loosely about their bodies, emphasizing their width and compounding the impression of massive strength. They glanced repeatedly at her out of the corners of their eyes—eyes that glittered with a mixture of lust and fear that sickened her and at the same time heated even more the rage that boiled inside her. She took another step forward, angrily conscious that somehow she’d lost her momentum.

“Aleytys, go back to the house.” Chalak’s voice sounded weary. She jerked her head around to look at him. His face was somber, frowning—but not hostile. *Not hostile*, she thought, with a flash of pleasure.

“No,” she said quietly. “Not this time.”

Mavas and Yurrish lumbered toward her, angry scowls twisting their round lumpish faces. Chalak checked them with a quiet gesture. Yurrish glanced uncertainly over his shoulder, waiting for a signal from Azdar to tell him what to do. Mavas stared at Aleytys, his face red, his small eyes filled with fear-born hate.

Aleytys laughed shrilly, an ugly sound slicing through the tense silence, laughed as much at her own

stupidity as at them, but only Chalak guessed that. Mavas hissed the breath out of his nose, simmering on the verge of explosion. Aleytys sneered at him. “You af’iha touch me and I’ll make you sorry.”

“Aleytys...” Chalak’s low voice held a warning that she ignored.

“Mavas,” Azdar said suddenly. “Get her out of here.”

“No!” she screamed. “*No!* I want to talk to you, that’s all. Qumri is...”

They brushed past Chalak and seized her arms roughly, strong thick fingers bruising to the bone. As they began shoving her back toward the door, she screamed angrily, helplessly, “Azdar! you kamdil! You fathered me. Af’i! Keep that bitch off my back. I’ll make you sorry, I’ll... ooohh.”

The two men pushed her savagely through the door and down the ramp, not caring how they hurt her in the process. As they reached the bottom she calmed down a little and managed to get her feet back under her. “Muttahid, muttahid, come on, let loose.” She tried to free her arms. “I’ll go. I won’t bother you anymore. You don’t have to...” She wriggled in their grasp, trying to pull away. “I said I give up. Come on, be reasonable.”

Mavas’s fingers bit into her shoulder and he shoved harder, forcing her to stumble and run along between him and Yurrish. She began to get angry again. With a grunt of effort she swung her feet out suddenly and thrust her weight down hard, breaking herself free. She sat down hard on the grass, knocking the wind out of herself.

Mavas reached down and wrapped his fingers in her long hair. A tight grin on his face, he jerked hard, swinging her around till her arms flapped like a jointed doll. He laughed.

With a scream of outrage and pain Aleytys scrambled onto her feet. Anger became a wild river of rage so strong it was almost tangible. She could feel the burning hot flow sweeping down her arms into her fingers. Without thinking she flung her hands out and slapped the faces of her captors. The rage tore through her palms.

Mavas roared with pain and stumbled away from her. At the same time Yurrish shrilled a fervent curse and backed off, holding trembling hands in front of his seared face.

Considerably startled, Aleytys stood frozen, mouth dropping stupidly as she watched the two hulking males who had been manhandling her so brutally just a moment before run away from her like terrified mikhmiks. She lifted her hands and examined the palms. No change. They should be charred black, she thought. Her hands tingled like they usually did on a winter morning. That was all. Licking her lips, she stared after the fleeing men, then, with a soft frightened gasp, she wheeled and fled into the house.

9

Long shadows danced across the common—shadows of strange men and strange beasts, crossing and recrossing the trampled grass. The caravan was here. Aleytys pressed her nose to the window. No sound trickled through the heavy double glass, but she could imagine the mosaic of cheerful shouts and animal noises and hammers and creaking wheels, all the things she remembered, happening the way they always happened.

Restlessly she twisted around on the bed and leaned back against the headboard, lifting her hot heavy hair into a knot on top of her head. “Ai-Jahann, I’ll be climbing the walls in a minute.” She let her hair fall and swung off the bed. The clock said sa’at nudham plus twenty. She stretched and glared at the door. “I won’t! Let them chew on Aschla’s toes, I’m tired to the bone with watching out for their delicate feelings.” She tugged the door open and flounced out into the hall.

Some minutes later, after striding head high past asiri who averted their eyes and made the horn sign to ward off the bad luck she carried with her, she wriggled through the bushes at the far side of the charidan and stepped onto the river path. As soon as she was in deep enough shade she tossed the hood back and let the river breezes play in her damp, sweaty hair. Butterflies danced in the air around her and the cool air slid like silk along her body. Slowly the hard knot of resentment burning in her midsection dissolved under the soothing influence of the afternoon’s beauty and peace.

She wandered down the path, enjoying the smells and sounds carried on the gentle breeze. A flat rock thrust out into the river sending the water dancing whitely around it. She slipped onto the cool granite, kneeling so that her fingertips rested inches from the spattering drops of ice-cold water. For a brief moment an almost unbearable sadness filled her eyes with tears. The thought of leaving this valley, this place that made up all of her life, tore at her heart. She dipped her fingertips in the water and flicked a few drops in the air. “Damn, I won’t cry.” She scooped up a double handful of the water and splashed it onto her face.

Jumping to her feet, she walked on down the path, immersed in unhappy thoughts. She felt restless, uneasy, her body the center of a chaotic whirl of emotions compounding regret and anticipation, anger and excitement, and, above all, a deep abiding ache that worsened each time she thought of leaving her gentle, warm, and deeply wise dream-singer.

A low stone wall filled in an eroding section of the river bank. Aleytys sank on her knees and rested her aching head on her hands, elbows propped on the wall. An old horan cast thick shade so she left the hood back and let her hair fall around her face. The gentle music of the water slowly soothed her troubled spirit and calmed her throbbing heart until her body was relaxed and receptive. She bent further until she was lying across the stone, looking deep into the river. Water—green shadows altering, bubbling cloud-white foam, fugitive fire glints from Horli sliding along the top, cool green depths darting into sapphire-blue points. Down. Down. Spirit... mind... soul... dissolving... floating... out... out... like mist to comprehend... cherish... I/not-I... one... not-one... not same... one... one... time... time stretching out till time no longer had meaning... I drifting... up like a leaf on the wings of air... I was/was-not... Aleytys... fish... snapper... mavufiq... yehma... mikhmikh... insectfishanimalplant... all... awareness... drifting down on the wings of air—I-to-Aleytys... and she was aware of a richly patterned tapestry of life around and underneath her. She looked out of her own eyes, but this time the tie didn’t break. Threads as numberless as stars dusting the night sky spun out away from her, spun out to life, life shared and cherished. Aleytys stood up very carefully, glowing with a breathless wonder. Slowly, very slowly, she turned her head, delight bubbling in her at the throbbing vitality that made up the vast web of life spun from ground to sky.

Then she touched something alien to the web. Like a leaping tongue of fire, it glowed a pale yellow cat’s-eye among the feral rubies and cool emeralds of the other lives. Warmth flashed out from her to encircle the other. She gathered up the abba and sped down the path.

Just below the waterfall she saw him—a man of the caravan sitting on the bench, eyes closed, head back resting against the smooth bark of a young horan. His eyes opened—round, black, dreamy. He smiled at her.

An almost audible click inside her head marked the end of her union with the all, but curiosity damped the sharp loss and she walked cautiously forward, stopping just beyond the scuffed toes of his black boots. He didn't move, but his round brilliant eyes followed her.

She examined him curiously. *How strange black eyes look*, she thought. *Funny skin, too, so pale*. She glanced down at the warm gold of her own skin. *How really strange. Ugly*. She blinked as his face altered. *Is he reading my thoughts?* she wondered. *Madar! I hope not*.

His smile faded and his eyes went blank while his mouth dropped at the corners and trembled slightly. He pulled his feet up and wrapped his arms around them. Somehow they became a barricade between him and her. "Takhiyyeh, Caravaner," she said. A puff of air blew a lock of hair across her eyes and she brushed it back with a smile. "Have you seen many rivers as lovely as our Raqsidan?" She nodded at the falls, where a rainbow hovered in the mist.

"Takhiyyeh, zaujeha. It is indeed lovely. Will you sit?" He pulled his legs tighter against his chest and stared at her over his knees.

With an amused chuckle Aleytys sat down. "I suppose a merchant has to be tactful." She stretched out her arm and tentatively touched first the leather of his boots, then the coarse red material of his baggy trousers. "There's one thing I always wanted to know," she said.

"What's that?" It seemed to her that his wariness intensified. She frowned, then waved away impatiently his attempt to speak.

"How do you wear all those tight clothes? Don't you about die in high heat?"

He burst out laughing, startled out of his caution much as she had intended. "Have you ever thought, zaujeha, what it would be like to ride a horse through woodland in a flapping skirt?"

She considered this. "But the herdsfolk ride all the time."

"On grassland, not through heavy woodland."

As a picture of that formed in her mind, laughter bubbled up and spilled out. "Shredded!" Still chuckling, she tossed her hair back and grinned at him. "And probably scaring the poor beast out of what wits he has too."

"I think you're right." He touched his boots, his heavy trousers. "But this protects the rider too. Or he'd be shredded like skirts."

"Ah." She smoothed her hands over her thighs and looked curiously back at him, sensing the barrier rising between them. For several minutes she sat on the bench, her hands absently pleating and smoothing out the silky green and gold material of her abba. Slowly, so imperceptibly that at first she thought she was imagining the whole thing, something intruded into her mind. This wasn't like moments before, when she'd taken into herself the glow of the lives around her. This was a thrust as much sexual as it was mental. *I should get out of here*, she thought vaguely.

He leaned forward, his eyes unblinking on her face, large round eyes growing, growing... black pools, pools to drown in—drown... drown... pulling... promising—. She tilted gradually toward him until something small and tough inside her sent out a spreading wave of protest... Like a black fist in her mind, it struck at the intruder... to be smothered in a cloud of sticky softness, and again she was

drowning in warm fog... drowning... With a remaining glimmer of awareness she felt her body responding to the subtle intrusion as she would to her lover's penetration. Her nipples hardened and there was a familiar burning itch in her loins.

A deep repugnance stirred her resistance again into a hot searing flame. With a sharp cry she jumped to her feet and backed away from him, filled with a horror verging on nausea. "No!" she gasped. "No."

The pressure abruptly ceased and the man cowered back against the horan, stretching out trembling hands to fend off... something, she didn't know what... as if her anger and rejection had a solid force that beat at him. He moaned softly.

Breathing hard, she brushed both hands through her hair and nervously smoothed her abba around her body. "Aschla's icy claws, what did you think you were doing?"

"Don't." Tears welled from his pleading eyes.

"Huh?" She stared at the shivering miserable figure, surprise cooling her anger.

"Don't be angry. Please. I'm sorry. I was wrong. Sorry. Please. Don't hurt me. You hurt me." His words came from quivering lips in a feeble whine that grated on her ears. She fell back on the bench too astonished to speak, still staring at that creature. He was sitting in the mottled shade from the horan's sparse thatch of tight-curved leaves, looking sad and ridiculous. She slipped suddenly back into the dim half-tranced outreach and saw him as a scruffy little mikhmikh filled with pain mostly self-inflicted. It confused her. She shook her head, trying to clear her whirling brain.

"What were you trying to do?" she asked more calmly. He seemed to shrink inside his skin. His black eyes watched her sadly over the tops of his knees.

"Well?" She could just see the pink tip of his tongue flick over his lips, then he lowered his head as if trying to shelter himself behind his own knees.

"I..." he began. She saw the dark eyes squeeze shut. "It worked before. Last year. They let me..." He peered at her through slitted eyes. She frowned and he looked hastily away. "I feel what others feel. Happy, sad, hurt, strong. All. What they feel, I can change. Animals... they be easy. I control them... heal them when they're hurt or sick. People be harder. They're more dangerous. Women in the valleys, not so dangerous. I thought you... you be like them."

Aleytys rubbed her hands together absently as she considered the possibilities this new idea opened to her. Excitement grew in her as she remembered that glorious feeling of oneness. *I never thought of that*, she marveled. *I can do it* I'm sure I can do it.... She lifted her head and faced him, eyes glowing. "Teach me."

"How?" He inched farther away from her, crowding into the tree. His black eyes glanced furtively away down the trail. She could see a muscle twitching in his cheek and she knew he was preparing to run.

"No!" She caught hold of his arm. He cringed, panting, his eyes screwed shut.

"Please," he whined.

Aleytys shook his arm impatiently. "Don't be such a dishrag."

“I can’t keep you out of my head.” He slid around on the bench and let his feet chunk onto the sparse grass. “Can’t keep no one out. All the time. Everything. You know what that means? All the time. Hour on hour. Day on day on day. Never be rid of other men’s passions, even their smallest itches.” He rubbed his hands up and down his legs. “They mix in my head like knots of worms and I don’t know... can’t know what be mine and what be others.” His hands kept at the rubbing, up and down, up and down, up and down the coarse crimson cloth.

Aleytys shivered. Then she straightened her shoulders and said briskly, “Look, caravaner, pull yourself together. You said you can control animals. And women. Well, by Aschla’s bloody claws, control your own mind.”

“I can’t.”

“Nonsense. I bet you never tried.”

“Zaujeha...”

“By the Madar, caravaner, you nearly wiped me out a minute ago. And you try to tell me you can’t protect yourself? Hihdag! Put a little stiffening in your spine.”

“Haaaah!” His face flushed red and his breath hissed between clenched teeth.

“Go on.” She snorted impatiently. “Go to work on your self. When they flood you, find... ah... do what you do in your own head and turn them off. Try it!”

His mouth tightened. He looked at her, flat black eyes filled with dislike. Then he shrugged. “I try. Later.”

Aleytys sighed. “It’s up to you, caravaner. Nobody else can help you.” She eyed him coolly. “Now show me how you control animals.”

“How do I teach? I was born like this.”

“Show me.”

He shrugged again, his black eyes sliding away from her with deep-seated resentment hidden in them. He pointed “There. That tree. There be mikhmikh halfway up.”

“Where?” She scanned the horan but could see nothing.

“Touch me. With your mind if you can. If you can’t we have nowhere to go.”

She bit her lip. “Hmm... better let me—” She slid off the bench and dropped onto the grass at the edge of the water, her back to the murmuring river. Leaning her chin on her hands, she let the sound of the water wash over her until her mind slid free. Once more the threads spun out from her. She touched the pale yellow flame and listened dreamily as he began to talk.

“Feel what I do.” He glanced skeptically at her and she responded with an abstracted smile. “I make a finger with my mind. You see?”

“Mmm.”

“I touch him. See. He looks like a tremble in the air this way. I touch him again and he be quiet. Like finger stroking his fur. There’s a place inside where all the quivers circle around, that’s the place you touch. Like this. And he does what you want.”

At first it was all very fuzzy and confusing. She watched and saw nothing and the rising frustration threatened to shatter the connection between them. Then something clicked in her head. It was as if the suns shone through a break in thick storm clouds. She listened in growing impatience as he kept talking and talking.

“Watch,” he crooned. “Watch the tree with your body eyes. See. There he comes. Down trunk. There, just under that patch of leaves. See?”

The small furry animal, its chameleon fur now the bright silver of the post-noon horan bark, backed down the trunk, small feet clutching busily at the bark, bright black eyes darting with perky alertness from side to side. With a fluffing of its fur it plopped onto the earth and trotted over to them, fur flowing from silver to green to sand and back to green.

Aleytys smiled tenderly as the tiny animal sat up on its hind feet, draping its delicate forefeet over its mottled green stomach fur.

The caravaner reached down and lifted the mikhmikh. It nestled in his hand like an animated ball of fur, changing color to the sunburned brown of his flesh. As it settled, its long fluffy tail curled neatly around his wrist. After a minute he set the mikhmikh back down on the ground and released it.

The timid animal scrambled to its feet and scurried across the path.

Aleytys reached out and soothed the terrified mikhmikh. She coaxed it back to her hand. Nervous feet pricking across her palm delighted her and she stroked the trembling body with gentle fingertips. At first the tiny heart beat wildly, knocking against the palm of her hand. Then it gradually slowed and the mikhmikh closed its eyes, purring with pleasure, an almost inaudible minuscule sound that enchanted her, as she rubbed her fingers along the knobs of its arching spine. Moving very carefully, she set the mikhmikh on the ground and watched it scamper off. Then she stood up. “You leaving?”

“I’d better.” She hesitated and scraped the toe of her sandal across the sand of the path. “I… I suppose I’d better warn you. Don’t talk about me. Not if you want to stay out of trouble.”

“I thought…” A vague puzzlement sounded in his hoarse voice. “I don’t understand. The last time I was here I lay with a valley woman. Other valleys the same. Your men don’t care who your women play with.”

Aleytys laughed, a hard bitter sound. “You probably found Kahruba. She’s a very pious blesser of the Madar. Never misses a chance. Me, I’m different.” The corners of her mouth dragged down in an unhappy grimace. “Damned different.” She examined him curiously. “I suppose your people are different even more so. We bless the Madar, but you don’t really understand, do you? I suppose there’re others like Kahruba, but most share joy only with those they have affection for. It’s a part of our beliefs. The deeper the joy, the better our beasts thrive, our fields produce, the better the Madar is pleased with us.” She shrugged. “We bless the Madar, you slice the throats of women who wander. I think I prefer our way.”

“Your men, they have no pride to let another man take what’s theirs?”

“Theirs?” She frowned. “Nobody owns another person.”

He lowered his eyes. She examined the stiffness of his muscles. “Nobody,” she repeated firmly. “You don’t believe that?”

“What about those you call asiri?”

“We don’t own them. They’re part of the clan. Just like... I was going to say just like me. But that’s wrong. More than me.”

He said nothing, but his disbelief was almost palpable.

She sniffed. “What’s it matter, anyway? Like I said, don’t tell...”

Before she could finish her sentence, a pebble came flying down the path and bounced off the caravaner’s shoulder. He jumped to his feet.

A small boy—about Kur’s size, Aleytys thought—popped out of the zardagul bush near the bend in the path and stood grinning at them. A catapult dangled from one hand and a small sack of stones from the other. Aleytys was startled and revolted by the malicious cruelty in the small face.

“Gryman’s gotta gurrul, gryman’s gotta gurrul—” Over and over again, like a knife worried back and forth in a wound, he chanted those words, punctuating them with more catapulted stones.

Aleytys waited for the caravaner to do something, waited for him to grab the boy and teach him some manners.

The caravaner bent his head and seemed to shrivel as she watched.

“Ai-Aschla, caravaner!” She stared at him in disgust. “You going to let him get away with that?”

He looked silently at the ground. Another stone bounced off his cheek, leaving a pinkish stain in the pallor. Aleytys shook her head.

Then the boy missed his aim and one of the pebbles grazed her cheek. She leaped at him. Alarm chased the mockery from his face and he scrambled backward toward the bush, but Aleytys was too fast. Her hand closed on his thin shoulder and jerked him back into the middle of the path. He yelled angrily, struggling to pull free, wriggling, scratching, biting, cursing viciously. Aleytys dropped to one knee and upended him over the other. She heated up his behind with a series of good healthy smacks, ignoring both his wails and his curses. Then she set him on his feet again, keeping a firm hold on one wrist.

“You don’t need these, little rat.” She flung the catapult and the bag of pebbles into the river.

The boy twisted his head and spit into her face. She slapped him hard. “Mind your manners, rat.” Using his shirt sleeve, she wiped her face clean.

“I tell me father and he’ll kill you.”

“Are you finished?” she asked coolly.

He glowered at her.

“Then shut up.” She tightened her fingers on his wrist and kept her voice soft and deadly. “You’ve the manners of a half-witted maimun. Until you’re old enough to defend your right to be obnoxious, learn to control your baser impulses. Tell your father what you damn well like.” She laughed, blue-green eyes glinting fiercely—or so she hoped. “But remember this.” She bent over him and breathed the words into his face. “I’m a witch and I’ll put such a curse on you, you’ll get a crooked neck looking over your shoulder for the rest of a miserable life.”

“Witch? I don’t believe you.” He tried to speak defiantly, but his voice cracked and he was no longer pulling away from her. Wary respect began to replace the fury in his face.

Aleytys sensed a qush flying overhead and smiled again. She reached out and touched its tiny brain. To her delight the bird responded instantly. She flung up her free hand and snapped her fingers. As if in response to her summons the qush came slipping down in a long fierce glide. It landed beside her on the sand and fixed feral yellow eyes on the boy.

“Look,” she said softly. “If I say, he’ll rip the eyes from your head.” She fluttered a hand and the qush leaped up, driving its wings hard. As the boy cringed back, terrified, it landed on a branch above his head. “Whenever you see a qush circling overhead, young rat, remember I can look through his eyes.”

He gulped.

“Well?” She raised her hand.

“N-no. *No!* Don’t!” He pulled away from her loosened grip and began sidling toward the bushes.

“Mind your manners to your elders. Or you’ll get some more unpleasant surprises.” She gestured and sent the qush soaring free into the sky.

“Y-yes, zaujeha.” He whirled and dived into the bushes. They could hear the crashing of his frantic progress slowly fade as he ran toward the common.

“There.” She put her hand on the caravaner’s arm. “By the way, I never asked. What’s your name?”

“Tarnsian.”

“Do you see, Tarnsian? You’re not alone. Use your gift, don’t let it use you. You have allies everywhere. Fight, caravaner! Doormats are fine for wiping muddy feet on, but you’re a man.”

He backed away from her and sat down on the bench, his face creased into a bland smile.

Aleytys ran her hands through her hair and squeaked with frustration. “Ai-Aschla, I give up.”

10

Whistling softly under her breath, Aleytys padded down the hall while rubbing briskly at her damp hair.

As she turned the corner by Azdar's room, she heard quarreling voices. She slowed and listened. Qumri and Azdar. Arguing. She stopped walking and let the towel fall around her shoulders. The purple door was open slightly. *Maybe if I get a little closer*, she thought, *I can hear*

"... can purge the valley, get rid of her!" Qumri apparently was forgetting caution in her angry obsession, letting her voice grow too loud in her urgent need to convince. Aleytys didn't wait any longer. Running lightly on her toes, she crossed the square and plastered herself against the wall beside the door. Nervously holding her breath, she stretched up and pinched out the night candle over her head, then, more secure in the shadow, she sank down on her heels and listened hungrily.

"... the curse. No stone on stone in the house of Azdar. If you touch her..." Azdar's growl sounded unusually tentative, as if he wanted deeply to follow her advice but was afraid, Aleytys thought. *My father. Phah!*

"The Sha'ir says there's a way."

"Ghair fi'l! What's that snake doing crawling around my house?"

"Listen, Azdar, I sent for him. No. No." She seemed to be placating him. Aleytys ached to see inside, but she didn't quite dare. She could only imagine the consternation on his face.

"Listen," Qumri went on tensely. "There is a way. The Atash nau-tavallud."

"What's that?"

"You know. Don't play games with me, Azdar. Stupid games. The last time the valley called on Aschla in the Atash was two hundred three-year ago. At least, that's what the Sha'ir said. You know the herdsfolk, they're closer to Aschla than the houses." Qumri's voice sank into a low persuasive croon.

For a minute there was a tense silence in the room. Aleytys stirred impatiently. A cramp seized her calf and she massaged the leg, biting her lip at the pain.

"Atash? Burn her?" Azdar's voice broke the stillness. "She's outclan, I know, but she's still my blood. What would the houses think? How can I face the mard?"

"Don't think of it that way." Her voice was soft, cooing, enticing. "You want to get rid of her. She's like a bomb in the house. The mard won't condemn you, they'll bless you for getting rid of the danger she represents. Trust Aschla."

"Chalak..."

"What's he? You've said it yourself a hundred times. Nothing!"

"He's my son."

"Nothing!"

A hand closed on Aleytys's shoulder. She swallowed a yelp and stood up slowly. Heart bumping in her throat, she turned to face the man standing beside her. "Chalak," she breathed.

He laid a finger on his lips, then pointed down the hall. She nodded and padded rapidly after him. He

waited beside her bedroom door.

“May I enter, sabbiyya?”

“Be welcome, abru sar.” She swallowed hastily and walked past him to sit down on the end of the bed.

He stepped inside, and pulled the door shut behind him. “Well, Leyta?”

She shrugged. “Well, brother?”

“Eavesdroppers seldom hear pleasant news.”

“Yes, but they find out things they need to know.”

“Perhaps. What will you do with what you heard?”

“Do you know what I heard?”

“A little.”

“Tell me something.”

“What?” He folded his arms over his chest and smiled gravely at her. “Will you listen to me later?”

“Yes.” She patted her hand on the bed beside her and molded the quilt into a series of narrow ridges. Eyes fixed on her handiwork, she said, “What’s the Atash nau-tavallud?”

The sound of breath sucked in hard jerked her head up. He looked grim. “I missed that,” he said. “I had hoped... You’re sure that’s what he said?”

“What’s *he* said. Qumri.” Her chest felt oddly constricted so she stretched out her arms and pulled the air in deep, then exploded it out again. “Atashi. That’s an old word for fire.”

“Aschla is the dark daughter,” he said slowly. His cool reserved face was suddenly filled with pain. “Leyta...”

“Don’t,” she said hastily. “Just tell me.”

“It’s an old rite, born out of man’s terrors, used when fear is stronger than reason, than humanity.” He looked down at his strong short-fingered hands. “The isan dana initiate the ritual. They gather and ask permission of Aschla to hold the Atash nau-tavallud and purge the vadi of the ruh kharab, the demon infecting it. They summon the Sha’ir, the Khohin, and the shura’. With the shura’ standing guard, the Sha’ir and the Khohin perform certain secret ceremonies over the body of a slaughtered stallion. After this, as an outcome of these ceremonies, a person is chosen out of the valley people.” His voice hoarsened. He cleared his throat and looked over her head toward the window.

“Please finish.”

“May I sit?”

“Abu sar, be seated. I beg your pardon for forgetting this courtesy. Now will you please get on with it,

brother?”

He laughed and patted her hand. “Leyta, you always were the impatient one. *Now* is when you want things, *right now*. I think *now* was your very first word.”

“*Now*’s a good word. So they choose a person. What happens then?” she shuddered. “You understand, I have a personal interest in this.”

With a tired sigh, he said, “This is hard for me, Leyta. I can’t speak against the Madar, but I find the Atash rite... difficult to accept.” Abruptly his voice grew harder. “And I won’t be a part of it.”

She stared at him, surprised.

He stood up and started pacing back and forth past the end of the bed, almost stepping on her feet. “After the person is chosen, with their own hands the Khohin and the Sha’ir set up an ‘asa in the finjan Topaz and lay bundles of chub, hizum, and himeh around it, topping them with three handfuls of qua. In front of the entire vadi population—and not one is allowed to stay away, even the dying and women in labor—the chosen is taken in procession to the ‘asa and tied there. The fire is lit and fed until all... until all is consumed and become ash. Then the ashes are carefully collected and divided into five parts. The first part is taken to the gates of the Raqsidan and buried where the two roads cross. The other four parts are taken east, west, north, and south and scattered to the winds with chants to Aschla. This, it is said, will purge the Raqsidan of the ruh kharab.” He leaned against the door and folded his arms across his chest. “Now you know.”

Aleytys shuddered. “This time she’s got me.” He nodded. “With the Sha’ir and Azdar backing her the Khohin will have to follow.

“Ziraki says the guilds will back me.”

“It isn’t enough. You know that.”

“What am I going to do?” Her words fell dully into the little silence.

“What you’ve already decided to do, Leyta.”

She looked up at him, startled. “What...”

“Time is past for playing games.” His thin intelligent face creased into a smile. “Don’t name me fool, sister. I said I wouldn’t be part of this and I meant it. But...” He turned his head and gazed somberly at the east wall in the direction of Azdar’s bedroom. “He’s still the Azdar while he lives and I’ve got little direct authority.”

“Chalak, I’m frightened.” She held out her shaking hands and he took them into his. “I don’t know anything out there. I don’t know anything but the valley.” She pulled her hands free and clenched them into fists. “I don’t want to go,” she muttered unhappily.

“Have you a choice?” He dropped on the bed beside her. “You’d better try for the cities on the coast. But don’t tell me where you’re going. I’ll put food and other things you’ll need in the stables. Tomorrow...” He sighed and gently touched the top of her head with his fingertips. “By tomorrow night you’ve got to leave.”

“No.” Her hands clenched into fists until her knuckles turned white.

“Leyta.”

“No.”

He frowned impatiently. “Leyta, you’re being silly. You haven’t time to be stubborn.”

She twisted her fingers together and stared numbly at them “I’ve never been out of the valley, Chalak.” She twisted around on the bed to face him. “How do I act? What do I do? What do I say?”

His fingers closed hard over hers in a comforting grip “When there’s a choice, sister, between a painful and certain death and a chance for living, however slight. . . ”

“There’s no choice.” She sighed. “You’re right, dammit”

“You take life.”

“Every time.”

“A long life, sister. And a happy one, I hope. Somewhere. . . ” He gently freed his hand and stood up. “I’ll put some bolts of avrishum in the pack. That should help you live when you reach the cities.”

“Thank you, brother.”

He bent toward her and once again gently touched her hair. “Madar bless, sister.”

A shaky smile on her face, she nodded. “Madar bless brother.”

The smaller moon was an egg-sized dot on the edge of the world while the larger was a coppery melon, the hare standing on his head crowded into one corner of the almost-full oval. The thief sat in the shadow of the tent and watched the circle of witches moving purposefully through an incomprehensible ritual. Their voices came to him musically, clearly, in the still night air. In the center of the revolving group the diadem lay gathering in the light from the two moons.

Her face stern and pale, Khatayat whispered, “The moon dancer. We will summon Mowat.” She looked down into N’frat’s wide awe-filled eyes. “We’ll spin the ger hanat around this troublesome burden we have in our care so tight Myawo’ll find no chink to dig through.” She sucked in her breath. “Bring the man. He’s tied to the burden and must share the spell. Raqat....”

The warm-bodied nomad girl, the oldest of the young ones, walked hip-swaying and confident to the place where the thief was sitting. He looked up at her.

“Come with me.” She held out her hand and helped him rise, then led him to the others, the chains on his legs clanking dispiritedly in the clear still air of the night. His pale eyes glinted with curiosity as he turned his head from side to side, staring in turn at each of the women. Khatayat glanced at him, a slight smile curving her lips in tribute to his coolness. She moved to stand beside him while the others formed a circle around the two of them, each Shemqya one arm’s length from the other.

"I have summoned Mowat only twice in my life," Khateyat said, her voice a mere thread of sound. "One of you will be moon dancer. For all, this warning. Hold your souls strong and steady. Hold. Or you will be consumed." She blinked. "You, thief." She rested her hand on his shoulder. "You must sit very still. There." She pointed to the bare ground beside the diadem, frowning at the covetous glitter in his eyes. "Your role is silence. Do you understand?"

He shrugged and sat down.

Silence settled over the group. Khateyat drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yaqakh-n-sarat...." Her voice, a little unsteady at first, soon settled into a smooth calm chant. "Tadetat-b-ptam, Mowat. Come. The white silences. Come. Dance for us in the white silences of the night. Dance for us. Moon-thorn maid, hare speaker, come. Come. Come. Come...." She closed her eyes and began turning, slowly, then faster and faster. The others, still silent, faces strained, lifted heavy arms.

Khateyat's hands darted out and slapped around a pair of wrists. Eyes still shut, she breathed, "Chabyat."

Raqat echoed her. "Chabyat."

Face blank and still, Raqat turned her hands over and placed them palm down on Khateyat's wrists. The circle broke. N'frat knelt beside the hon and lifted the lid. One by one she lifted out the scented oils. Kheprat sank to her knees and began to tap her thighs in a slow insistent rhythm. As the sound broke into the strained silence the other two girls moved to Raqat's sides. Shanat untied the thongs that bound the moon dancer's night braids and spread her long heavy hair over her shoulders. R'prat unlaced the shoulder ties that held Raqat's tunic on and drew the supple leather down to a heavy pool at her feet.

"Hananam senya." N'frat's high sweet voice caught up the rhythm of Kheprat's hands. Shanat pooled her palms and caught the precious drops of oil, then stroked it onto the softly coiling strands of Raqat's hair.

"Nahanam nyebak." R'prat took the pot and poured the oil over Raqat's shoulders and breasts. Then she and Shanat began spreading it over the moon dancer's body, working in time with the monotonous beat of Kheprat's hands. As they finished, N'frat set the pots carefully back in the chest and spent the intervals picking up Kheprat's beat on her own thighs. Khateyat stood, a silver-streaked statue, palms up with Raqat's hands resting heavily on hers. The two girls lifted the moon dancer's feet free of the tumbled tunic, anointing each with a special oil and meticulous care, then, on their knees, they moved to join Kheprat and N'frat.

Khateyat let her arms drop, bent down, and picked up the discarded tunic. Silently she backed away, leaving Raqat standing alone, arms still outstretched.

The moon singer stood like a bronzed statue, her skin gleaming like dark water, golden highlights on the high cheekbones, the points of her shoulders, her full breasts, and the thrust of her generous hips. The thief watched her appreciatively.

"Ger-n-Mowat shanyef." Khateyat's rich full voice broke through the meaty thud-thud-thud. Raqat drew in her breath in a shuddering sigh; she began to sway; highlights rippled like mirrored flames over her glistening body.

Hands beating on thighs, breathed-out chants, tongues clicking, sound working in and around thudding feet, scraping through across hard-packed earth, feet moving up, down, in careful patterns; liquid-gold voice, gold highlights pouring over thrusting, curving planes, and in the background hands slapping on thighs, breath forced between teeth, weaving in-out, golden voice spinning words into silver moon-web.

Hands beat on thighs, faster faster faster faster; feet spun out a pattern over bruised grass, faster faster faster; breathed chant growing urgent, urgent—demanding! Singer's voice rising to strong demand, repeating over and over the staccato syllables....

Silence called....

Silence wailing around the seated thief, the glowing diadem....

Let it be done.

Let it be done.

Let it be done!

Singer whirling, eyes blank, feet touching ground in intricate patterns, pattering soft sound weaving in and around the chant, in and through, around and over the insistent rhythm of the wordless sounds and beating hands.

Yatfedarya: let it be done!

... Sound stopped with the final triumphantIt is done.The thief let the air trickle out of his straining lungs, feeling a harsh prickle over his exposed skin, a tightness bound around his head. He looked down at the diadem resting beside him, its glow oddly subdued. He tried to touch it but found his hand gently nudged away. Impressed, he stared around at the circle of witches.

Raqat lay collapsed in a heap of hot woman-flesh on the cold ground. Panting too hard to say anything, she shoved the sodden oil-sticky strands of hair away from her eyes.

N'frat snatched up one of the rolled leathers and trotted to the exhausted dancer. "Put this around you, Qati," she said. "You don't want to get sick."

Raqat smiled tiredly at her. "Thanks, N'fri."

Khatyat looked around at them all. "The thing is done," she said hoarsely. "Let's to bed and get what sleep we can before morning." She touched the thief with her foot. "You go back to your chon, you've work in the morning."

The thief shrugged and stumbled to his feet, feeling strangely drained of strength. He glanced back at the diadem lying almost forgotten in the dimming moonlight. "Why?" he said.

She stared at him thoughtfully. "Better you don't know, slave. Accept it as for your protection. You're alive and will stay so. Don't press your luck."

Part II: Dragonseed Tries Her Wings

1

Aleytys sighed and moved her aching shoulders. The slow shuffle of the hooves over the rutted track, the creak of leather, and the steady *whmph-whmph-whmph* of the horses' breathing beat a dull counterpoint to the unhappy circle her thoughts pursued as the cold air chilled her body and dropped her spirits even lower.

As the unaccustomed strain on her legs grew gradually unbearable, she wriggled and shifted position and rested her weight on one hip, then the other. She shifted forward and back uncomfortably until the ache spread over the whole of her lower body. Finally she freed her left foot from the stirrup and hooked it around the saddle horn, almost falling off the horse's back as she squirmed around.

"That feels a little better, Pari my pretty mare. If I don't fall off..." The mare stumbled and Aleytys grabbed hurriedly at her mane. "Ha! Mi-muklis, if we every part company..." She laughed and shook her head. "I'd never get back on again."

As soon as she stabilized her balance she tilted her head back to stare at the moons. With Zeb a small bulge like a wart on her side, Aab was beginning the long slide down to the jagged mountain peaks. "About six hours to go before dawn. I wonder how far we've come." She looked around. On her right, the side of the mountain climbed in a solid mass toward the sky, moonlight glinting off a pile of granite rock. On her left, the ground swept down so abruptly that the feathery crests of tall ironwood barely topped her head. "No way of telling. About five hours gone. Vajd said vadi Kard's two weeks' travel south."

Somewhere down around her navel a cold hollow grew, an ache that was harder to bear than the physical ache of her tired muscles. "Ahai, Pari..." She stroked the smooth neck of the dark mare. "I miss him dreadfully already and we just left the valley this night." She closed her eyes, seeing him a dark quiet figure silhouetted against the shimmering rock. "Vajd..." she whispered. But the word was lost immediately in the gusts of wind snatching at the skirts of her abba. She shivered and pulled Vajd's heavy cloak closer about her, wishing vaguely for a pair of the caravaner's boots to fend off the currents of icy air that slipped under the skirts of the abba and fluttered around her legs.

With a shake to her shoulders, she slid her left leg down and cautiously slipped her right around the horn. "Aai, that smarts," she breathed as her inner thigh touched the leather again. She thrust her left foot back in the stirrup and clucked to the mare. "Come on, Pari, little mayal, move your feet. Better find a place to get off the road. When they start looking for me, someone'll sure come this way."

She shook her head at the precipitous slopes on both sides of the road. No way to leave the path there. She rode on. The slopes turned into high rocky tors rising in crumbling grandeur on either side of the road that wound between them, spending more distance going up and down and around than it covered in actual point-to-point extension. Aleytys had to creep along and hold the mare to a slow walk because the road was treacherous with small lumps of rock that could turn underfoot and cripple one of her horses. On and on and on and on... up... down... around... hour after hour... Aleytys clinging to the mare, the

pack-loaded stallion pacing steadily behind. She rode until riding became a torment, until her thighs were raw, until she was trembling with weariness. The tors faded and she rode again between steep slopes, one rising above her, the other falling away below, and when the land flattened a little, the trees and bush grew so thick, the shadow was so black and daunting, she shuddered at the thought of pushing into it.

Aab was resting on the tip of a high peak whose name she didn't know when the inhospitable mountain relented and presented her with a pleasant grassy slope dotted with scattered circles of sinaubar. She shook herself to semi-alertness and pulled the mare to a halt, the stallion behind her nickering impatiently and pushing forward to bump his way past. Aleytys rubbed her face and reached out with her tired mind. She soothed him and sent him back. "Sorry, mi-Mulak. I suppose the both of you are tired and hungry and thirsty." She sighed. "Come on, azizhya-mi."

The mare began to pick her way downhill, winding a more or less southeasterly course around the rocks and lance-straight ironwood trees scattered in isolated majesty on this sparsely turfed mountainside. The mare curved around one of the sinaubar circles and Aleytys swayed in the saddle. She caught at the saddle horn and kept herself erect by will alone as fatigue washed in huge waves over her aching head.

When Aab was a thin paring of milky light capping the mountain ridge, Pari pushed her head through sparse brush and came out on a wide apron of sand sloping down to a shallow stream. Aleytys started and stared blankly at the rushing water. *Drink*, she thought.

As though the word released some hidden inhibition, Mulak shouldered past her and sank his nose in the clear water. Pari trotted beside him and began to drink also.

As the horses stepped farther into the stream Aleytys sat clutching the saddle horn. *Tracking*, she thought, *herdsmen*. She closed her eyes, then forced them open again when a warm black blanket shut down over her mind. Tracking... the stream hissed past the horses' hooves, sending the sand whirling into a faint cloud clearly visible in the remaining moonlight.

Washtracks away... The thought drifted soggily through her mind. *Wash* She turned her body to look downstream. At the sudden sharp pain shooting up from thighs moving across stiff cold saddle leather, she gasped and flinched. *Got to stop*, she thought, tears of pain blurring her vision. Here.... She blinked the tears away. *No, no shelter... it's too soon... too soon... if they catch me ...* A cold shudder slowed over her body. She pulled the mare's head up out of the water and sent her sloshing down the creek bed. Mulak snorted his head out of the water and paced along behind.

Through the gathering clouds of weariness fuzzing her brain Aleytys felt a formless wonder at the automatic efficiency of the newly wakened faculties of her mind. Having watched men work with horses all her life she knew how recalcitrant the stallion should have been with that insulting burden on his back. Then her mind drifted off, thoughts and images appearing and altering in rhythmic spasms with no logic in their progression.

After a while the mountainside dropped more steeply so that the creek bottom changed from the sand and gravel of the more placid stretches to treacherous water-smoothed rocks, forcing the mare into a jolting gait that sent jarring pains up her spine. As the horse cautiously picked her way downstream, Aleytys's mind began to blink crazily on and off. More and more often, when the blackness clicked away, she found the mare's mane in her face. Time stretched out endlessly at one moment and at another snapped into short sharp segments. The night in its turn grew darker and darker as Aab dipped behind the mountains. At the same time, though, a fugitive line of red fought with the darkness at the eastern edge of the world.

Aleytys blinked hazy eyes and saw a wide apron of flattish stone lying like spilled fudge beside and beneath the creek. She pulled back on the reins and the mare stumbled to a stop. Aleytys gazed blankly down the stream, her mind momentarily empty of thought. Then she turned her head and stared at the stone.

Tracks, she thought finally. Her mind worked in brief spasms, spaced by blanks where she thought nothing, felt nothing. *South ... put my hand to the red... left hand... better leave the water here... getting too far east... if I get lost ...* That last thought sent adrenaline spurting through her body, jolting her briefly awake. Pulling on the right rein, she turned the mare to the south and nudged her out of the water.

The two horses plodded over the wide stretch of rock and later across meadowlands where their hooves sank fetlock deep in sticky black mud and leaf-mold. While the eastern sky turned pink they threaded through a dense grove of ironwood where it was still black night.

As they came out of the grove Horli was a red boil on the eastern plain, now visible as a vast blue plate. The fiery light struck the scattered clumps of trees and painted long shadows that crossed and recrossed the rolling hills, which dipped down in graceful swoops to the plain.

She straightened her back and stretched. The cold fresh morning air stirred along her sides, starting shivers that traveled up and down her tired body. She pulled the cloak back about her and looked around.

Sinaubar clustered over the slopes with the slender-boled circles breaking up the monotony of the ubiquitous carpet of tough purple webgrass. They were an odd growth and she blinked, seeing them in daylight for the first time. They always grew in circles since, like some mushrooms, they grew on a common root. They had no branches for the first two or three meters. Then downslanting limbs climbed in a wobbly spiral up and around the rough peeling bark until the tree looked like a cone-shaped scrub brush. Their dark leaves—blue-green threads waving in thick bunches around a central vein—starred out at nodal points along the branches. Aleytys swayed in the saddle and tried to focus on this serene landscape painted in strong colors—purple grass, blue-green leaves, red sky. It was like looking at a painting seen from a distance, lent a curious unreality by her fatigue.

She swallowed and realized abruptly that her mouth was dry, her lips sore and cracking. Leaning cautiously forward, she tried to unhook the waterskin but her numbed fingers bent at unpredictable angles or refused to bend at all. She opened and closed her hands several times, watching them turn pink as circulation renewed itself. Pulling the bone stopper loose, she lifted the skin and pressed a stream of water into her mouth and over her face until the icy sting started her mind moving. She shoved the stopper back, hung the skin on its hook, and sucked in a lungful of the crisp air, beginning to feel alive again. She clucked to the horses and started south once more.

As Horli's bottom cleared the horizon, the land began to change, growing steeper and rockier with ironwood taking the place of the sinaubar. Soon the mare pushed through a thin line of sweet raushani and stopped on a bank that dipped at a sharp angle down to a small stream. Aleytys examined the dancing water thoughtfully, noting the nearly straight downward plunge of the deepening ravine. She nudged the mare forward, grunting as the tilt of the animal's back put extra pressure on her torn thighs.

She stopped the two horses in the middle of the stream and peered down along the water. As far as she could tell, the stream cut downhill at a steep angle while the banks maintained their same level so that the sides of the ravine grew taller and taller. About half a kilometer ahead it appeared to open out into a meadow.

“That looks interesting, mi-muklis mayal. Bet you both could do with some rest and food.” She kicked her heels into the mare’s sides and started her downstream, the stallion following calmly behind.

After about half an hour, the ground leveled out and Aleytys sighed with relief. She straightened herself in the saddle and looked around with lively interest. The ground in the little valley was more or less level and lushly upholstered with khiragrass, which shone bright green in the lurid morning light. On her right, around the far edge of the meadow, rose a thick growth of ballut and bydarrakh. No horans.

No horans. She sighed. The absence of the shining trees brought a sense of loss oddly sharp, oddly worse than the loss of Vajd. For the first time she felt in the core of her being the loss of her home. There was a deep marrow-of-the-bones comprehension that she would live on alien soil the rest of her life, that she would never again have a place where she fit without strain. She shrugged and turned her back on the trees.

The left side of the valley was a precipitous cliff—the wall of the ravine grown at least fifty meters high. Interest sparked in her as she saw what looked to be a deep hollow near the ground, half hidden behind a skirt of prickly bushes and a few lean ironwoods.

She nudged the mare forward and edged cautiously past the needle-pointed leaves of the bushes. Next to the cliff she found a short climb like a meter-high ramp. She urged the mare up and halted under the curving roof of the hollow. It was like standing in a stone bubble. The top arched over her head and dipped back into chilly red-tinted shadows. The bubble was about three meters high, three wide, and about double that deep. The floor was more or less level, covered with decayed leaves and miscellaneous debris.

She leaned forward and scratched the mare along her mane. “Not much, is it, Pari? But better than a night in the rainstorm.” Once again she straightened her tired back. “Aziz-mi, how’m I going to get way down there?” She eyed the floor with distaste. “My legs don’t seem to want to work.”

Holding on to the saddle horn, she tilted over until she slid from the saddle to collapse in a rubber-legged heap on the floor in the middle of a pile of pricklythorn. The spines punched into her, stinging her onto her hands and knees. Clumsily she crawled to the mare and pulled herself erect until she stood clinging to the saddle, meagerly supported by legs that kept bending in the middle.

She wiggled her toes and flexed the muscles in her legs until the feeling flowed back into them. Letting go of the saddle, she stumbled over to the stallion.

After wrestling the pack to the floor, she stripped off his gear, chuckling as she scratched his head under his forelock, tottering back as the stallion bumped her affectionately in the chest. “Ahi, muklis, watch it—my poor old legs haven’t got much spring left in them.”

With a last rub of his shoulder, she sent him out into the meadow. Then she stripped the mare and released her to run free.

She shuffled wearily to the front of the hollow. Over the top of the pricklybushes she watched the horses run, prancing, kicking out fore and hind feet alternately, whinnying exuberantly. She smiled, catching a little of the mood. Then she sighed and turned back to the pile of gear.

Walking with her legs bowed out so that the inner surfaces of her thighs would not touch, Aleytys dragged the packs as far back in the hollow as she could, brushing away the sticks, thorns, and the

winter's casting of desiccated leaves. After tidying the pile, she took a bottle of ointment Vajd had given her and walked down to the front of the bubble.

With morning birds whose names she didn't know chirruping merrily around her, she edged through the pricklebushes and tottered over to the dancing water of the stream. Seating herself on a rock in the full light of the two suns just lifting their tops above the trees, she pulled off the creased and stained abba so that she sat naked in the growing warmth of the morning.

She looked down at her legs and gasped. They were stained with blood from knee to crotch. "Qudda Madar!" she breathed. She dipped her hand into the water. "Ahai! Ice!" she yelped. Slowly, letting her flesh adjust to the chill, she dropped her feet into the clear cold stream and stood up. With a groan, she bent and scooped up handfuls of water, splashing it over the torn skin, wincing and squeaking each time the icy fluid hit her tender flesh.

Once the blood was washed off she shuffled back to the rock and dabbed on a thick slathering of the ointment. With another chorus of groans and moans she crawled out of the water onto the rock and stretched herself out in the sunlight, bunching up her abba for a pillow.

The ointment sank in and did its healing work, while the warmth of the sun soothed her chill and aching body. Slowly her fatigue crept back and she drifted into a dim half-sleep. But Jaydugari are conditioned from birth to avoid sleeping in Heshlight, so, reluctantly, she pulled herself up again and lay down flat on her stomach to drink from the stream. The water had an astringent leaf-green taste that was refreshing and new to her.

Blinking repeatedly to keep her eyes open, Aleytys stumbled back into the shelter of the hollow. She spread out one of the sheets of tufan she had wrapped around the packs and dumped a blanket on top of it. Touching the fleecy pashmi of the blanket reminded her of the horse blankets and she wobbled over to the heaped-up packs and picked up the crumpled pads. She wrinkled her nose. Wet with sweat, exuding a dank musty smell, they needed airing like she needed sleep. She hung them over the pricklebushes where the sun could burn the stink out of them.

Almost before she could drop her head onto the rolled-up abba and pull the blanket across her shoulders, she was plummeting fathoms deep into sleep.

2

Aleytys sighed and sobbed. Deep in her sleep pictures formed in her mind. . . .

The tracker knelt on the ground, and puzzled over the tracks. "Two stood here," he said, glancing up at the glowering Azdar. "A woman. A man. Two horses."

"A man!" Azdar swung down from his horse and stared at the trampled sand. "You sure? Who?"

The tracker shook his head. He prodded at the sand with his gnarled forefinger. "Too dry here. A man. See? Sandal mark. One of ours helped her. He turned here." He hunched along over the sand and flicked at the prints with his finger. "Went back to the vadi." He stood up slowly, dusting the sand from his legs. Eyes flat and emotionless as a snake, he looked down the back trail, then turned again to Azdar.

“The woman, she went alone, that way.” He pointed south along the rutted wagon road.

Aleytys frowned in her sleep and made a vague sound of protest.

Mounting again, Azdar jerked his horse’s head around. With the animal sidling restlessly in the middle of the road, he swung his head around and looked each man in the face out of bloodshot eyes. “A horse to every man if we catch her before the night,” he growled, his face twisted into a vindictive scowl. He slammed his heels into the gelding’s sides and plunged off down the winding rutted track.

The men looked uneasily at one another. Their eyes kept sliding around to Chalak and slipping away. Nodding at the tracker, he said quietly, “Get started.” He mounted and started his horse south along the trade road, riding slowly. The other men fell in line behind him.

Aleytys sighed and turned onto her stomach, her lips moving soundlessly with her brother’s name. Chalak... Chal... Ch...

The dream changed. The tracker grunted and held up a hand. He slid off the horse and squatted on the road and peered down at the hard rocky ground. “Missed her,” he growled. The background was vague, misty, but what the dreamer saw of it was strange. The tracker stood and peered back down the back trail. “She turned off trail a while back.” Sourly he shot a glance at Azdar, red faced and impatient on his black gelding, then his eyes slid past and rested on Chalak’s impassive face. “We come too fast.”

Azdar scowled. “Well?”

“Got an idea. Never been in the saddle before. If she wanted to turn off, would’ve took first open ground.” He spit thoughtfully, watching the spittle sizzle briefly on the rock. “Have to find cover soon. Coming up high heat.” He wiped the sweat from his wrinkled apricot face with the corner of his headcloth, then settled the bast cords that held the cloth on.

Azdar peered from under his cowl at the suns. Huge red Horli, with Hesh snuggled against her belly, floated up near zenith. He gnawed at his thumbnail in frustration. “How long before we reach where you think she turned off?”

“No use missing her again. We came too fast. Just waste time making the same mistake again.” The herdsman scuffed his feet thoughtfully over the hard ground. “I walk this time. How long?” He shrugged.

Chalak nodded. “Right,” he said softly. “We can lay up for high heat by that stream we passed a few miles back.”

The tracker spit again and started walking back, leading his horse and peering at each side of the trail, his dried-up face turning slowly from side to side.

The air inside the hollow began heating up as Hesh and Horli soared to zenith. Aleytys grumbled in her sleep and, arms moving clumsily, fumbled the blanket off her. Snoring slightly, she curled on her side and sank further into sleep.

The pursuit crawled along at a walk with Chalak serving as the butt of his father's ill humor. The dreamer smiled in her sleep, feeling his grim satisfaction at their creeping progress.

The dream scene shifted again.

Under purple-blue towering clouds the group of men inched down the mountainside, winding through the scattered ironwood trees. "Wait." The tracker pushed through the spindly brush and stepped onto the splash of sand slanting down the bank and under the stream. The dreamer jerked with a twinge of fear as she recognized the spot.

He knelt a moment beside the smudgy prints, then squinted across at the sand on the other side. "She stayed in the water." He led his horse into the stream and started pacing slowly downhill.

"Just a moment," Chalak said abruptly, drawing a smile from the dreamer. The tracker turned. "How do you know which way she went?" He shifted in the saddle and pointed back toward the road. "Shouldn't we check the other way first?"

The tracker looked at him impassively. "No," he said after a moment.

Aleytys stirred restlessly and moved to another spot on the tufan out of the pooled sweat collected from her steaming body. In her sleep she smiled, recognizing Chalak's efforts to hold back those tracking her. Her lips moved. "Chalak... Chala... Cha..."

The sky was darker as the cloud curtain thickened across Horli's fat red face. The tracker waded through the cold water, eyes moving steadily from bank to bank. Behind him the other men walked their horses along both banks. Each time the tracker came to a stretch of rock he flicked up a warning hand, stopping the twin lines of men, then he crawled out onto the rock, his nose so close to the surface he seemed to be sniffing it like some hunting animal. Each time, after a few minutes, he stood up, shook his head, and splashed back into the water.

The wind strengthened. As the light reddened and dimmed, Azdar growled under his breath, then called impatiently, "Time's wasting. Move faster!"

The tracker lifted his head and looked impassively at the Azdar. With maddening deliberation he considered the clan head's angry face. When he spoke his voice was dry and derisive. "We missed her before. You want to take the chance?"

Chalak nodded earnestly, stifling the satisfaction he felt at this unexpected and unconscious support. "He's right, abru sar," he said quietly. "The light is getting bad. He could easily miss her turn-off."

Azdar snorted. "The light's going. What difference's it make we lose her by missing her or because the rain washed out her trail? Move faster!" he rasped.

The tracker shrugged and started on downstream in a long steady lope.

Finally, on a wide lumpy apron of stone, he fingered a short scratch, flicked away a small pebble sitting with its lichen side down, and nodded his head.

The dreamer cried out in fear, her whole body shuddering under the prod of her uneasiness.

Azdar jerked his horse's head around and brought him rattling and scraping up onto the rock. The tracker frowned in irritation and waved him back.

On hands and knees, nose once more inches from the stone, he crawled forward, sniffing out the almost invisible trail. Then, with a low grunt of satisfaction, he stood up and stepped off the far edge of the rock, pointing at deep indentations in the soft black earth. He studied the tracks for a few strides, then looked up at the sky.

Azdar slid off his horse and examined the prints. "How far ahead is she?"

The tracker paced off a few more meters along the trail with Azdar following close behind. "The woman is letting the horse choose its own path," he said slowly. "You see?" He pointed out the short distance between the prints and the rather erratic line of travel. "Could be, she didn't go much farther." He dropped down and squatted beside the tracks, prodding at them with thumb and finger. "Made late last night, 'bout dawn, I'd say." He squinted up at the sky. "Going to rain soon. Got 'bout half a chance to catch her. Depends how much farther she went." He stood up, looked around briefly, then began loping smoothly along the trail, pulling his mount into a trot beside him.

The file of men moved over the slope, winding between the clustering circles of sinaubar. Only the softness of the black mountain topsoil under the matted roots of the webgrass made any tracking possible in the dim musty light trickling through the lowering clouds.

Then big scattered drops of rain began splashing down, coming faster and faster as the minutes passed. The tracker cursed softly and slowed to a stop. Azdar halted beside him. "There was a chance," he said bitterly.

The tracker shrugged. "I go on tomorrow." He rested his hand on the knife and let his fingers caress the hilt. "You do what you want."

The dreamer twisted and muttered in her sleep, feet moving in an unconscious parody of flight.

Azdar looked at the black sky, the huge wet drops splashing down on his face with convincing finality. He grimaced. "We aren't supplied for a long trek. Chalak, you go with him. Bring her back."

“No.”

“What!” Azdar glared at his son.

“No. If he wants to waste his time following a drowned trail, let him.” His head snapped back as Azdar swung viciously at his face. He wiped the trickle of blood from his mouth and turned his back on his father.

“Get a fire going,” he said flatly to one of the naukar. “In there.” He pointed at the nearest sinaubar circle. The man nodded and slipped away into the shadow under the trees. Turning to the rest of the men, he said quietly, “We go back to the valley in the morning. There’s no chance of trailing her after this rain.” The men looked quietly at one another, then nodded curtly, making the respect shalikk before they followed the firemaker under the sinaubars.

Ignoring the silent, glowering figure of Azdar, Chalak lifted his face to the rain and smiled. The drops were coming down steadily now, merging into driving lines.

Aleytys groaned and opened sticky eyes. Her head ached from a too-heavy sleep and reeled under the impact of the vivid dreams. She licked crusty lips and peered through the gloom at the lowering darkness outside the hollow. Then she tried to sit up.

Pain flashed through her body like fire. She fell back with a hoarse gasp.

After a minute she tried again, and this time she managed it. She spread out her legs and prodded at the inside of her thighs. Scabs had formed and dried during her long sleep so that the abraded flesh pulled, burned, and, most of all, itched. She curled her fingers into fists to control the urge to scratch.

Grunting as she stretched more aching muscles, she caught up the bottle of ointment. Once more she spread the cool salve over her legs, working the herb-scented cream into her scrapes and scabs. It felt good. She smiled as she worked, even started whistling cheerfully. Pushing herself up onto her feet, she stepped carefully through the spiny debris to the front of the hollow and glanced at the suns. Both were very low in the western sky, hanging half behind the jagged edge of the mountains with broken clouds blowing wild across their faces. She frowned. “It was raining in the dream...” She shook her head and waddled out to gather wood for her supper fire.

The horses were out in the center of the grass grazing contentedly on the thick succulent stalks. As she headed for the trees, the mare lifted her head, flicked her ears, gave a little jump, and began to prance around the meadow, kicking up her heels in sheer exuberance. Aleytys laughed and shook out her hair, feeling an echo of that joyousness in her being.

As Horli oozed behind the mountain ridge Aleytys ruefully examined the thin trail of smoke trickling from the tinderbox.

“Another dud,” she moaned. She brushed straying strands of hair out of her face and glanced back over her shoulder at the bit of sky she could see from inside the hollow. It was purple with cloud. She turned back to the box that she could hardly see in the gathering gloom. “Come on, you devil, light!” Once again she fluffed up the tinder and snapped the trigger. Sparks flew and she blew gently on the smoldering crumbs.

For the hundredth time the tiny spark blackened and died. Sitting back on her heels, she glared at the frustrating box. "Once more, just once more..." she muttered. She cleared out the box, pouring into her cupped palm the pinch of crumbling deadwood she'd painstakingly scraped out of the old stump. With a disgusted sniff, she flung it away.

Rummaging in the saddlebag, she came up with the old book Vajd had given her. One of the flyleaves was blank so she tore a strip off it, crumpled it loosely, and tucked it into the gap at the end of the tinderbox. With a thin-bladed knife she whittled off a few more shavings from a resin-filled piece of raushani and crisscrossed the slivers into a little heap on the stone.

She snapped the trigger. This time the sparks caught hold and turned the paper into a lively little blaze. She tipped it out hastily onto the pile of shavings and added more until the wood caught fire. Whistling triumphantly through her teeth, she dropped small twigs across the little fire. Then she teetered back on her heels and grinned at the result of her efforts. "My first fire," she murmured complacently. She built the fire up until it was a crackling blaze, then set about preparing her supper.

After she had eaten and cleaned up, she strolled to the edge of the hollow and gazed out at the valley. The mountain peaks still visible between the clouds glowed like frozen fire, though Horli had vanished behind them. The freshening breeze that flipped the limber branches of the pricklebushes around, to the imminent peril of her abba, was heavy with the promise of rain. She lowered her head and looked around. The spiny leaves of the bushes snagged at the fluttering material of her abba so she had to untangle herself. While she was pulling loose, a few drops of rain splashed past the ironwood's leaves and fell onto her head.

Closing her eyes, she searched out the horses. "Come in, Pari," she whispered into the darkness. "Come, Mulak." With caressing mind touch she teased them out of the meadow and back into the hollow. The stallion pushed his face against her shoulder and she scratched him between his flicking ears. The mare danced up, demanding her share of attention.

Aleytys laughed and fended off the slobbering mouths. "Come over here. I cut some grass for tonight and there's corn for you, mi-muklisha." With her hand on the stallion's shoulder, she led them across to the heap of meadow grass piled along the side with handfuls of pale yellow-green corn poured on top. Mulak snorted and thrust his black nose into the sun-warmed mass and whuffed it around. In a minute he took a mouthful of grass and corn and began chewing placidly. Pari followed his example.

Aleytys patted them affectionately and went back to the fire. The pot of chahi nesting in the ashes sent up threads of herb-scented steam. She sniffed. Faintly acrid, faintly sweet, pungent and refreshing, the fragment steam curled around her face and she sighed with pleasure. Protecting her fingers with her sleeve, she lifted the pot and poured a cupful of the brown amber liquid.

She stood up and took the cup of chahi with her to the front of the hollow. The rain was coming down now in heavy stinging lines, which she watched with profound satisfaction. She thought of the tracker and grinned. "I hope you sleep cold and miserable, af'i," she muttered. Behind her the fire radiated heat that the insweeping wind picked up and curled around her, while inside her body the hot drink was a spreading center of comfortable warmth. Feeling calm, strangely happy, at peace with herself and the world around her, she sipped at the chahi and listened to the beating rain, the scratching of the pricklebush thorns against the rock, the roar of the wind. In the Raqsidan the clans would be gathering for evensong. She could hear in her mind the simple beautiful chant that celebrated the gentlest aspect of the Madar. Almost without her willing it the words of the shabsurud floated up into her mind and she sang them softly into the wild and stormy night.

When she finished, she spilled a few drops of the chahi in Madar's honor and walked slowly back to the bed of glowing coals.

3

Aleytys rode downhill trying to angle toward the south. The leather began to rasp against her thighs, so she stood in the stirrups tottering unsteadily but managing to wrap the abba's flaring skirts about her legs. She settled back in the saddle and breathed a sigh of relief as the silky material soothed the rasp.

"Well, Pari." She patted the mare's neck. "Looks different around here. A few more days, I suppose. Then turn back to the road." She shifted uneasily and looked back over her shoulder. Somewhere behind her she felt a danger sniffing slowly but inexorably on her trail. She shook off the chill and glanced to the right, reassured by the dim blue line that marked the location of the mountain ridges. "At least I can't lose that." She looked around. The mountain had gentled into rolling hills covered with a thick growth of some tall sun-bleached grass. There were a few stunted trees but not much else.

She squinted up at the suns. Horli was in the first quarter of arc with Hesh a bright boil on her left side, just touching the edge on his passage in front of the softer red sun. "Ahai, Pari, I took off the wrong time of the month. If I could have waited till Horli occluded Hesh. . . ." She shook her head and pulled the hood farther over her face and settled more comfortably into the saddle.

With the horses nodding along at a quick walk she rode on and on. . . endlessly. . . up one rolling swell and down again. The horses paced steadily along, their swaying a hypnotic rhythm that rocked her brain into an idling half-daze that combined with the monotonous sameness of the landscape to send time passing almost unnoticed. The suns climbed higher and higher until they were beating down nearly overhead. The mare nickered uneasily and swung her head around.

Aleytys blinked and gasped as the heat bit into her. She tilted her head anxiously to see the suns. "Ahai, Pari. What a dumb thing to do, go to sleep in the saddle." She rubbed her hand over her dust-covered face. Even through the thick material of the abba she could feel Hesh's burning claws. She glanced around. Ahead there was a scruffy group of trees barely taller than Mulak's head. The thin dusting of papery leaves provided little shelter from the suns, but there was nothing else around so she sighed and set Pari trotting over to them.

At the trees, whose shelter was flimsier than she expected, she twisted in the saddle and licked dry and cracking lips. "This's not shade enough to shelter a mikhmikh." The square of tufan tied over the pack on the stallion's back caught her eye. "At, idea! Pari, this dried-up lady isn't licked yet." She slid off the mare's back and tied the tufan so that it threw a pool of shade big enough for the three of them to crowd into.

She suffered the high heat through, head and eyes aching furiously. At the worst part she poured water onto her sleeve and bathed the horses' tender noses and poured some water in a shallow basin so they could drink. For herself she splashed it over her face and drank a few swallows. It took years for Hesh and Horli to move the few degrees of arc that put a thicker blanket of air between them and the crisping earth. She stirred finally and felt the waterskin. It was limp, nearly empty. She poured some water into the basin and let the horses drink again. Trickling a few more drops out onto her sleeve so she could bathe her face, she thought, *I'd better find water. Soon .*

She looked up and saw a hawk sailing high overhead. Reaching out, she stroked his small fierce brain. *Water*, she thought at him, *water*, thrusting the idea deep into his dim awareness. He angled swiftly southward.

With the line between them a stretching thread of communication, Aleytys hurriedly untied the tufan, bundled it on top of the pack, and climbed back into the saddle. She kicked her heels into the mare's flanks and sent her loping after the fleeting speck. The black stallion trotted along behind, linked to her by the other invisible thread spun out from her mind.

As she rode, she nested further into the bird's mind, striving to maintain the link between them. Suddenly she felt a snap and a whirling dizziness. Then she was looking down at a rolling wrinkled surface pale gray and queerly distorted. Off in the distance bobbed the clumsy earthbound animals, a blackish blot on the unreeling map of the ground. Fleetingly she felt the oddness of a black and white vision of the earth, somehow even stranger than the unaccustomed aerial view.

A building compulsion jerked the bird's eyes away, Aleytys's awareness following, as to the south, far ahead, almost at the limit of vision, a wandering line of dark gray cut through the pale gray grass. *Trees*, she thought. *Some kind of stream. That's good. I wonder how far it is.*

The hawk caught the wind in the hollow of his wings and banked over and down into a long slanting glide. The ground came close and the glide leveled out. She sensed the complex play of muscles, as ordinarily she was aware of the pressure of air sliding on her skin... a subtle tactile awareness with every inch of her body part of a vibrant sensing organ. With the hawk she soared. It was an exhilarating experience, joy riding on the wings of air.

A sudden jolt snapped her away from the hawk. She blinked. For a moment a vast resentment of her heavy clumsy human body quivered in her, then the last remnants of hawk evaporated and she was once more wholly herself, flat on her back in the hot and dusty grass.

Cautiously she straightened her arms and legs. Everything worked and everything hurt, but no sharp, shooting pains warned of serious injury. With a wry grin on her dirty face she struggled back onto her face and dusted herself off.

Somewhat abashed, she climbed back on the mare and tucked the abba around her legs. As she rode along, letting the mare choose her own pace, Aleytys tilted her head and looked into the sky with amusement and regret. "Next time I go flying," she murmured, laughter bubbling in her voice, "I'll keep my feet on the ground." She stretched and groaned. "Just what I need, a new set of bruises."

Hesh and Horli crept slowly down a sky that was vibrating with heat so that the air burned her lungs with each breath she took. Even the horses were panting and growing increasingly skittish. Every shadow sent their eyes rolling and their bodies dancing sideways. She looked anxiously around. The grass spread out on either side, broken here and there by low patches of brush. Even the scattered trees were behind her. Rolling gently in a series of small lumps, the earth heaved up and down, stretching endlessly to the horizon line all around., Hot... it was hard to breathe... her mouth was dry, her nose stiff and hard... hot... She unhooked the waterskin and squeezed out a few drops onto the edge of her cowl. Her throat felt scraped raw, her mouth like badly cured leather. An ache climbed up the back of her neck and burned blue-white at the back of her head. She clutched at the saddle horn with one hand, the other held the damp material against her mouth and nose. *Where the hell is that stream?* she thought.

The land washed out in front of her eyes, washed out like a faded print, until all she could see was flash on flash of blue-white light.

Up another hill, then down, bracing with feet in stirrups; the mare's gait grew rougher... she was speeding up. Hoof-beats sounded beside her... the stallion. He was a black blur going by on her right side. She opened swollen eyes. At first it was difficult to focus on anything, then she squinted painfully and made out a blue-green line crawling at the bottom of a long slope. The mare twitched her head from side to side, pulling the reins loose from Aleytys's shaking fingers as she stretched out into an eager run. Aleytys hung on grimly, bobbing about in the saddle like a bundle of avrishum, her legs too tired and sore to have any grip left in them.

A sudden halt... belly banging into saddle horn, face into mane.

The mare was standing knee-deep in muddy water, her head buried up to the eyes in the tepid wetness. Aleytys worked her left leg up over the saddle and slid—fell really—into the stream. She didn't bother trying to stand, just collapsed flat out into the water.

She splashed the water over her face and into her hair until she was saturated, streams of water pouring down along the strands of hair and the folds of her abba. She sat up and shook the wet hair out of her face. "Ahai, Pari love, I think I'm going to live."

Both horses were having a little trouble drinking around their bits so she stripped the bridles off and tossed them up onto the bank. Then she loosened the cinches a little. She leaned against Mulak's side and watched the two horses sucking in water, frowning as some vague memories nudged at her about the problems caused by too much water after too much heat. She waded over to Pari, the soggy abba pulling heavily at her legs, threatening to trip her with every stride, further muddying the lazy flow of the water. "Out, Pari," she said, then she tugged at her mane, trying to pull her head up. Pari shook her head impatiently, splashing water all over Aleytys.

"Hai!" Aleytys backed up and plopped herself down on the bank. Taking firm hold of the two equine minds, she forced the horses out of the water. "Wait a little, mi-muklisha, then you can have some more." She smiled as the two horses began cropping at the tough springy grass, then looked around. The trees provided protection from the direct rays of the double sun, but did nothing to cut the stifling heat. Her sopping abba wasn't cool anymore but was more like a portable steam bath. She plucked disgustedly at the clinging material. "What a mess."

Struggling with the wet ties, she finally managed to wriggle out of the abba. Carrying it upstream, she sloshed it around in the water, then lifted the dripping garment and wrung it out. Above her head a low limb stretched out over the water as if made for a clothes line. She grinned and hung the abba over it. Then she stood up and stretched, feeling gloriously free as the feeble breeze played around her naked body.

When she got back downstream, the horses were still grazing peacefully at the thick clumps of grass. *Good*, she thought, *I won't take the packs off now. We can go farther after we rest a while. Ai-Aschla, I'm tired.*

Finding a flatfish spot thickly carpeted with grass, she stretched out on her stomach, resting her head on her crossed arms. It felt good to lie flat and let her aching muscles rest. She closed her eyes and slid down the long slope into sleep.

Deep in the darkness in her mind something stirred, expanded into a shimmering image something like a mirage. Gradually it steadied and the dreaming Aleytys recognized the tracker, crouching uncomfortably in the shade of a blanket tied to an ironwood, his horse kneeling close beside him barely inside the limits

of the shadow. The dreamer shuddered as she traced the dour fanatical lines of the tracker's face. As she watched he leaned from the shade and squinted thoughtfully at the suns. Working with neat, efficient movements that husbanded energy, he urged the horse onto its feet and began untying the blanket sunshade.

In her sleep the dreamer stirred and a mischievous smile spread over her face. As the tracker unhooked the waterbag and pulled the stopper loose, she insinuated sensor threads into the patient mind of the horse and spooked him into a panicky flight, leaving the startled tracker cursing furiously as he watched his mount disappear upslope along his backtrail.

Home, she breathed into the equine mind. *Home without stopping*. Chuckling happily, she let the scene dissolve and went deep into sleep.

4

The bottom of the huge red ball touched the mountain, then seemed to sit motionless while the sides squeezed out like a tomato being slowly squashed by an invisible foot. Hesh was still a double palm's width above the horizon, sitting like a belly dancer's navel jewel on Horli's middle. Aleytys pulled the mare to a halt and flexed her cramped legs.

"Three, four hours till dark," she murmured thoughtfully, easing back in the saddle. The mare shook her head briskly, making the bridle jangle. Leaning on the saddle horn, Aleytys eyed the narrow, deep river rushing past a few feet from Part's hooves. "Can't cross yet. Look at those clouds, muklis. It's a good thing it didn't rain the past three nights." She stood in the stirrups again and looked around. "Ai-Ascha, nothing but trees." With a sigh, she settled down again and sent the mare into a fast walk with a gentle nudge in her flanks.

"We need a roof of some kind over our heads, Pari, aziz-mi. I can't afford to get sick." Humming softly, she scratched her fingers along the base of the mare's mane.

The river gradually broadened as the slope of the land gentled, but there was still nothing visible but the same trees and tangled bushes, neither the thick-leaved horans nor the squat bushy bydarrakhi, just spear-straight ironwood and thick stands of mingled raushani and pricklebushes offering no shelter at all. Then the river curved and the mare followed around the bend.

They emerged from the trees into another of the soggy open meadows that dotted the banks of the river. She shifted in the saddle again, running her eyes around the clearing in a cursory, disinterested sweep. This time, though, she looked back quickly. Halfway under the trees on the far side of the meadow a brownish square object loomed out of the shadows. A cabin? She looked hastily around but saw no one. *Good*, she thought. She kned the mare toward the shaded shaggy edifice.

Halfway across the clearing she burst out laughing. "What an idiot." Pulling the mare to a stop, she sent her mind questing out, sniffing for intelligence. Nothing. With another laugh, she patted the mare on the neck. "Luck's really holding me." She stretched and yawned: "Come on, Pari, let's inspect our new home."

Sitting with hands crossed over the horn, she examined the cabin. It was constructed of peeled logs and roofed with shakes, heavy timbers hammered into shutters and door. Very neatly made, too, under the weathering and webbing of seasonal debris. Dry leaves snuggled in dusty heaps against the walls; spider

webs festooned the eaves and dripped over the shutters.

“Hmm.” She swung down and stepped cautiously across the mud to the door. “Ahai, I hate spiders.” She grabbed a handful of leaves and wiped the webs away from the door. “How do I get in? Oh. Yes.” She tugged at a braided thong dangling near the doorpost. With a hollow thud, a swoosh of dust-laden air, and a sepulchral *cre-eak*, the door swung open and she poked her head in.

The interior had a dank and musty smell. Even with the door open, little light got in because the window was tightly shuttered. She backed out and considered the window. “Open that and blow the dead air out. I wonder what that stink is. Hope I find something disgusting in there.” Using the palm of her hand as a hammer, she pounded the shutter bars out of the hooks and dragged the heavy shutters back. More dust splashed into her face, making her sneeze. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Ahai!” She waved her hand back and forth in front of her face. “If there’s a lot of sassha in there... the thought of being a meal a bite at a time for a pile of vermin...” She shuddered. After hooking the shutters open, she leaned through the gaping hole and peered inside. “Looks clean. Hmm.”

She walked into the cabin and stood in the middle of the single room, hands on hips, examining the place. The floor was constructed of carefully fitted planks, neatly level and joined so well that it was hard to tell where one plank stopped and another began. On the far wall shelves made of open latticework marched up to the roof. There was another window in the back wall directly opposite the one in the front. “That’s interesting. I wonder why...”

She moved over and sniffed at the lathwork. “Ahai! That’s where it comes from, yes.” Flicking a clump of short silky fur off a corner, she grinned. “Fur hunter’s hold. Talk about luck. If there’s a balance to things...” She bowed her head and made the shalikk to the Madar, then turned and leaned back, bracing her elbows against one of the shelves. “I’m going to have some bad, bad times ahead to make up for all this honey. Madar willing, I’ll survive...” She laughed and looked around again. “The owner of this little gem probably won’t be by here till Baligh at the, earliest. Ahai-mi, what it must be like when the hides are green!”

On the other side of the window a field-stone fireplace spread out across the wall. The inside was blackened with use, but the old ashes had been swept neatly out. Only a few of the ever-present spider webs and a lot of dust and a few skeleton leaves rested in the firehole. She pushed away from the drying racks and sauntered over to the other wall.

An open bunk bed with nothing on it but laced leather ropes woven in a taut webbing that creaked and screeched as she leaned on it was snuggled neatly in the far corner. She sat on the webbing, her knees hiking up as she sank with the elastic leather. “A place to sleep.” She wiggled on the sagging web and chuckled. “Softer than the rock I had for a bed yesterday.”

After lugging the pack sacks inside, she hung the saddles and other tack on the pegs that marched up the wall beside the bed. By this time the light inside was a dim red haze. Aleytys walked over to the doorway and glanced to the west. Hesh was gone completely and she could barely see any of Horli above the trees. *I’d better get in some wood*, she thought.

The last light was a fading fan of red thrust through a break in the heavy clouds when she dumped the final load of wood beside the fireplace and went outside again. Large drops of rain came plopping heavily down. “At least the horses are under a roof.” She chuckled. “Even a shed out back with a manger and all. This is a man who loves his comfort and not so bad a person; he thinks of his horses, too.” She sighed and stretched, letting the raindrops splash on her upturned face. “Talking to myself more and

more. Well, long as I don't begin answering... ahai!"

She slammed the shutters closed and shoved the bar back in place. Inside, she could scarcely see the packs sitting in the middle of the floor. After a few attempts accompanied by a lot of lurid language, she managed to light a candle stub. Planting it in the middle of the hearth, she leaned back, stretched, dragged her fingers through her hair, then scratched industriously. "Ai-mi, will I ever get used to riding?" She examined her fingernails. "And *Ineed* a bath."

After supper she sat cross-legged on a piece of tufan in front of the fireplace. The golden-red light played comfortably on her face while the wind howled around the corners of the cabin, though the storm had dwindled to a few scattered raindrops. She sighed with pleasure as a comfortable warm peace lapped around her. Leaning forward with her elbows resting on her knees, she stared into the flames until she sank into a doze.

The brightness spread and reached out, encompassing the two horses dozing behind the house... reached out... a tars walked the dark wetness of the forest, stalking a fral that sheltered in a raushani tangle... dark red blood-hunger... blind green panic... sliding on... warm sleep thoughts deep under earth... feel pull of cool and patient laughing water in deep-swift river... slow... slow... slow... slow... aeon-turning tree cycles... and threading through the whole a sense of watching, calm warm wisdom... guiding... nudging... watching over....

She became aware of herself as a separate self again. She was afloat in a drifting current of light, turning, rising, falling, immersed in liquid golden glow, then lifting out again... slow at first, then faster, sweeping toward a grouped pulsing brightness... coiling around....

A sharp crack... a small intense pain... jerked abruptly back to here-and-now, Aleytys looked down. A pinpoint of light burned on her knee, a spark smoldering in the abba cloth. With a quavery startled laugh, she flicked the spark back onto the stone and crushed the smolder out with her thumb. Then she stretched and yawned, scrunching around onto her side. Resting her hand on her arm, she stared once more into the fire.

Body warm and relaxed, comfortably tired, she watched pictures form and die liquidly across the coals. Her mind floated out again. The tars was feeding... a bright blue aura, shining killer glow. Nausea soured her mouth. Eyes closed, she moved restlessly on the tufan. *Animal, predator, true to its nature... man is a predator, too*, she thought uneasily. She merged deeper with the tars, savored the salty heat of the bloody chunks of meat... blazingly alive... stalking free and wild... tear, claw, chew, swallow... quivering chunks of bloody meat... juices coursing down an eager throat... kill... muscles moving in perfect harmony... aware... *aware* ... more than animal... less perhaps than man....

Aleytys shook herself free, a little ashamed, more than a little surprised at the wild places in herself. The fire was dying down to a mass of red-black coals. Using a branch as a poker, she spread these out and laid on a hefty load of wood. *That should last a while*, she thought.

She picked up the candle and started to turn away. The slanting shadows danced across the stone and dipped into incised lines as she turned her head, bringing out with startling vividness a series of words cut into the stone. She brought the candle closer and traced out the words.

"Talek-i-quleh. Talek's hold, vadi Kard. My landlord must belong to the Kard. That should mean..." She laughed and tossed her hair out of her face. "The river could be the Kard. Maybe. I don't know... anyway, I follow it. I'll probably get back to the trade road. Right direction, anyway." She rubbed her fingers over the stone. "Good with his hands." She stretched and yawned, then moved across the plank

floor to the bed.

Snug between the blankets, she closed her eyes, but her brain kept circling in the old tired circles, plotting. *The Kard*, she thought. *Vajd... no! Two weeks' ride along the trade road.... I've—if the dreams were true—I think they're true.... Vajd....* Once again she fled the ache of loneliness the name burned in her. *I don't have to worry or hurry now... no one on my backtrail... stay here a while—couldn't find a better place.... Chalak... Vari... Twanit... ah, I miss you all. Mother was wrong, I need people. Vajd, I need you. Ah, Madar... I keep... I need him. It's cold, cold, cold... alone....*

Finally sleep thickened like fog over her tired mind.

5

She stretched, emerging reluctantly from the comfortable darkness. Shoving the blankets back, she thrust her legs over the edge of the bed and pulled herself onto her feet. The cabin was still gloomy dark with the shutters closed and the door shut. Although a few stray drafts crept along the floor, the air was stuffy enough to give her a shadow of a headache.

Outside, Horli was up over the trees with Hesh still traveling across her belly. The morning was heating up quickly, but was still bearable, so she wandered out across the grass of the soggy meadow letting the black muck squish up between her toes, the morning breeze blow through her tangled hair and over her skin. She sat down on a wide flat rock the flood-waters of thaw had tumbled down from the mountains that cut a dark blue line across the sky in the west. The smooth green water eddied in a river pool, at one side of the boulder as it thrust out into the river. She edged forward and leaned over the pool, catching broken glimpses of herself in the slowly circling water. Her skin was several shades darker, a kind of golden brown like a ripe peach. *Nice*, she thought approvingly. *Too bad Vajd ...* She shied away from thinking of him and tugged nervously at her hair. The uniform redness was streaked with lighter patches and the tresses hung in lank oily strands. She grimaced. *Better hunt up some soapweed*, she thought. *I can't stand to feel so grimy .*

Resolutely banishing all troublesome thoughts from her mind, she wandered in and out of the trees, searching out useful herbs and generally getting to know the new neighborhood. She slipped into a clean abba as the suns climbed higher in the sky and sat down on a flat-topped boulder where she swished a few wild lettuce leaves in the water until they were crisp and cold and watched the river flow past her feet as she nibbled at them.

The silence around her was oppressive, a complete absence of human noise that kept jabbing at her, kept reminding her that she was alone, totally alone, for the first time in her life. She flicked the remains of the lettuce in the water and watched it float off. *Maybe... maybe if I stay here and let the fires burn down till... maybe I could go back*. She kicked at the water and dreamed until the suns got so hot she had to retreat.

Later that afternoon she scrubbed herself and did a wash, beating her abbas energetically against the rocks along the river bank, scrubbing at them with the remains of the soapweed she'd used on herself. With one thing and another she managed to pass the day without sinking too deeply in her growing depression. As the top of Horli slid behind the mountains, she called the horses back from their grazing and shut them into the crude stable behind the cabin. This night she didn't stay up in front of the dying fire but slipped between the blankets, determinedly banishing thought from her mind.

The next day was harder. Sleep eluded her far into the night.

The third day she wandered restlessly about in aimless circles, bathed twice, washed her hair again, mounted the stallion and rode him around and around the meadow to harden her thighs, shifted the tack around the walls, unpacked and repacked the pack sacks, and swept the cabin out with a twig broom. Late in the afternoon, she sat cross-legged and went through the breathing exercises Vajd had taught—not too successfully, but they brought a measure of calm to her jagged nerves.

A blackness prowled around the edges of her mind, increasing her nervousness.

That night she watched Hesh and Horli slide behind the mountains with a kind of quiet desperation. Reluctantly she pulled the door shut and dropped the bar with a solemn chunk into the slots. The fire spread a pleasant warmth and a soothing red-gold light through the room. She stretched out on the tufan and stared petulantly into the little tongues of fire that danced over the coals.

The blackness that had wandered at the edge of awareness all day prowled closer. There was a tars out there sniffing around. A little alarmed, she reached out cautiously and fingered his brain. Odd. There was curiosity there, a drive to know that was almost human... not instinctive like a smaller cat's, but purposeful, driven by self-conscious intelligence. He felt her. She was sure of it. He wasn't frightened, wasn't angry, just curious. There was a sense of a strong personality. She drowsed on the tufan and teased at his consciousness while she remembered what she'd read about the tars. It was not exactly reassuring.

The tars was a predator, a big catlike animal half the size of a horse, owning a long limber body that terminated in a whiplike tail. His muscles slipped beneath his short silky fur with powerful grace when he ran and he could outrun all land animals in his native mountains. His feet were toed with thick pads permitting a springy maneuverability, long leaps, and surefooted prancing from rock to rock. The front toes were longer, almost thick fingers, and he was remarkably dextrous with them... and strong—one blow from one of those forepaws with the claws unretracted could tear a man in half. She shuddered to think what he could do to her, but strangely enough she wasn't afraid; there was no menace in him for her. His head was triangular with powerful jaws and large round eyes that shone yellow in the daylight and a fierce green at night. Those eyes had three sets of eyelids that could be lowered individually or in combination for protection in widely varying conditions, so that he had the sensitivity needed for excellent night vision, yet could stand the searing light of the brightest summer day. His forehead bulged in a wide dome between tubular mobile ears, promising considerable development of the forebrain. According to the books, he was a formidable quarry it was far better to leave alone, since for every tars taken at least three hunters died.

He prowled around outside for a little longer, then slipped away to hunt. Aleytys sighed and crawled into bed, feeling, as she drifted into sleep, a little less lonely—as if she'd found a companion, maybe even a friend.

6

The hook with its fragment of worm flipped up and dropped into the water with a tiny plop where the current on the edge of the eddy caught it and danced it downstream. A slim shadow flashed from the eddy and leaped at the worm. As the fish took the bait, Aleytys set the hook with a swift jerk on the line. Flashing silver-copper in the ruddy morning light, it leaped out of the water, splashed back in a cascade

of crystal droplets, leaped again. The line swished through her fingers.

With a grin, she scrambled to her feet and caught the fish in midleap with a rapid twitch of the line, snapping it out over the bank. She pounced on the flapping fish but dropped it immediately, yelping as it slipped around in her clutching hands and poked needle-pointed fin spines into the soft flap of skin between her thumb and forefinger.

She knelt and thrust the hand into the water, then examined it after the sting had been chilled away. A series of blue-purple punctures marched along the inner edge of her palm, stopping just below the first knuckle of her forefinger. She sucked at the punctures until she could taste the faint saltiness of blood. The stiffness went away and she closed her hand into a fist, laughing triumphantly.

The fish was still flapping weakly. Wrinkling her nose, Aleytys picked it up, fingers pinched together just below the vein-thin tail. She worked the hook out of its mouth, humming cheerfully, even chanting a little song as she worked. "Da da dada dee da da, pretty little devil." She tossed the hook away and slipped the pin through its gills, then dropped the string of fish back in the water.

On the rock again she worked another worm half onto the hook and dropped it back into the water. She flipped her hair out of her face and lay back on the warm granite. Her eyes half closed in lazy contentment, she scratched the beast in the ribs, drawing a vibrating rumble-bumble that bounced her head up and down, sending little ripples of laughter exploding through her. After a while the tars yawned widely and stretched out, belly up, so she could rub his stomach. He yawned again, rumbled with deep pleasure, and waved his feet in the air as she dug her fingers through the shaggy fur running down the center of his stomach. She turned her head and stared into a gaping red cavern ringed with bone-white horrendous fangs. Chuckling, she batted him in the jaw with the back of her hand. "Close your mouth, Daimon, before you scare me to death."

A tug on the fishline brought her head around. Sliding over to the edge of the rock, she peered into the water. Another fish was nibbling at the worm. As she tucked straying ends of hair behind her ears, the fish darted forward and struck at the hook. "Ah! This one's yours, Daimon, love." She played the fish for a moment, then tricked it out of the water.

When she had the hook free, she tossed the fish to the tars. He whipped up his head and caught it. With a fast double crunch, it disappeared and he dropped back into a lazy pool of black fur.

Later, as Horli slid down the arch of the sky and high heat waned, Aleytys sat up on the bunk and yawned. Although every door and window in the cabin stood open, the air was thick and hot so that she felt sticky with sweat and her head ached dully from a too-heavy sleep. Sighing, she rubbed her eyes and brushed damp strings of hair off her forehead. "I'm going to have to stop sleeping so much," she muttered. "I should be doing my exercises, doing more riding, or I'll end up in the same shape as when I started." She sighed again and swung her legs over the edge of the bunk.

A scrabbling sound at the door shot adrenaline through her heavy body, sending her leaping for the far window. A triangular black head thrust through the doorway and rumbled in a kind of tentative question.

"Daimon." She padded over to him. "You almost scared me white-haired." She stopped in front of him, hands on hips. "You never came in the house before, mi-muklis. Now what could you want, I wonder?"

Treading warily, the tars slipped around her, the tips of his retracted claws clicking daintily on the plank floor. He came up behind her and butted his head against her legs. She stumbled forward a few steps, nearly falling to her knees. He butted against her again, moving her a few steps farther toward the door.

“Hai, what...” She heard the deep rumble he made when he was pleased about something. She reached around and put her hand on his wide head. “Wait a minute, abru sar. I don’t grow my own fur like you.” She pointed to the peg where her abba was hanging. “I’ve had enough sun on my skin today.” She scratched behind his ears, then edged quickly past him. The tars grunted but let her go.

As she wrapped the abba around her and tied the fastenings, she frowned thoughtfully at him. “Animal? Just what else are you, my handsome friend?” She smoothed the material down over her body. “Haia, let’s go.”

He led her into the forest on a winding, twisting path through the thickets of sinaubar, wild plum, and badmaha, around the huge ironwoods, past daunting tangles of prickly-bush and raushani, until she was thoroughly lost in the dim green twilight. She watched with envy as he moved gracefully through malicious natural obstacles that seemed to take delight in making her feel stumble-footed and moronic. Thorny vines caught at her abba, wrapped around her ankles, thrust claws into her hair while a small cut over her left eye opened by a snagging creeper itched furiously. She was sweating profusely, her eyes were watering, her nose running. It was a humbling experience.

Every few strides the tars would turn around to make sure she was still following and his mouth would open in what she would swear was a grin: But the intense need to know, which was one of the driving forces in her own life, she shared with him. Totally dissimilar from the tars in body and habit, she found this strange likeness made them friends in a way no human had ever been with her. In her loneliness Aleytys sometimes wondered if she were fooling herself, creating something that was not there to save her sanity; but then would come that mind-touch, the warm sharing partnership, and her questions would vanish.

The tars turned across the path in front of her. She unhooked the last creeper and looked around. Behind a fringe of raushani a wall of gray-green-amber stone rose up and up until it lost itself in the canopy of leaves. She used the end of her sleeve to wipe the sweat and dust from her face and settled on an ironwood root, leaning back against the trunk, rather glad for the rest.

The tars wiggled his ears at her and rumbled pleasantly. Then he slipped like a black shadow into the tall ferns and grasses between the clumps of raushani. Still intensely curious, she kept a tendril of her mind in touch with him, following him into the cliff. She chuckled, sensing the mewling kits in the blackness of the lair. Just for this moment she was completely happy. *He brought me to see his family*, she thought. Sliding the hood back, she let the breeze blow through her hair, contentment flowing like a warm river through her tired body.

After a short wait the tars came back. He stood impatiently in front of her, ears twitching, body switching from side to side, while she scrambled to her feet and smoothed the abba over her body. She could have sworn he was anxious for her to present her best appearance. He gave a satisfied purring sound, turned, looked back over his shoulder, then walked away a few steps. Aleytys took a tentative step forward and his purr deepened with approval. Aleytys followed him through the bracken into a slit in the rock.

Since the ceiling barely cleared the tars’s head she walked along stooped over uncomfortably until the crack widened into a bubble-shaped cavern. Light filtered in through a few smaller cracks penetrating the roof from outside. In the dim twilight Aleytys could see a female tars lying on her side with three minute bundles of fur nuzzling at her nipples. The female growled and Daimon walked over to her. He cuffed her lightly.

Aleytys chuckled. “They’re very nice babies, Daimon. I can see why you’re proud of them.” She put approval warm in her voice. “I’m delighted that you brought me to meet your family, abruya ’hiaivna.” She went on rambling, putting approval and appreciation into the words, reinforcing this with the mind-touch. She knelt on the cave floor for about a half hour, telling the two tarsha about herself, talking just to be talking. Somehow it helped to say these things, although the listeners wouldn’t—couldn’t—understand. Big Daimon lay next to his mate, yawning now and then, licking her face and biting lovingly at her neck.

Finally his courtesy wore thin as Aleytys kept a tactful distance between herself and the kits. He picked up one of them by the scruff of its neck and dropped it into her lap. The baby started to howl and the female tried desperately to struggle to her feet.

For the first time Aleytys realized that something had happened to the mother’s hind quarters. She dragged her back legs and her warning growl was ragged with pain. Hastily Aleytys touched her frantic mind and soothed her, then quieted the kit so its wailing wouldn’t disturb the injured female. She began stroking the baby, rubbing it behind the ears and under the diminutive chin, then running her hands over the sensitive ribs. The little one began to purr in a tiny falsetto reflection of Daimon’s adult rumble.

“Mm. . . feels good, doesn’t it, little mi-muklis, aziz-mi. You’re a darling, aren’t you? Wish I could take you home and keep you.” She laughed aloud. “Scare anyone white-haired who saw you, that’s sure.” She sobered and looked at the female again. She was very thin, almost gaunt. . . little more than matted fur over big bones. As she rubbed her fingers over the kit, Aleytys felt too many bones. “So thin, poor baby.”

She probed, reaching out with her new senses. There was hunger in the female, deep, gnawing hunger. And the babies were only half fed. She cuddled the kit in her arms and hobbled on her knees to the mother, moving very slowly, very carefully. Putting the kit down, she reached out a hand and rested it, very lightly, on the female’s heaving ribs. “What’s wrong, abruya ’hiaivna? Let me see.”

She moved her hand onto the front shoulder of the injured tars. The bones felt terribly sharp under her fingers. “He brings you food, I’m sure. But not enough? Or maybe something’s wrong with your stomach. . . easy. . . easy, mi-muklis, aziz-mi. . . I want to help. . . I don’t want to hurt you.”

The female moved uneasily under her hand and whimpered with fear. Daimon licked her face and turned his huge head helplessly to Aleytys. She could feel the overwhelming need pouring out of him. He whined briefly, begging her to do something, anything, his need settling down around her like a black fog. With the mind-touch she gave him answer, feeling of peace, feeling of *yes, I know*, feeling of trust and friendship. He calmed. The female seemed calmer too.

Aleytys ran her hands slowly down her backbone. Near the haunches her fingers touched a bump and the female, gave a sharp little moan. Daimon flowed up onto his feet, growling. Hastily Aleytys soothed him, turned off his anger. He settled back, ears twitching constantly.

“Hai, Daimon, we’ve found where it hurts.” She brought her fingers very gently down and explored the lump. It centered about the spine and felt hard and hot under her fingers. She chewed on her lip. “That caravaner. . . he said he could cure. I wonder. . . Mother, I will bless you if. . . She began touching the lump with her mind, gently pressing her hands around it. Her breath came in short sharp pants and she could feel her face heating as if with a bad case of sunburn.

Time slowed. . . power flowed out of her like hot lava, searing her fingertips, her palms. She trembled. It was a burning ache that tore at her soul. . . torment. . . the flow increased to a roaring flood. For an

eternity she sat frozen to the tars. When finally she took her hands away, her bones creaked like old leather. Eyes watering, she looked down. The lump was gone and with it the aura of pain. She sighed with relief and wonder. Staggering a little, she stood and moved back a few steps until she could lean on the sidewall. Now. Stand up, Daimonsha. Stand up, aziz-mi.”

She gave the female a gentle nudge with her mind, The tars straggled to her feet, falling once, finally standing on four feet that all worked, gaunt sides moving visibly as she panted in her hunger-born weakness. A deep sound rambled in Daimon’s throat. He licked Aleytys’s hands with his long rough tongue. She dropped to her knees and hugged him affectionately, reveling in the flood of warmth—perhaps even love—pouring out of him.

She used him as a brace and pushed back onto her feet.

“Ai-Aschla, I’m destroyed. Daimon muklis-mi, take me home. I’m going to sleep at least a week.”

It was full dark outside. She straightened her aching back and smiled into the star-burning sky. Resting her hand on the tars’s shoulder, she said softly, “Sometimes, my friend, it’s very good to be alive.” She sighed, looking with distaste at the deep shadow under the trees. “Come on, aziz-mi, take me home.”

At the edge of the clearing she hugged him briefly and let him go back to his mate. Tiredly she walked across the meadow, feet stumbling now and then as though strands of grass slid between her toes. Her mind drifted in a haze of wonder and happiness. As she reached the door, she shoved the hood off her head and started undoing the fastenings with one hand as she pulled the door open with the other, then she halted, shock thrumming through her.

A roaring fire leaped in the fireplace and a man stood leaning loosely against the stone.

She eyed him wearily. “Who are you?” As she spoke she sent her mind searching for the tars.

“I’m the one should be asking that.” He moved out of the shadow so she could see his face clearly. Imperceptibly she relaxed and let the mind-search lapse. He was a stranger.

“Why?” she asked coolly.

“My house.” He jerked his head toward the name carved in stone. “Made with these hands.”

“But... you’re a fur trapper. What are you doing here now?”

He laughed. “You’re scolding me?” He took a step toward her. “Got bored with the vadi. Decided to get some wild meat.” He edged closer to her. There was a wide grin on his tanned face and an amused twinkle in his chahi-colored eyes.

Aleytys rubbed two fingers over the hollow at her temple. “The cabin was empty. I didn’t expect you.”

“Disappointed?” He laughed, his teeth very white in his sunburned face. “I’m not, love. I don’t usually catch wild sabbiyeh in my nets.”

She felt a stirring in her loins; he was close, very male, very disturbing, and after the emotional session with the tars, she was very susceptible. She stared uneasily at him. “Catch...”

With a chuckle, he swung her off her feet and flung her over his shoulder with a force that jammed the

breath out of her body. Then she was tossed down on the bed.

Confused and a little frightened, wanting and reluctant, having known only one man in her life, Aleytys lay and looked up at him. He reached out and touched her hair with gentle, caressing fingers. "Soft," he murmured. "Soft fire..." His hand traveled her cheek, leaving a trail of heat behind it, slid over her shoulder, and pulled at the fastening of the abba.

Aleytys laid trembling fingers over his.

"No?" he said softly. He bent and kissed her fingers. Her hand involuntarily slid behind his head and stroked the soft short curls at the nape of his neck. "No?" His breath was hot on her throat, lips tickling as he repeated the short syllable. The need, the loneliness, the trailing remnants of the day's miracle, combined into a roaring fire inside her.

When he finished, he rolled off her and stood up, pulling his abba back together. With a grin, he wiped the blood from his neck where her nails had clawed him. "Little tars," he said affectionately.

She growled low in her throat and grinned back at him. Sitting up, she let the abba fall in careless folds around her legs. She stretched and groaned, tired beyond any ordinary tiredness, but at the same time content, at peace with herself and her world. She lay back and watched as Talek pulled a bubbling pot off the fire and brought her a cupful of chahi. She raised up on an elbow and swirled the steaming liquid around in her cup. Then she looked at Talek. "Your eyes are the color of chahi," she murmured.

"Hai!" He sat beside her as she moved her body back to give him room. He leaned over and brushed the hair back from her face. "I like the way you bless the Madar, aziz-mi."

She chuckled. Catching his hand, she pressed her lips against the palm briefly, then let it wander on, stroking and caressing her. The chahi left a pool of warmth in her middle and she drifted into a comfortable half-doze. "How long've you been out from the Kard?" she murmured hazily, wondering if news of the Raqsidan's troubles had reached that far as yet. *Vajd*, she thought, *maybe he knows something of him, my love, my love*. She murmured the last two words aloud and Talek chuckled, taking them as a compliment to himself.

"Ten days," he said after a while. "Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered how long it'd take to get to the trade road from here."

"Ten days'd do it, walking, faster, if you've got horses."

"Horses!" She jerked upright, spilling him off the cot with the vigor of her movements. "Damn." She pattered to the door and thrust her head out. *Mulak, Pari*, she called with the mind-touch, *come, come, come*. For a moment there was silence, then she heard the dull thudding of their hooves as they came across the meadow toward the cabin. Mulak thrust his delicate head against her shoulder. "Sorry, my friend, forgot about you two. Hey, Pari... I'm glad to see you intact." She stroked the mare's quivering nose. "Come, let's get the both of you settled for the night."

When she came back into the cabin, Talek had an odd look on his face. "Well," she demanded, setting hands on hips and staring him down.

"The bad-luck piece from the Raqsidan," he said calmly.

Startled, Aleytys walked over and sat down beside him. “What do you know about me?”

Talek caught hold of her head and turned her face up so he could look at her. With a sudden grin, he traced the outline of her lips with a long forefinger, then bent over and kissed her, a long, slow exploratory kiss that left her breathless and limp, then he lay back on the bed and pulled her down on top of him. “Had some visitors from the Raqsidan before I left.” He stopped provocatively and his bony mobile face lit up with a mischievous grin.

“Well?”

He sobered abruptly. “You know what happened to your lover?”

“Ahai!” She tried to push away from him but he held her to his chest.

“Now just relax, little tars.” He ran his hands slowly up and down her back until he’d worked the tension out of her muscles. “They found out. Your Sha’ir read the smoke, rounded up a hairy bunch of fanatics, and took him from the Mari’fat. Funny thing, they’d have fought for him, but he said not and went.”

Tears flowed slowly from her eyes. She clenched her hands into fists until blood ran as her fingernails cut into her flesh. “He knew... he knew when he sent me away... ah, Madar... ai-Aschala....” She broke into wild sobs.

“Now, don’t do that. Sure he knew. I don’t go for that bloody stuff myself, but trust a fanatic to forget he’s human—Aschla’s tits, girl, he couldn’t help it. Look at me, suspecting who you were all the time—I mean, what other woman’d be wandering around out here with hair like yours?—and I had to have a go at you.” He laughed nervously and shook her until she hiccupped and sniffed, blinking the flooding tears out of her eyes.

Talek shook his head. An amused lilt came into his voice. “Knowing you were the blackest kind of bad luck. Ah, well, I’ve had bad luck and I’ve had good and neither one lasted long enough to dry spit. His didn’t last long either.”

“Oh?” She stared blurrily at him.

“Aye, went under the knife... “

“Knife!” she shrieked. She jerked away and turned her head wildly around the room as if searching for answers in the dark corners.

“Now, little tars, just relax. I told you his bad luck didn’t last long.”

“He’s dead.”

“No, of course not. Just blind. He’s doing fine right now.”

“Blind?” She went limp. He pulled her back down and rubbed his big hands comfortingly over her shaking body. “Blind?”

“Yeah. You’ve got the worst bunch of herdsfolk I ever heard of there in the Raqsidan. They’ve a sweet little trick they call the Madrash alameh. Cut a man to pieces a slice at a time. Way I heard it, blind, castrate, cut off hands, feet, and so on; take off a piece here and there till the poor nit just gives up and

dies.” He grimaced at the grisly picture his imagination presented to him.

“Vaji...” Aleytys whispered the name. Horror dried the tears away and she lay and shuddered over and over in endless spasms.

“Now, witch, you keep forgetting. I told you he’s all right. No need to go on like that.” He sat up and cradled her in his arms, rocking her like a baby. “Poor little sabbiya, no, he’s still a man and still very much alive. Getting along fine in the Kard. A dream-singer don’t have to see. He’s almost good as new.”

She sighed and collapsed against him, vaguely glad to feel his strong body close to hers. “How...” she murmured, curiosity beginning to overpower the chaotic emotions seething inside her. “How did he get away?”

He patted her shoulder and rubbed her back, his hands warm and alive. “That’s a good girl.” Laying back on the bed, her body resting flaccidly on top of him, he spoke softly. “A cousin of yours, little girl with a snub nose, figured she wouldn’t stand for that. Good blood in your family, though it seems to have skipped some of the men. She worked on some other character and together they sneaked the singer away. She brought the blind man to the Kard a couple days before I left. Got there just ahead of the herdsmen chasing her and asked for sanctuary. Mightn’t have got it—we aren’t a people to mix in others’ business—but the herdsmen tried to take him without asking. Well, we couldn’t have that. Besides, our own singer was getting senile.”

“Then he’s alive and doing well.” Aleytys felt wrung out, limp with relief.

“Right. He’s got a good life ahead of him. Him and the little girl set up house, seem to be getting on fine. They make a good pair. And the mardha Kard were taking good care of him. Like to see a bunch of little dream-singers soon as can be. Damn if I don’t envy him a little.”

A brief flash of jealousy hot as hellfire ripped through Aleytys. For a time-stopped instant she wanted to kill Vajd, tear him to bloody quivering shreds, then the feeling washed away, leaving her weak and sick. *At least he is alive... and Vari... that’s the end of that dream.... I can’t go back now.... I don’t want to go back.... Ah, mi-Vadj....* “I’m glad,” she said hoarsely. “They’re the two best people in all the world.” Taking a deep breath, she spoke softly into the heart beating under her ear. “I’d like to see them both. Will you take me?”

He chuckled. She could hear the rumble in his chest. His hands went on stroking her hair. “Not a chance, little tars. I’d have to be out of my head to bring you into my vadi. The luck you carry around’s too bad for me. Got two people killed....”

“Two? Killed?” She tipped her head back and stared into his smiling face.

“The Sha’ir. And a boy from the caravans. And it ruined the trading for maybe a long time in the Raqsidan. I doubt any bunch of traders is going to camp there a good long while after this. And it lost a good man his eyes and banished a fine girl. Another thing. Your clan head.”

“Azdar?”

“Had a stroke. Can’t move, can’t talk, more like a vegetable than a man.”

“Good!” she said fiercely.

“Well.” Amusement twinkled in his voice. “Can’t see bringing that kind of luck home with me.”

She dropped her head with a weary sigh. “It was just a thought. Never mind.” She yawned. “Ahai, I’m tired... so tired.”

He chuckled again, the sound a little unsteady as his breathing deepened. “Not yet, red witch, you owe me some more rent.”

She ran her thumb across his ribs. “Think you can collect?”

“Know I can.”

7

Aleytys’s eyes popped open. She lay wondering what had wakened her, then surrendered to the pleasant lassitude glowing through her aching, hard-used body. *Well and truly paid*, she thought. She touched her tender breasts and a warmth began building again inside her. She looked around for Talek.

Her eyes widened as she saw the fat pack sacks sitting in the middle of the floor. She turned her head. The wall pegs were empty. A scraping sound came from the door. She lay back and closed her eyes, slowed her breathing.

Talek slipped inside. After a hasty glance at her, he picked up one of the pack sacks and hauled it outside. She lay and watched as he cleared the place. After he pulled the door shut behind him, she dived out of the bed and scrambled through the back window.

Standing behind one of the ironwoods, she watched him roping the packs on Pari’s back. She shook her head ruefully. “He’s impossible,” she breathed. Such a cheerful, unrepentant, and unblushing rogue. *It’s hard*, she thought, *to hate a man who laughs at himself and the rest of the world*.

As she watched him, her nipples hardened. She rubbed her hands over her breasts. “Damn him,” she muttered. “I wish he hadn’t got me all stirred up... no.” She sighed. “No, I’d do it again in a minute.” She peered around the tree again. He was tying the last knots. “What am I thinking... I better get busy or that charming rogue will steal everything I’ve got.”

She sent her mind questing. The tars was asleep in the den, but responded to her urgent call, flying through the forest like a black wind. He came to her and rubbed his side against her, rumbling softly in his giant-sized version of a contented purr. She peered around the tree again.

Talek was in the saddle, pulling on the lead rope. Aleytys stepped out of the wood, the tars beside her. “Talek,” she called, her voice fluting through the quiet morning air.

He looked around and saw a slender golden figure with a ruffled silky mane blowing in the morning breeze and shining like fire against the dark background of the trees. When he caught sight of the tars walking loose at her side, he gulped and lifted the reins.

“If you try to run,” she called, “I’ll send Daimon after you. He’s no retriever and would make a bloody mess of you.”

Talek grinned weakly and shook his head. "Never thought I'd see a tame tars."

Aleytys rested her hand on the beast's shoulder. Eyes glinting in amusement, she said softly, "Tame? Don't fool yourself, hunter." She walked quietly toward him, sending the horses into an uneasy dance as the predator neared them. Talek turned pale. "Now," she said crisply. "Get down. Unpack my things and take them back into the cabin. Strip the horses and let them loose." She scratched the tars around his ears and smiled dreamily at his answering purr.

Shrugging, Talek slid out of the saddle. "Easy come, easy go." With a cheerful smile on his tanned face, he unroped the packs and carried them toward the cabin.

"Where's your own mount?" she asked abruptly, frowning around at the empty meadow.

He lifted a foot and swung it in a graceful arc. "Walking on it, bint Horli."

She chuckled involuntarily, startled at being called daughter of the sun. "Your pack?"

He hefted the two packs. "Tied up with these."

"You may take your own things out."

His eyebrows flicked sardonically, up, then down. "Yes, abruya sabbiya, right abruya sabbiya, anything you say."

She suppressed a grin as he disappeared into the cabin. In a minute he was out again, slipping his arms into the loops of a backpack. He stopped a short distance from her, hands on hips. "All right, abruya sabbiya, what now?"

The tars gave a deep rumble at the sound of his voice. He slanted a wary glance at the beast. "Am I breakfast for that handsome creature?"

"Talek, you're... you're... I never knew men like you existed." Aleytys laughed, then sighed. "I almost hated to stop you."

He sighed. "Ah, sweet witch, it's a terrible old world after all; bad enough to be a rogue, but to be an unsuccessful one!" He flashed an unrepentant grin at her.

She shook her head and returned his smile. "Let me tell you something," she said lightly. "I wouldn't trust you. But I like you. I really like you. And not just for how you pleased me last night. All the bad men I knew before were so self-righteous that it lifts my heart to meet one who takes neither himself nor anything else so seriously." She held out her hand.

"I thank you, my dear, but I'll not come a step closer to your friend there." He waved an expressive hand at the tars. "I doubt he's had breakfast yet. There's a wishful, hungry look in those big eyes of his."

She laughed and scratched the tars on the side of his jaw. He opened his mouth wide and grinned at her. At the sight of those awesome teeth, Talek paled again and swallowed hastily.

"Don't worry."

"Hai. You can say that."

Aleytys sent her scratching fingers under Daimon's chin. "Just keep an eye on his tail. When a dog waves his, that means he's friendly." She moved her hand down the tars's back, scratching vigorously at the lumps of his vertebrae. "When Daimon gives a twitch to his, it means he's about to take a bite out of something." She went on exploring his fur with busy fingers until his eyes narrowed to lazy slits and his purring escalated to a rumbling roar.

"Just like an overgrown gurb," Talek said, shaking his head, but he was quite careful not to move from where he was standing.

Aleytys looked up. "Speaking about breakfast, I'm afraid you'll have to go without yours." She chuckled. "But you were about to, anyway, weren't you?"

He whipped up an eyebrow, flashed his teeth at her, and started away across the meadow.

Aleytys watched him a minute, then called, "Talek."

He turned. "What now, my dear?"

"I don't care what you do, but I won't want you around here the next day or so. I'll send Daimon hunting through the trees every day. He won't be polite if he meets you."

"I believe you," Talek said dryly, eyeing the beast.

"I don't care who you tell about me. It'd be nice if you let Vajd and Zavar know I'm alive and well." She rubbed her nose. "Might let them know about Daimon, too."

"Sure," he said. "Let him see how well off he is with a nice ordinary sabbiya for consort." He grinned impudently at her.

"A'fi!" She frowned horribly at him, then went on with amusement bubbling through the words. "Anyone else you tell, be sure you let them know about my little friend. Or you're likely to have their blood on your hands." She smiled. "Just think what it'll do for your reputation. You had the bad-luck witch of the Raqsidan and lived to tell about it."

"And a pleasure it was, too." He tilted his head to one side and examined her body with an appreciative glint in his amber-brown eyes. "You sure you wouldn't like to continue the experiment? I wouldn't mind hanging around a few days."

"Don't press your luck, hunter."

He gave an exaggerated sigh. "Ah, well, I can dream. When may I be allowed back? It is my house, after all."

"I'll be gone in a week; after that, feel free."

"The Madar bless you, little tars," he said, suddenly serious. He wheeled and started for the trees again. At the edge of the meadow he stopped and waved to her.

Smiling, she waved back.

Two arrows snapped out of the trees and thumped into his chest. A third cut past his neck, pulling after it a spray of blood. With a ludicrous expression of astonishment on his face, he toppled to the ground.

Aleytys watched frozen with horror. She wheeled to face the trees on the other side. A herdsman rode from the shadow, a crossbow pointed at her breast. The tracker. She gasped and jerked out of her paralysis, slamming her hand on the tars's shoulder. "Go," she shrieked. "Kill! Kill that—"

Daimon leaped forward, covering the space between him and the herdsman with two great bounds, pausing almost in midleap to snap a crossbow quarrel in half. Landing beside the panicking horse, he swiped at the tracker, tearing him into bloody shreds with a double blow from his razor-sharp claws. Ignoring the ragged mass that had been a man, he trotted contentedly back to Aleytys.

She bent over Talek. He was just barely alive, but life was rapidly flowing away. Blood welled out of his neck and frothy red bubbles piled and popped around the quivering shafts in his chest as he struggled to breathe. He smiled at her, a flicker of his lips. A trickle of blood slid out the corner of his mouth. His lips moved.

She bent down. "Bad... luck—" The thready whisper faded. She leaned closer as his lips worked again. "... worth it." His eyes closed and he went limp.

Aleytys gasped. She pressed her hands down over the spurting wound in his neck, cursing her stupidity as she let the healing force tear out of her. The blood seeped through her fingers, then the flow lessened and finally halted. She breathed more easily for a minute, before she looked at his face. His mouth hung open, his eyes were rolled back, the whites gleaming dully. A sob tore from her throat. "No!" she whispered.

She pressed one hand around the arrow in his chest and pulled it out, then the other. Hastily she pressed both hands over the wounds. "Come on," she sobbed. "Live, Talek. Live, man. Ahai, abruya Madar..." She probed into him deeper and deeper, seeking some remnant of life-force to foster and only gave up when she felt his presence flaking away as his brain cells died.

Rocking back on her heels, she stared at the body, dazed and hurting. "Ah, Madar, why?" Tears welled up in her eyes and began dripping down her face. "Why...?" She wrapped her arms around her legs and hid her face against her knees as helpless sobs racked her body. Why...?

8

Aleytys turned and looked back. The ache inside her stabbed bitterly as she watched the smoke from Talek's cabin-funeral pyre rising in a black column that bisected the red half-circle that Horli was thrusting above the line of trees. Aleytys smiled through her tears as Daimon sensed her unhappiness and rubbed comfortingly against her side. "At least I still have you, my friend. For a little..." She sighed, then mounted the mare and started riding upstream, following the river to the trade road.

The days melted one into another. There was no hurry now. The last pursuer was really off her trail this time so she felt little pressure to get on with the long trek ahead of her. Thinking was so painful that she refused to think, keeping her hands busy and letting her mind sink into a thick lethargy.

On the fifth day, though, she could no longer ignore Daimon's uneasiness. With a wrench that left her torn inside she sent him back to his family. For a long while she kept touch with him as he trotted in

fearless majesty through the trees. Then the touch faded and she was alone.

9

Aleytys watched dreamily as the edge of the sunlight ate into the shadow beside her big toe. She yawned and turned over on her stomach, moving her feet farther away from the sun. The tufan sheet wrinkled under her so she humped up and spread it out again, settling back with a sigh of contentment. Over her head the solitary horan thrust its shining head into the sky and threw its thick shade across her body. She reached out and ran her fingers affectionately over the rough silvery bark. The horan was in its brightest midday phase, glittering like a jewel in the middle of the browns and greens of the surrounding trees.

She coughed and spit out the phlegm blocking her throat, then rubbed her clogged nose, wincing as she touched the raw flesh. In the breaking cold her eyes felt stiff and sore, her bones ached, and her head felt as if it were stuffed with raw avrishum. “What a miserable time to have this happen,” she muttered. Dropping her clean damp head on her crossed arms, she stretched out and let tiredness flow over her. Gradually, as her top nostril drained so she could breathe, she drifted off to sleep, her head nestling in among the horan roots, more content today somehow, with the horrors of the past fading into washed-out images on the backdrop of her consciousness.

A burning pain snatched her awake some time later. She jerked her foot out of the searing light of Hesh. With a sigh, she sat up and looked to the west. Horli’s edge was brushing the gray line of the mountaintop, but Hesh was still high. The afternoon was clear and pleasant, with a brisk breeze stirring the hot air.

Suddenly Aleytys shivered. She curled up against the horan for comfort and searched the small clearing with her eyes. There was a dead spot around her, a feeling of foreboding she couldn’t explain, like black wings hovering in threat over her head. Absently running her hand over her sore foot, she scanned the empty sky, then traversed the clearing again. Even the horses were invisible, sheltering under the trees, though she could feel them off to one side—uneasy too, restless, not cropping grass, standing still, heads twisting about, ears flicking nervously back and forth. Aleytys probed further, feeling with her emphatic sense for sign of other life or other cause of the oppression in her soul. Nothing. Just the peculiar image in her head of horrible black wings beating nearer.

The man walked out from under the trees and stopped a few paces away, looking at her. Aleytys relaxed as she recognized him. “Tarnsian,” she exclaimed, relief making her voice a little more welcoming than it might have been. “Give me news about the vadis. I haven’t even seen a person, let alone talked with one, for over two months. Caravaner, am I glad to see you!” She sat up and thrust her arms into the sleeves of the abba she had pulled over her. As she tied the ties she went on. “Do tell me what’s happening in the valleys. Have you tried protecting yourself as I showed you? You look different.”

Her voice slowly died as he stood there in stolid silence, cold black eyes fixed on her. Smothering force flowed out from him, driving her back against the trunk of the horan. “What’re you doing, caravaner?” she said hoarsely, rubbing the back of her hand over her forehead. “Leave off, will you?”

Blackness beat at her. She froze against the tree, her arms and legs congealing into helpless lumps. Belatedly she fought back, but it was like battering smoke. Blackness blanketed her, smothered her, she couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t move. Thought flowed slower in her mind, the words and images growing sticky so that they were increasingly harder to shift, to string together. Blackness swirled until she tumbled over, falling down into the swirling smoke.

An unknown span of time later she blinked her eyes open. Flat on her back in the grass, she could see Horli half gone behind the mountains with Hesh, a finger-width north of her, touching the horizon line. *I've been out a long time*, she thought. *What happened ... ?*

Panic washed through her. She struggled to sit up and discovered that her hands were tied behind her, feet tied too. Hobbled like a calf for slaughter. Pale-faced and shaking, she tugged wildly at the ropes, but the caravaner knew his knots too well.

After tipping over twice, she rolled onto her knees and looked around. Her pack was roped on Mulak's back and he was tied beside Pari to a young bydarrakh. Several other horses stood dejectedly beside them. Tarnsian walked around the stallion, trying the ropes holding the pack to see if they were firmly in place.

Aleytys shook her head tentatively, trying to clear away the cottony feel that didn't come from her cold. She reached out for the animal minds and nearly plunged back into shuddering panic when she found herself locked inside her own skull, the shock sending her heart hammering against her ribs. With tears of frustration and fear flooding her eyes she panted, struggling with the ropes on her arms—pulling, tugging at them, scraping the skin from her wrists until the blood ran.

Her nose dripped, her upper lip was sore and crackling, her mouth dry and leathery from the leaching air passing through on its way to her laboring lungs. The dull misery of her head, oddly enough, cut through the panic, steadying her.

She made a great effort and wiped her nose on her shoulder, spit out some of the obstructing mucus, and tossed her hair out of her eyes, waiting in grim silence for Tarnsian to tell her what he wanted.

Arms swinging arrogantly, a satiated smile curling his lips, Tarnsian sauntered over to her. He bent down and checked the ropes on her wrists, pinching the raw flesh with a shrill giggle. The high-pitched sound woke a cold, hard terror in the pit of her stomach. She licked her lips and twisted her head around so she could see him. "Why, Tarnsian? I never hurt you. Why?"

Without answering her, he seized her around the waist and grunted her up onto his shoulder. Stumping heavily through the sun-bleached grass, he carted her to the mare and slid her over the animal's back until she lay atop her, legs on one side, head and arms dangling on the other.

She tried a few delicate probes at his mind, trying to worm her way through the flannel muffling her own. Again the image of black wings fluttered at the edge of her bound-in awareness. He laughed and slapped her buttocks. "No use, bitch. I know too much."

Her nose began to clog up again. Opening her mouth, she gasped for air. In seconds her whole head was stuffed until it felt like solid bone. "Tars'hn," she blurted. "C-can't brea—"

Startled and annoyed, he circled the mare and wrapped his hand in her hair, jerking her head up so he could see her flushed, congested face. At the sight of her distress he gave an irritated exclamation and eased her off onto the ground. Straightening, he stood back and glared at her. "What's wrong?"

"I've got a bad co'd. My 'ead's all stobbed ub." She coughed and spit the mucus out on the ground at his feet. "I 'ad to sleeb i the rain and I caught this co'd."

"Silly bitch."

She sniffed and spit again, her head beginning to clear a little while her mind worked better. “Dammit, man, I can’t ‘elp it.” She gulped in a few mouthfuls of air as she looked uneasily at him. “You taking me back to the Raqsidan?”

He smiled at her and let his eyes travel slowly up and down her body. “You refused me once.”

The fear lying cold in her stomach spread through the rest of her as the evil in his face intensified. “No, I won’t take you back,” he whispered. “A lot of things be changed in the past weeks.”

“So I see.” She pasted a sweet, enticing smile on her face and wriggled her body suggestively. “Why keep me tied up? I can’t hurt you.”

He snickered. “Silly bitch, I read your lie like that!” He snapped his fingers in front of her nose. “I keep you tied because that’s the way I want it. I keep you tied till you be tamed.”

Anger flashed the fear out of her. She rugged futilely at the ropes for a second, then fury turned into a cold rage that fueled the patience of a gurb at a mousehole. She watched him calmly.

He grinned at her. “So. No use wasting your strength, whore. A gryman knows his knots.” His grin turned into a giggle. “And the other thing—I tied you in your head. Other men’s feelings don’t bother me now. I find them very satisfying.” She examined his face. Once, thin, almost haggard, now it was full and puffy. His nervous bony body was developing a pronounced pot around the middle so that he looked like a bloated spider. Sick inside, she refused to think about what was feeding him.

As she watched, he chirruped softly. A red lusuq crawled out of his sleeve to sit on his thumb, staring with opaque black eyes at Aleytys. The poisonous thing clung there and preened its wings. Tarnsian looked fondly at it. “My army. See, I learned what you started to teach me.”

“Why not let me loose?” she coaxed. “Don’t you owe me?”

“Oh, no. You belong to me.” His fist closed slowly. “I keep what’s mine.” He chirruped again and the lusuq crawled back inside his sleeve.

After saddling the mare, he walked back to Aleytys, two pieces of rope dangling from his soft hands. Kneeling beside her, he rested the knife point on the ropes that bound her feet and looked intently at her. “Try running, bitch, and when I catch you, I play with you with this.” He sliced open the top two fastenings of her abba, turning back the edge with the point of the knife so that he bared one breast. He wrote his initial on the soft flesh, a hairline of blood following the moving knife point. Then he touched the point to her nipple. “You understand?” Aleytys nodded, not trusting her voice. He sawed the knife through the ropes around her ankles and pulled her to her feet. Pointing at the mare, he said, “Get on.”

“How? I need my hands.”

He laid the knife against her cheek. “You run. . . .”

“Ahai! I know.” She held out her hands.

In the darkness of the caravan Aleytys tugged at the ropes that spread-eagled her across the cot. “Ahai! Ai-Aschla.” She twisted her head and examined the house on wheels. “I’m in some kind of corner now.” She stretched her mind, glad to have that little bit of freedom again. Being locked inside her skull had given her a claustrophobic attack of the horrors.

The sour miasma of fear and hatred hanging like a cloud over the camp brought her flinching back to herself. She replayed in her mind the ride into camp, remembering the sullen eyes, haggard faces, even the children wearing frightened ugly masks. What happened here? she wondered. What happened to Tarnsian?

Footsteps thumped hollowly up the steps outside. The door opened and Tarnsian came in with a sleek, sated smile on his face, and Aleytys felt chilled once again as the power came rolling out of him in surging waves that suffocated her. She choked. Her nose was clogged again, dripping into her mouth, but that tiny irritation paradoxically proved to be her salvation, bringing her back up out of the suffocating blackness.

He looked her over silently. Then he took off his vest and hung it over a chair and followed that with the broad black belt. Aleytys turned her head away to stare at the wall.

He finished stripping and walked over to stand beside the bed. She felt him there but refused to look at him. With a nasty laugh, he tangled his fingers in her hair and forced her head around. “Don’t turn away from me,” he said mildly. He hooked a low stool over to him, sat down, and began stroking her hair as it slid past her shoulder and off the edge of the bed. “I wanted you once. You refused me, remember?” He drew his fingers down her cheek and nipped a bit of flesh between his fingernails. “Remember?”

“Yes,” she said reluctantly, staring with blurred eyes at the sagging jowls of the face bending over her.

“Yes what?”

“I remember.” She shuddered. “I refused you.”

“Nobody refuses me anything now.” His fingers played in her hair and slipped caressingly along the bone of her chin and down the graceful curve of her neck. “Nobody laughs at me now.” His fingers moved to the hollow at the base of her throat and stroked softly up and down. “The morning after the fireball the shrengo Paullo...” His hand slid around her throat and tightened painfully. “The shrengo Paullo threatened to geld me if I even looked at one of the taivan women.” He laughed and released her so that she could breathe again. She swallowed and swallowed again. Ignoring her distress, he went on. “Paullo’s dead. Lusuq bite, you see. And I’ve had every woman in camp. Even when he was still alive, his woman had my child in her.” He moved his hand down, caught her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. With a soft giggle he squeezed so hard that he drew a grunt of pain from her spit out from between clenched teeth.

Calmly he started to fondle her breasts. To Aleytys’s shame her body responded automatically to the friction of his moving hands. Furious with herself, she forced her awareness to a frozen place deep inside where feeling was a far-off thing. From that vast distance she felt his weight come on top of her, felt him in her, moving in her.

“Then he was slapping and biting at her, beating at her numb body and face with his fists. “Gesaya-yag—whore, feel! Feel, bitch, feel. *Feel!*” His voice rose into a shrill hysterical scream. Numb and helpless, she felt her lip split and blood start trickling down her face. Then her nose smashed and the

pain penetrated to her cloister so that she slid off into total unconsciousness.

Hate... fear... terror... lust... as she drifted into pain-seared awareness again, Aleytys cringed from the emotions that simmered thickly in the pungent air. She was thrown in the corner of the caravan, aching in a dozen places, fouled with Tarnsian's juices. In the moonlight streaming through the small window she saw the figures writhing on the cot. Turning away, turning over, trying to shut out the sight and the sounds—the sickening mélange of lust, hate, fear, pain swirling like foul smoke over the cot—she huddled in the corner with cramps twisting her stomach until she vomited again and again. Exhausted in body and spirit, she retreated into the warm blackness of unconsciousness.

Feeling nothing, thinking nothing, hearing, seeing, touching nothing in the blackness of unknowing, a point source of light blinked on and rapidly spread into an image of a man walking pensively down a narrow roadway whose white sand glowed eerily in the moonlight. Tarnsian. Wearing an abba and sandals instead of caravaner dress. Passively viewing the unreeling dream, Aleytys felt a tinge of wonder at that.

He slapped his foot down flat on the sand, picked it up, looked at the print he'd made, laughed, walked on. The road wound through the cliffs, then continued along the river as the valley opened out. The tangled roushani thicket gave way to the horans. Tarnsian cursed as the unaccustomed skirts twisted around his ankles. Dejectedly he sank down on a horan root and dropped his head into his hands. He drew in a deep breath and eventually leaned back against the trunk, hands clasped loosely between his knees, his face haggard and unhappy. "I did something," he said hoarsely. "I finally did something."

Restless black eyes roamed over the sleeping countryside, then he smiled. Sitting up straight, he summoned a late-moving lusuq so that it shot out of the night on whirring wings and settled on his outstretched forefinger. Moonlight shimmered on its glassy iridescent wings and glittered off the spiny carapace. He lifted his hand to eye-level and laughed triumphantly.

"Small friend. Deadly small friend." He lifted his hand out away from him, ready to hurl the insect to the ground and crush it with his heel. Then he hesitated.

"It's not your fault, small one. You only follow your nature." Still holding the lusuq quiescent on his finger, he pushed himself back on his feet and strolled on down the road. "For the first time in my life, farenti lusuq, I was the doer not the pillow they beat. Ay-yag, lusuq, what's it feel like, having the power to kill who you choose?"

He halted, startled by the dark broth beginning to brew up in him. "So many years," he mused, kicking on through the sand. "Sheman. Gryman. Siani, feed the horses. Siani, fix the yara. Despise me. Stay away from the women, slime. Don't touch my food; go eat with the whores, Siani. Your ma was a whore, Siani. Do this, sheman. Do that. Even Marya, whining 'Love me, Siani, love me.'" Love!"

He smiled suddenly, his eyes glittering in the double moons' light like the chitinous armor of the bug on his finger. "Paullo. A few chigra in his bed..." He giggled. Looking down at the lusuq, he whispered, "Farenti lusuq, how'd you like to stick your tail in Paullo's face?" A stray cloud passed over Aab's face so that the night darkened suddenly. He sighed. "Talle d' purg, lusuq." He lifted his hand to flick the insect away.

A small stone came sailing out of the darkness and caromed off his shoulder. He wheeled.

Charoh skipped out of the black shadow under the trees. He stood in the middle of the road and laughed at Tarnsian.

“Sheman,” he chanted in a high shrill voice. “Sheman wearing skirts. Wait till I tell, wait till...”

Panic spurted through the empath. He still wore the abba and sandals betraying his complicity in Zavar’s plot to free the dream-singer. Without stopping to think, he flipped his forefinger, casting the stickyfoot straight into Charoh’s face, and stood gasping, trembling, yelling with his mind, *Killlllll*

The lusuq sank the barbs on its six feet deep into the boy’s flesh, then drove the poison sting in its long flexible tail into his cheek again and again. Finally it jerked itself loose, whirred up into the air, and darted off.

The boy screamed once as the sting sank in the first time, then collapsed in a writhing heap on the sand. Tarnsian stared down at him, shattered by the sickening mixture of hate, fear, triumph that stirred in him. At the same time, like the pleasant flaw from rich red meat, the boy’s savage pain flooded him, woke in him a terrible joy and a salty taste at the back of his throat like the beginnings of thirst.

With a last breathy cry, the boy straightened out rigid as a metal rod. He held this strained position for a moment, then his body collapsed in on itself. It lay on the ground like a doll with the stuffing fallen out. It. Not he. Not anymore. Tarnsian felt the strain dissipate inside his body. His shoulders lowered from their taut defensive lift, his spine curved, his face softened. It, he thought. It. A thing. He touched the thing with his toe and it resisted the pressure soggily.

Licking dry lips, he knelt beside the body. Its face was beginning to swell. He touched its cold skin with revulsion. Put his hand on its shoulder; it was like touching wood. He shuddered and wiped his sweaty palm on the abba. “I’ve got to get him back. Can’t leave him here.” He ran the hand that hadn’t touched the body through his hair. “Can’t touch it... Paullo!” The name exploded out of him. “He’ll kill—”

Fear nauseated him. Hands pressed against his eyes, he struggled to control the bitter fluxing of his emotion. Breathing heavily, he lowered his hands onto his knees and licked dry lips. Eyes on the thing in front of him, he ran through his mind all the torment, all the mockery, all the petty cruelties he’d suffered from this boy. A cold hard satisfaction bloomed somewhere deep down inside him, deep—where it was dark and powerful. Slowly he felt power beating inside him like dark moth wings.

Tarnsian stood up and walked swiftly away, grains of sand pattering down on the road as his moving legs jarred them off the swinging abba....

The blackness closed in again, the passive consciousness of the viewer sinking gently into the comforting nothingness....

11

The suns were high when she woke. Tarnsian came in with a bucket of water and some rags. He cut her free and shoved them into her hands. “Clean up this mess,” he grunted.

Pausing in the doorway, he said, “We’re rolling in three minutes. Throw the water out the door when you finish.”

She watched him stump out of the caravan, then used the water first to wash herself. “Ai-Aschla,” she gasped as she touched her mangled face. Hopping painfully across the narrow space between the walls, she stooped and looked into the mirror.

Her face was a grotesque lumpy mask with black eyes extending in purple glory over her cheekbones, nose a smashed, distorted purple lump, upper lip gashed deeply and swollen to three times its normal size. "Aschla's claws! He sure made a mess of me." She touched her nose and winced as pain stabbed into her brain, then looked back into the mirror. "Ahai! I'm ugly." Shuddering, she dropped onto the cot and stared at the stinking smears of vomit, feeling black depression chilling in her stomach.

The stench from the vomit finally made it impossible to sit any longer. Reluctantly she sloshed the rag in the water and mopped at the mess on the floor, almost vomiting again as the smell coiled in her throat. Once again the cold clogging her nose was a blessing, cutting down the stench to bearable strength. She scrubbed the floor clean and tossed the water out the door, sighing with relief as it splashed to one side of the trail taking the smell and to some extent the uncomfortable memories of the night with it. She stood in the door a while and watched the thickly growing trees slide past on both sides. For a minute she considered jumping, then the black wings fluttered and she gasped, catching desperate hold on to the doorjamb to keep from being thrown under the clawed feet of the following yara.

Hastily she shut the door, her hands shaking and her stomach cramping again. She stumbled to the cot and collapsed on the soiled blankets, wincing as the pain in her face stabbed at her. She probed at the sore spots with the tips of her fingers. She thought of Daimon's mate and wondered.

Lying back on the couch, she turned her attention inward, sliding into the deep tranced outreach where heat flowed back and forth like tongues of flame over her aching flesh, then she was immersed within the cool soothing waters of a vast black river....

After a while the trance transmuted into sleep and she dozed during the morning leg of the journey.

The caravan jolted to a stop. Aleytys woke and lay blinking, forgetting for the moment where she was, then the bitter taste of slavery poured back, bringing with it the image of her mutilated face. She prodded at her nose and grinned as she felt the familiar straight slim bone. Scrambling eagerly onto her feet, she hurried to the mirror.

The purple bruises were gone. So were the lumps. Even the cut on her lips was healed without a trace. Once again she ran an exultant finger down the smooth straight line of her nose. She was herself again, the ugly monster of the morning only a bad dream.

Tarnsian pushed the door open and walked in. Aleytys backed against the wall, watching him with sick apprehension. "On the bed," he said tersely.

When she hesitated, he punched her in the stomach, hard, so that waves of pain spread through her body. Trembling, she lay on the cot and waited for him. He unbuttoned and took her without preliminaries, but Aleytys retreated immediately into the warm blackness where he didn't exist. She let him have her body, a flaccid doll body empty of spirit.

He slapped her, yelling hoarsely. But the more he clawed at her with mind and hands, the farther she retreated. When he ended, she was gone fathoms deep in the center of her being where nothing could reach her, nothing could touch her.

That day passed. Then another. Until day faded into day into day and she sank into a daze. Whenever he came to her she let him take her without a struggle, and she retreated into that dark place until he was thrusting into a limp, unresponsive body about as exciting as a rag doll. Eventually he kicked her out of his caravan, but even then he wouldn't let her go.

Aleytys stole blankets and a square of tufan from one of the other caravans and waited till the family were gathered around the supper fire sullenly consuming the bowls of stew that the dispirited women prepared. From another she took a blouse and a pair of pants. From a third she took boots that would fit her. Then she went to the whores' fire and shared their food. She spread the tufan under their caravan and slept there more happily than in Tarnsian's bed.

The banibaccivaso never looked at her even when she walked close; they wouldn't talk to her or acknowledge her presence in any way. The slave women made the horns with their fingers to avert bad luck, but they were such beaten-down drudges they hadn't spirit enough to rebel against her presence.

At first she sat on the steps of the slave caravan when the caravaners moved in their daily stages from camp to camp. Then she grew bolder, cut the black stallion Mulak out of the horse herd, and openly took a saddle and bridle for him. Each time she climbed into the saddle, though, she found that Tarnsian hadn't forgotten her. The blackness clamped down on her mind and stayed there until she dismounted. He would not let her go.

After several days in dry camps the taivan drew up in a large clearing beside the biggest, noisiest river she had ever seen.

Aleytys took a towel and soap from one of the caravans and carried her gleanings down the river until she came to a deep pool screened from the camp by an upthrust of rock and a thick stand of young bydarrakhs. Stripping off the blouse and trousers, she plunged into the water and began scrubbing at her skin. Even though Tarnsian hadn't touched her for some time she still felt unclean. With sand and soap she scrubbed herself until her skin glowed pink and tingled pleasantly. Then she lathered her hair and rinsed the soap away, splashing water over her head until she was laughing and gasping from the inundation.

With a sigh of pleasure, she climbed out of the water and sat on the grass toweling her hair, getting the heavy mass as dry as possible. Her cold had healed itself with the bruises, but she didn't want to take too many chances. She glanced at the rock that hid the camp and sighed. No escape. No place to go. Not here.

She slipped back into the blouse and trousers and spread the towel to dry beside her. Hands clasped around her legs, chin on knees, hair spread out over her shoulders to finish drying, she watched the water flow past her toes and considered the past days. "I seem to be a survivor type. Mother, wherever you are, at least you birthed me tough," she murmured.

The moving water soothed her so that her body rhythms slowed, her mind calmed, the thoughts gliding along one after another like beads on a worry string. *Seven more days*, she thought, *seven more days to the Massarat. He has to make a mistake sometime. Madar, how strong he is. I can't fight him. Ahi, ai-Aschla, may he grow careless one minute.... Just give me one minute's edge....*

She sat on the grass luxuriating in the warmth from the suns hanging low over the mountains, enjoying the good clean feeling on her skin and in her hair. She breathed in, out. The water coiled around her brain as she watched it slip past, hissing softly around the impeding rocks. The changing shapes, blue and green shadows, the shallow lines engraved on the surface, always the same, always different, captured her senses until deep inside the dark heart of her being she began to feel glad to be alive. She breathed in a deep lungful of the late afternoon air. Good to be alive....

Her mind skipped back to Vajd. Once again she saw him standing beside her, moonlight carving deep

lines in his face, his hand trembling on her thigh. "Hate makes things ugly," he said then. She could hear his deep gentle voice. *Even when I forget his face*, she thought, *I'll remember his voice, the touch of his hands. I was so innocent then, giggling through the halls with Vari. It was a good life*, she thought, *a few bad times, that's all. They protected me, my friends... Ziraki and Suja and Zavar and even funny little Twanit, and dear, dear Chalak....* She remembered them all, cherishing the memory, chuckling warmly in appreciation.

"So you can still laugh!" The shrill voice broke in on her thoughts and she sprang to her feet, wheeling to face the woman behind her, startled that one of the baccivaso would speak to her. Marya stood a few feet away, eyes huge and glittering in her thin strained face.

"Laugh at this," she hissed. A knife glinted red in Horli's light as she flung out a thin bare arm.

Aleytys gasped. "Marya," she stuttered. "Wh-what—" She backed to the water's edge. "Why?"

Marya pressed her lips together. She lowered her arm slightly while a muscle twitched at the corner of her mouth. Panting deep breaths stirred the soft folds of avrishum over her breasts, then she spoke softly, the words dropping like acid into the lovely late afternoon. "Why? My son is dead. My man is dead."

"Hai?" Aleytys stared at her, bewildered. "That's got nothing to do with me."

"You! Because of you. Because of *you*!" Marya's voice rose to shrillness again. She clamped her trembling lips together. Aleytys could see her neck muscles working as she swallowed. "Why'd you bring your curse on us? Tarns'n, he was a good man. A gentle man. You spoiled him." Swaying a little, eyes closed, she sucked in a series of short ragged breaths.

Aleytys took a step toward her, but Marya's black eyes popped open.

"No," she shrieked. "Stay away. Don't touch me." She lifted the knife higher. "You touch him there in the Raqsidan and he change. I have his child here," She splayed her free hand across her body. "Because of you... because of you I lay with the killer of my son... Because of you I bear the child of the killer of my son... the killer of my man." She shuddered and fixed her straining desperate eyes on Aleytys. "I can't forget. When he love me. When I sleep. I can't forget. I dream and dream and wake and remember. Now I give you something to bless your nights. Something to remember all your life... all your stinking life." Her voice got shriller and shriller, while she seemed to expand with the pain and hate and anger working inside her.

Aleytys shrank back, keeping her eyes on the knife.

Marya laughed. "Watch, witch woman. I know I can't hurt you. Keep your evil eye on this. Dream of me!" Still laughing, she clasped both hands around the hilt of the dagger and plunged it into her stomach. As gouts of blood poured out, she slammed down on her knees with her mouth stretched in a wide mirthless smile. Then she raised the knife again and split her heart.

Aleytys gasped in horror. Reluctantly, step by hesitant step, she walked to the huddled body. It had a curiously diminished look. She shivered. It didn't look like anything that had ever been living. It looked dead. Flattened. As if made of something other than flesh. She knelt beside—She couldn't think of this meat as Marya. The eyes were open with a dull glazed look. Already flies were crawling in and out of the gaping mouth.

Dazedly Aleytys lifted her hand. The palm was smeared with blood. She whimpered and wiped it

frantically on the grass. The drying blood smelled musty and a little sweet. Her stomach shifted queasily while her eyes seemed stuck on the dead face. She looked and looked and whimpered, shaking, wrapping her arms around her knees, and rocked herself back and forth, back and forth, tears slipping silently down her contorted face. "One... two... three... four... one twothree four... one... two... three... four..." she whispered. "Vajd... Talek... Marya... *him... cursed... cursed... cursed... Paulo... the Sha'ir... the tracker... the boy.... One... two... three... four... how many more....*"

"Yaggrya!" She looked up as the hoarse exclamation broke momentarily through her anguish. Tarnsian wavered in front of her eyes. "One two three four, one two three four, one two three four," she chanted.

"What happened here?"

"One two three four, one two three four... cursed..." she chanted, swaying back and forth on her buttocks.

"Bitch, what happened!" He slapped her across the face until she collapsed in a sobbing heap. "Ayatt!" He kicked the body in the ribs, watching its white arms flop about. With a grunt, he bent and buried his hands in the long black hair. Pulling the body across the grass, he dumped it into the river. Then he stood impatiently and watched it glide away, turning over and over in the water, alternating the spread-out web of black hair with the set white face. After it vanished around a bend, he turned back to Aleytys.

She looked up at him out of wide animal eyes.

"Get up," he snapped. When she sat without moving, he growled impatiently and wrapped his hand in her hair. He pulled her with a jerk onto her feet and slapped her into a stumbling walk back to the camp. As she walked he could hear a whispered "One two three four..."

12

The line of caravans wound silently along the side of the mountain, lurching over the ruts and rumbling slowly along the rocky track. Dull-eyed and sunk in a bottomless lethargy, Aleytys rode behind Tarnsian's caravan, slouched in the saddle and moving unconsciously in rhythm with Mulak's restless stride. She wore stained and faded trousers, a ragged blouse that was no more ragged than the dirty, brittle lusterless hair tied in a straggling tail at the base of her neck with a worn leather thong. Her feet were bare and calloused, gray with ground-in dirt and sweat.

Mulak tossed his head and pranced a little, bored with the plodding progress. Aleytys tightened her knees automatically and pulled him back to the stodgy pace of the clumsy wagons. She moved her shoulders absently, trying to ease the fall of the cloth over her aching back. Then she subsided into the mindless daze that was her only refuge from the pain and horror that filled her nights and much of her days.

The mountains sloped down and opened out. The caravans turned a corner and began rumbling down toward a wide green valley. A big slow river bisected the valley. Twin rows of blocky white houses with steeply pitched rust-brown roofs marched in placid symmetry along both banks. Most of the houses had an extension built on pilings ending in a small pier thrusting out into the river. Two dusty streets curving along the housefronts were dotted with bustling pedestrians. There were none of the huge clan houses that characterized the Raqsidan, but the familiar horans glittered among the houses.

Tarnsian's caravan came to the T-crossing that led into the valley. Behind him the other caravans began slowing in preparation for the turn. He clucked to the yara and drove past. Following numbly behind, Aleytys thought nothing of this until a shout came from several of the caravaners behind her. She shook herself out of her lethargy and looked around.

Four or five of the men were running their yara off the road. They swept past her, sending Mulak into a nervous dance, and paced beside the lead caravan. Tarnsian looked coldly at them and pulled his team to a stop. Aleytys sent Mulak sidling back away from the noisy scene.

The baccivash Maleyan wound his reins around the chook and leaped down. Followed by the other men, he strode angrily and a little hesitantly to Tarnsian. He stopped by the driver's seat and looked up at the frowning man. "This is the vadi Massarat, Z'rau." His voice was hoarse with the effort to reconcile the conflicting emotions driving him.

"Well?" Tarnsian's question hit Maleyan in the face like a blow. His cold face gave not an inch of opening. "We turn here for the tangra Suzan and the tijarat."

"Well?"

"You didn't turn."

"So you did notice," Tarnsian said acidly. "And what did that tell you?"

Maleyan scuffed his feet in the coarse gravel and stared down at his clenched fists. "Well?"

"We have to go to the tijarat. Or our children starve. We don't have meat to last the winter."

"Get back in line." Tarnsian turned away and lifted his reins.

Maleyan didn't move. He swallowed. "Please, Z'rau." He lifted trembling hands. "Our children will starve."

Tarnsian eyed the shaking man with a cool sardonic twist to his mouth. "Want to see them dead now?" He chirruped softly and lifted his hand so Maleyan could see the lusuq perched on his thumb. He shuddered but stubbornly remained beside the caravan.

Back on the trail, Aleytys lifted her head at the mention of the tijarat. Her sluggish brain began to quicken. As the confrontation intensified she lifted her hands to her lips and stared. Rebellion flared hot inside her but she beat it down. *Keep low, Leyta*, she thought. Holding her emotions under a heavy damper, she turned the stallion and moved casually back along the line of caravans. The banibaccivaso moved past her, gathering in a thick crowd around Tarnsian's caravan. *While his attention is distracted*, she thought. *Oh, Madar, keep him busy, keep him busy*. Her mouth moved in a quick flicker of a smile.

The noise of altercation behind her increased as more and more of the men joined the argument. Aleytys allowed Mulak to move a little faster. She slipped past the last caravan and walked the stallion down the road into the valley. Keeping her mind as blank as she could, heart beating slowly, breath coming in/out, in/out slowly, eyes slipping vaguely over the ground, seeing but not perceiving, all emotion choked to an even blandness, she allowed Mulak to move into a trot.

As she passed the first houses, she pulled him down to a slow walk. *If I ask for sanctuary... no*, she

thought, tensing up just a little. *No, all he has to do is summon me.... He's too powerful. I can't... run? Run* . The thought was irresistible. *Run. Get away, leave the incubus behind* . She strangled the rising excitement and muttered, "Ahai, don't wake the monster."

She considered her resources. One horse. She stroked Mulak's neck and smiled affectionately. One saddle with blanket. One bridle. Not much use, but there. A hunting knife under her knee. A scrap of cheese and a stale loaf of bread in the saddlebag. A waterskin under her other knee. The clothes she wore. Nothing else.

The smell of fresh bread drifted to her nostrils and snapped her head up. Her eyes began to glow like a hunting tars. Turning in the saddle, she saw a man coming out of one of the small houses on the field side of the road. He was carrying a large flat box balanced on his head. She could just see the tops of the round golden loaves of bread. Her mouth watered. She turned Mulak... hesitated an instant... then reined him around and set him plunging into the baker, knocking the startled man over and scattering the bread across the road. In a flash she slipped out of the saddle and gathered up half a dozen loaves.

The man roared and jumped at her. With a gasp Aleytys ran around the other side of Mulak while the black stallion squealed and bared his teeth. The baker backed rapidly away, giving Aleytys time to jam her loot into the saddlebags. She grabbed another two loaves and stuffed them down the neck of her blouse. Then she was in the saddle again.

"You won't—" The baker hurled himself at her, grabbing at her leg.

She felt a questing touch flick across the surface of her awareness. Panic flooded through her and she kicked the baker in the face, then screamed Mulak into a run until she was galloping down the road as if demons were clawing at her heels.

As she pounded past the last of the houses, she calmed enough to slow the stallion until he was moving in a ground-eating lope that he could sustain for a considerable time. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she saw that the road was still empty. Her pounding heart slowed, too, and she began to breathe more normally. She felt Tarnsian tugging at her but he was too far away to pull her back. *Too far* , she thought exultantly.

The loaves of bread inside her blouse began to irritate her skin. She reached back and undid the flap on one of the saddlebags. Holding the horse's barrel tight between her legs, she twisted around and stuffed the loaves inside the bag. She couldn't close the flap again, but they seemed settled enough to stay. With a sigh of relief she pulled her blouse out of her trousers and let the itchy bread crumbs drop out. Reaching up underneath the flapping blouse tails, she brushed off her breasts and stomach. The breeze stirred up by their speed blew her hair out behind her and slipped with a feel of silk over her tired body.

Mulak's hooves pounded out a steady rhythm on the dirt of the road, and in her blood she felt an answering rhythm. Looking back at the rapidly retreating valley she laughed. She felt vibrantly alive again. As if she'd been dead and now was returned to life. Oddly, she grew aware that what she wanted more than anything else was a bath. Having let her physical person degenerate under the degrading mind slavery Tarnsian had kept her in, now that she was unfolding her wings, she felt an urgent need to wash the last remnants of that slavery off her body. She yearned for clean hair and a clean body. Still, colors were brighter, smells crisper, sounds danced in her ears. She felt Mulak's muscles moving strongly under her and rejoiced at the clean, free flow of his driving body.

Ahead, the road wound through patchwork fields where men working there stared at her but made no move to interfere. Tarnsian felt weaker and weaker in her head. The road climbed ahead of her,

appearing and disappearing over and around the rolling foothills, finally dissolving into the blue distance high above the valley floor. Far above, little more than a dark blue etching in the blue of the sky, rose twin peaks dipping to a steep-walled notch. The tangra Suzan. She looked higher. Hesh was a bright blue boil bulging from the side of Horli. She smiled with satisfaction. *In a couple days*, she thought, *I won't have to worry about Hesh*. She ran her hands over the top of her head. Easier to travel.

She eased herself in the saddle. "Mulak, mi-muklis." His ears flicked jauntily at the sound of her voice, making her bubble with delight. "If there's a shady spot near, aziz-mi, I can have my bath."

The rah' Massarat unreeled beneath Mulak's flickering feet. He reached the hills and slowed slightly as the land sloped upward more steeply. Aleytys pulled him to a stop at the top of a rise and looked back. She could see all the way across the valley since the air was clear and crystalline quiet. In the fields the men were tiny figurines on a patterned quilt beside a river reduced to a winding ribbon shimmering bright blue alongside whitewashed children's blocks. She sighed with pleasure.

Then a cloud of dust spurted up from the white sand of the roadway down where it came into the valley. At the same time the touch in her mind grew stronger. *Tarnsian*, she thought, startled. She watched the dust creep along the road. "Just one rider. It's not big enough... not even a caravan. He's crazy!" She frowned and shook her head helplessly. Turning the stallion, she sent him up the road at a fast canter. "Leaving all that he had... just to chase me down..." A vast puzzlement shrank her voice to a squeak.

The suns beat down on her bare head, starting a dull ache that made Tarnsian's probe even harder to bear. *We can't go much farther*, she thought, *not till the end of high heat*. She scrubbed her free hand across her face and looked around. The road had curved back toward the river until it roared past a few meters away down a rocky bank. She turned the stallion off the road and picked her way down the slope until she was riding beside the water, protected from the suns' searing heat by the trees that lined the river banks. As she let the stallion find his way through the rocks, she muttered vindictively, "Hope they don't like him back there. Hope they hold him up good."

The heat got more and more oppressive. Although the trees cut the killing radiation from Hesh, all too soon the air was so hot and thick that it was hard to breathe. Mulak panted heavily. He stumbled every few steps, too tired to lift his feet over the scattered rocks.

Aleytys pulled him to a stop and leaned on the saddle horn, looking around. Just ahead was a tree-lined circlet of grass. A huge ballut leaned precariously out over the river, throwing a dark patch of shade on the cool green water swirling in gentle whorls around a quiet pool close to the tree's exposed roots. Aleytys slid off the stallion's back, loosened the cinch, and worked the bridle off his sweating head so he could graze in comfort. She patted him and glanced speculatively at the saddle. *Better not*, she thought. With a smile, she slapped him on the flank, sending him off to eat and drink. Hurriedly she stripped off her clothes and hung them over a branch stub to let wind blow the staleness out of them. As she edged down to the rocky pool, the stones felt hot and good under her feet and she heard with quiet delight the shrill *kree-kree* of the noon-singers. At the water's edge she pulled a handful of grass to scrub with, then walked into the water, yelping and shuddering as rock-warmed feet plunged into the snow-melt of the mountain river. The surface inch or so was sun-warmed but the water below was icy. The cold seared into the whip-marks crossing and recrossing her back. She wedged the wisps of grass in between two water-polished rocks and ducked her head beneath the water.

On the third day of the escape she sighed wearily and slid down from Mulak's back. Her knees buckled and she grabbed hastily at a stirrup leather. "Ahai! Mulak, mi-muklis, this riding all night's for pain-lovers only."

She clucked to the stallion, starting him up the roadway once again and stumbling uphill beside him. The road was tipping more and more steeply into the sky every day now, the downhill dips more shallow. She closed her eyes and felt with her mind. Tarnsian was still behind, clinging to the trail with an insane stubbornness. "Damn the man," she muttered. "Why the hell does he do it?" She shook her head. "Mulak, my friend, you've got more sense in that horse head of yours than he does in his."

She shielded her eyes with her hand and looked up along the road. It disappeared around a curve and appeared again higher up. The line where it met the sky seemed closer. *If I can make it over by high heat ...*

She looked around at the coarse sunburned patches of soil and naked rock, then glanced back over her shoulder at the suns. Horli was just edging her top above the eastern horizon.

One good thing, she thought. Horli occludes Hesh. It gives me an edge. She sighed, then smiled. The air up here was chill and quiet as the morning made its beginning.

Breathing was harder this high and when the air heated up it would be harder still. She was breathing faster than usual and she could feel her heart pounding. Each breath burned her throat and dried out the inside of her nose. Half the time she was breathing through her mouth just to gulp in enough air to satisfy her straining lungs.

When Horli was a finger-width clear of the horizon, she pulled the stallion to a stop. He was hot and sweaty and his feet were dragging. Aleytys slid down and scratched him on the neck. Then she unhooked the waterbag and squeezed some water into her hands, holding it under his nose. He sucked it up eagerly and nickered for more.

She looked around. One of the ruts in the road had an extra depth where it crossed earth instead of the thinly covered rock. She poured some water in the rut and let the horse gulp it down. She filled the hollow again, then splashed water over her dry skin and swallowed several mouthfuls of the liquid. After another few minutes' rest, though, she grimaced and stood up. Catching hold of the saddle horn, she walked along beside the stallion and let him support part of her weight as they climbed higher and higher. As she stumbled on, she leaned her head against his neck and closed her burning eyes, letting him find their way up the road.

Abruptly she was walking faster and faster until she felt as if she was flying; walking was so easy... so easy? The pain in her knees vanished. Mulak nickered. With a haze of weariness wheeling through her head, she looked around. Although the air still burned her lungs and cut like knives whenever she took a deep breath, she was walking on a more or less level patch of ground. On either side of the narrow rutted track, barren rocks soared to needle points. She smiled, then laughed outright. "The tangra Suzan," she cried exultantly. "Mulak, we're over the top."

Five minutes later they rounded a bulge of rock and stood at the top of a long downslope. Far below there was a distant flatness, blue and hazy, that went on and on to the edge of the world. "We did it, Mulak. That's the Great Green out there." She turned back and scanned the sky anxiously, sheltering her eyes with her hand. Hesh floated two hands' width above the horizon. Aleytys sighed and set out again, downhill this time. As she wound down the steep switchbacks on the far side of the pass, she glanced back at Horli and smiled vindictively. "I hope high heat catches that bastard right in the middle of this

frying pan.”

Downhill walking proved even harder on her legs. Down and around she went until her knees threatened to unhinge completely. After the fourth switchback she dropped heavily onto a rock beside the trail and examined the soles of her feet. The skin was worn parchment-thin with stone bruises scattered in an abstract pattern of red-purple splotches over the ground-in gray background. “Ahai! Ai-Aschla,” she muttered. She wiggled her toes and shook her head; they felt funny, numb, like they were encased in transparent sheaths. “Keep on like this,” she breathed, “and I’ll wear them off to my knees. Mulak, aziz-mi, I know you’re tired, but I’ve got to ride a while.”

Down and down along a trail that seemed to stretch on forever. Rest at high heat. Rest so the horse could graze. Drink. A mouthful at a time. Move on. Down. Force down dry tasteless chunks of bread. Walk. Ride. Walk again to spare the strength of the horse. Down...

Three days down the mountain Mulak stumbled and fell to his knees, jolting Aleytys out of the saddle.

She pushed up on an elbow and rubbed her aching eyes. With a vast effort, she managed to focus her eyes. The stallion stood with his head hanging, his gaunt sides heaving painfully. She sat up and rubbed her hands over her face, trying to think.

With Hesh occluded, high heat was brutally uncomfortable but not deadly, so she had pushed hard. She looked at the horse. Too hard. With an effort, she stood up and swayed, nearly falling, while the world swung around her and finally steadied. She staggered over to him and knelt to look at the cuts on his knees. Weak tears spilling from her eyes in futile remorse for her thoughtlessness, she pressed her fingers over the wounds and let the power-river flow through her hands. The world reeled and grayed, then she plunged into blackness.

Sometime later she woke to find Mulak pushing at her head with his nose. She lifted her hand to shove him away and was startled to find herself so weak. Trembling in every limb so that she had to move in infinitesimal increments, she finally managed to get to her feet. She clung to the stirrup and let her head settle and the dizziness pass away. Getting in the saddle was totally impossible. She didn’t even try.

The next hour passed somehow, though half the time she was stumbling along automatically while her mind blanked out. Five times she woke to find herself in a heap on the ground with Mulak waiting patiently beside her. Each time it was impossible to get up but she did it, reaching the lake just as Horli began to slide past the horizon.

The grass felt like heaven under her lacerated feet and the dark shade of the trees was a blessing to her tired, aching eyes. She tumbled into the water at the edge of the lake and let the coolness wash over her. She felt as if her skin itself were drinking in the water and it was cool, so cool, over her eyes.

Mulak was nibbling at the grass, trying to eat around the bit. “Madar! Again. You’d think I’d learn. Sorry, my friend.” She splashed out of the water and stripped the bridle off, then the saddle and blanket. He whinnied with pleasure and began cropping eagerly at the lush grass on the bank of the lake.

After that rest the travel was easier because the road followed the water and because Aleytys didn’t want to make the mistake again of running the two of them off their feet. But she never stopped long. She didn’t dare. She would plunge into the river with the stallion, washing off the outer layers of grit and salt-sweat, and along with them some of the aches and pains of fatigue.

And always Tarnsian was there behind her. Sometimes the mind-touch would slip away and not return

for hours. But she never let herself hope. It always came back. Sometimes the probe would be a frail shadow so tenuous she scarcely felt it. Sometimes it compelled so strongly, fighting it was like wading through deep water.

She thinned, the strain and lack of proper food melted flesh off her bones. As the days passed she became sun-black skin stretched over those bones while her hair turned brittle and lank, caked and clotted together by sweat, dust, and her body's minerals. Her hands were beginning to shake whenever she lifted them. They were so rough, bony, grimed with ground-in dirt, which mere rinsing wouldn't wash away, that she hated to look at them. Mulak was in little better shape. The hurried snatches of grass and the constant moving on were wearing him down again.

He stumbled. Aleytys compensated immediately, shifting her weight to help him recover. She patted him on the neck. "Whoa, boy, careful." She slid off his back and looked him over. His ribs were beginning to show and his roughened coat was covered with white salt stains and dried froth. She shook her head. "Tonight we rest, mi-muklis. If he catches us, well, he catches us. At least you can get yourself a bellyful." She stretched and groaned. "Ahhh-ahai, my stomach's making love to my backbone." She peered down the road. "I wonder how much farther to the tijarat." Everything was beginning to fuzz at the edges for her. Her head ached dully and there was a sickening sense of foreboding that kept intruding on her. She pressed her lips together, and led the stallion off the road under the trees.

After she stripped him and sent him into the river, she pulled off her own rags and dropped them in a heap on the grass, pinning them under the saddle so a sudden gust of wind wouldn't leave her naked. Walking cautiously over the tough slippery grass, feeling absurdly fragile around the knees, she waded into the river and began scrubbing Mulak's sides with a handful of grass. He shook himself vigorously, showering her with large splattery drops of water. She smiled tiredly and let him heave himself out of the river and start grazing hungrily on the succulent watergrass. "I wish I had some corn for you," she said.

After rubbing as much of the grime as she could from her tired body, she wobbled over to a rock and sat down—a little harder than she'd planned when her knees suddenly folded. "Right now," she murmured, a wry grin stretching her sore mouth, "I wish I had that piece of moldy cheese I started with."

She bent down and flicked a finger in the water, sending a tiny shower of droplets into the air. "I couldn't do it before." She rested her hands on her knees and stared down into the clear green water. "I had to let the fish go. Funny how one's scruples fall away when it comes down to starving." She reached out with her mind and found a small fish. Conquering her intense distaste, she teased it downstream to her reaching fingers. Scooping it out of the water, she tossed it onto the bank and stared determinedly across at the other side of the river while the fish flopped its life out behind her.

A little sick in her heart, Aleytys plodded up the bank to her saddle. She slid the knife out of its sheath and walked reluctantly back to the dead fish. For a long minute she stared down at the slimy streamlined shape glistening opalescent in the strong light. Moments ago she had shared life with the fish, knowing it, in a way, more thoroughly than she knew her own hand. It might as well have been her own hand lying there, still, limp, dead. "I can't," she whimpered. "I can't." Then her stomach cramped again and her knees gave way, dumping her beside the fish. "Ai-Madar," she gasped. "My baby."

Gritting her teeth, she ran the knife along the fish's belly, feeling like a murderer. She gutted it, cut off its head, and threw the offal into the river. She poked at the limp fragment with the point of her knife. With a sigh and a slight shudder she caught an edge of the skin on the knife and peeled it back, baring the layered translucent flesh. She sliced a small bit off. Closing her eyes, she lifted it almost to her lips, then lowered her hand as sick revulsion shuddered through her. Then she dredged up the remnants of her determination. "I won't give in to that man. I won't," she growled.

Without any further hesitation she thrust the bit of fish into her mouth and chewed determinedly. To her surprise the raw fish had a cool clean taste, not strong at all, and a delicate chewy texture. Hungrily she slivered off more fish until all she had left was a little pile of cleaned-off bones in front of her. Her stomach clamored for more.

She waded into the water and summoned another fish and another, scooping them up, tossing them onto the bank. When she reached out for a third, she stopped. *A little at a time*, she thought. *No use taking more than I can eat*. She released the captive fish and watched it dart away.

The last bites of the fish were a little hard to swallow. Looking at a pink-veined fragment, she sighed and tossed it into the river. After she cleaned up the bones and skin, she washed her hands and the knife, then lay on the grass and watched Mulak graze. He looked better already. “Mmm, that’s nice, isn’t it, aziz-mi?” Flipping onto her back with a laugh, she stretched and stretched until she felt her bones cracking. “Ahai, mi-muklis, I’m so tired of running... and running...”

The last tip of Horli slid down behind the edge of the world and the sky bloomed purple, red, gold. “I’d better put those filthy rags back on.” She shivered as the evening breeze slid over her bare skin. “If I just had time to wash them,” she moaned. “Or something else to put on.” Mouth pursed with distaste, she slid back into the sweat-stained, dirt-stiff clothes. Weariness splashed around in her, as if she walked six inches under water—she could almost feel waves sloshing up and down on top of her skull. With a sigh, she pulled up the saddle, wiggled around on the grass until she found a reasonably comfortable position, pulled the sweaty saddle blanket over her shoulders, and closed her eyes. As she drifted to sleep she felt a faint amusement as images of her first nights on the trail contrasted with her present destitution.

A neighing broke through the darkness, followed by a vast rough something that rubbed damply across her face. Aleytys opened gritty eyes and focused on a black muzzle inches from her face. Once more Mulak shoved at her with his nose.

She pushed his head aside and sat up, wiping her sleeve across her face. “Ahai, I could have slept another whole week.” She rolled over onto her knees and got stiffly to her feet.

The night’s rest had worked marvels for the big animal. As Aleytys settled in the saddle a little later, he snorted and pranced about like a colt. She laughed with delight and kneed him forward. As she took off downtrail she glanced back over her shoulder. Horli had thrust her rim above the eastern mountains. *Hesh will be coming out today*, she thought and shivered. She swiveled around again and patted the horse on his arching neck. “No use moaning,” she said. “Look on the bright side, Leyta. We’ll have to stop longer at midday and so will he. Be better for both of us.”

Whistling cheerily, she rode down the rutted road, reveling in a reborn sense of well-being. Then the black wings fluttered behind her again.

14

On the twenty-first day of her escape, she rode out from under the trees as Horli—with Hesh back on the north snuggling beside her belly—slanted down to the hazy western horizon. The tjarat fields spread over acres and acres of flat land. Great circles of posts joined by long split poles. Rows of tables weathered by the years to a velvety gray. Flattened spaces of stone-hard earth. Stone troughs at each of the circles fed by flumes leading to the river and a series of waterwheels.

Aleytys sat numbly on Mulak's back, hands gripping the saddle horn so tightly her fingers ached.

One of the waterwheels was broken, another completely washed away, leaving only a spindly frame.

The troughs were empty of water but filled with dust and debris.

The wind from the plains blew across the empty tables.

No one.

Nothing.

The ghost of a dream.

The shadows of the nomad wagons slid over the close-cropped grass as Horli crept behind the horizon. The thief grunted and collapsed on the leather in front of his battered chon, finding a measure of relief in the shade as he massaged his aching legs and frowned fretfully at the busy nomads.

Khateyat came around the chon. He looked up and saw her, sighed, and levered himself onto his feet.

She nodded quietly in response to his grudging greeting. "Take the yoke and fetch water from the river," she said crisply. "Bring it to my chon and wait standing until I come for you. Do not let the buckets touch the ground. Do you understand?"

His pale eyes tightened into slits while the small muscles at the corners of his thin mouth hardened into knots. "I understand," he muttered.

With a last warning glance, she turned away and disappeared around the chon. Stavver went to the back of the Shemqya herret and lifted the yoke from its hooks, letting the buckets swing until they clacked harshly together.

When he came back from the river with the dripping buckets swinging from the yoke on his shoulders, he stared thoughtfully at the ground, wanting to drag them across the earth to spite Khateyat. But he knew the futility of that. No way of fooling these witches. He grunted. She'd make me fetch more after pouring it out on my feet. He stopped in front of Khateyat's tent and waited for her to come out.

Khateyat swung gracefully through the low entrance and nodded to him to follow her. She walked briskly out of the camp and climbed a low grassy knoll. The other Shemqya sat in a circle, eyes following their progress.

Khateyat stopped him in the center of the circle. "Don't move and don't speak. N'frat. The basin."

"Yes, R'eKhateyat." The girl jumped to her feet, lifting the large basin she had held in her lap. She brought it to Khateyat and stood in eager alertness and waited for the next exciting happenings in a life she found full of extraordinary and fascinating events.

“Shanat.” Khatayat swept her eyes around the group. She frowned slightly at Raqat, then her eyes rested on the youngest one. “R’prat.” She beckoned them to the center. “Support the basin with N’frat.”

“Yes, R’eKhatayat.”

The thief could feel a growing tension in the air. More magic to twist and confuse his mind. He saw and felt the consequences of the incomprehensible things they did, but still couldn’t quite believe in them.

“Move back a trifle,” Khatayat told him. “The water has not touched ground?”

“No.” He tried to sneer but it didn’t come off.

She looked at the buckets and nodded. “That is so. And good. There would be danger otherwise,” She moved him so that the left bucket was nearest the basin being held by the three girls. “Stand thus. And be silent. What we do is none of your concern. If you interfere in things you know nothing of, your reward will be most unpleasant.” She lifted the bucket and poured the water into the basin.

The interior of the heavy metal dish was a sooty black that turned the crystalline water into an unsteady mirror. The thief watched with covert interest as Khatayat bent over the mirror and whispered soft sibilant words that chilled the movement of the water until it reflected the gently floating clouds of the sunset sky. The whisper continued, going on and on until the first star in the darkening sky was imaged in the water.

Khatayat straightened. “R’nenawatalawa,” she said softly. “Come.” Her voice was like a breath of wind sliding across the mirror. “You called me. Speak. Show us what we need to know. Show.”

The water rippled. At first the thief thought the girls who held the basin had grown tired and faltered in their task. But the mirror rapidly cleared.

Instead of the sky he was startled to see the image of a red-haired woman riding down a rutted road on a magnificent black stallion. She was thin and tanned, dressed in filthy rags, hair streaming behind her like a crimson flag. Putting the horse to a stop, she looked around. The thief could see the river, the waterwheels, the deserted corrals as her eyes swept over them. Though the image was tiny, the outline of her form spoke eloquently of her despair. She dismounted slowly and stripped the saddle from the stallion’s back. For a moment she stood at his side gently stroking his neck. Then she slid the bridle off his head and slapped him on the flank so that he kicked up his heels and ran off. He didn’t go far, but settled down to a steady cropping of the sun-bleached grass. The girl... she was young, the thief thought. Very young. Perhaps even pretty. It was hard to tell. The girl sat down on a rock and stared at the river. After a few minutes, she gathered a pile of pebbles and began flipping them in the river.

The water shivered. Streaks of silver crossed and recrossed the image, then coalesced into a glyph, shattered again, reformed into a second, shattered, formed a third. Then the images vanished and the water reflected merely the star-lit sky.

Khatayat stepped back. “Pour the water out.”

The three girls tilted the basin and let the water flow out of it so that it splashed over the grass, wetting the thief's ragged leather leggings.

N'frat held on to the edge of the basin and fidgeted eagerly. "Is she the one? Is she the redheaded one the R'nenawatalawa gave us the diadem for? Is she?"

"Hush, child." Kheprat smiled affectionately into the eager young face, her blind eyes glinting white in the starlight. "Use your head. Why else would they show us her? Khateyat, what did the runes say?"

Khateyat frowned at the thief. "Take the water and pour the rest of it in the casks. Then you can rest till time for the evening meal. Go now."

Stavver shook himself out of his astonishment and trudged down the gentle slope, glancing repeatedly behind him at the silent standing figures.

Khateyat watched him until he disappeared behind the her-ret. Then she turned to the others. "Kepri, the woman is in danger and hungry. The R'nenawatalawa send us to her. We leave in the morning with the diadem."

Part III: The Diadem

1

Aleytys flipped the pebble into the river and listened to it plop. She sat on a rock beside the Mulukaneh Rud, its deep silent water flowing past her dusty toes, with Tarnsian's mind-touch prodding at the edge of her awareness. She lifted another pebble off the pile and tossed it in the water. The feel of him had an aura of triumph, as if he knew she'd come to the end of her resources.

After the last pebble sailed lazily into the cool green and disappeared, Aleytys said softly, "The end. That's all there is." She pulled her feet up onto the rock, wrapped her arms around her legs, and rested her head on her knees.

Time drifted past. She watched the shadows shorten and creep up past her toes as Horli and Hesh slid lightly up the arch of the sky. She was drifting in a half-doze when a series of scrabbling sounds broke through the placid morning hum. She listened a moment, puzzled vaguely. The sounds were coming from the wrong direction for it to be Tarnsian. Besides, she couldn't feel him, if he was that close, he'd have her tied in knots by now. She scrambled to her feet and stood poised on her toes, watching the line of shrubbery growing a few meters higher up the bank. The wind over the river nudged at her matted hair and so she brushed it impatiently out of her face and held it in a club on her neck as she scanned the bushes apprehensively.

At first she saw nothing, then a shaggy triangular head thrust around a pricklebush. A woman mounted on a yara rode onto the bank.

Dropping her heels back on the rock, Aleytys crossed her arms over her breasts and watched in quiet despair as five others joined the first. The leader wore a tasseled cloth on her head, held in place by an

intricately knotted cord. On either side of her impassive red-brown face hung heavy white-streaked black braids tied off with red cords ending in small tassels. She wore a loose tunic of a fine white material heavily embroidered at the hem and cuffs. Her hands were hidden in gloves of fine soft black leather as her feet were in soft black leather boots. She wore voluminous trousers in blue-dyed sueded leather. They were gathered in at the ankles over the boots, tied off with tassled cords. Aleytys watched that one and the other five dressed like her pull up in a line and halt, dark eyes on her with daunting steadiness. Still dazed and sluggish in reaction, she swallowed and breathed rapidly, a fugitive hope sparking in her.

At that moment Tarnsian struck.

Aleytys staggered and fell to her knees, sickly horrified at the oily malevolence that poured over her. *Worse*, she thought. *He's become worse*. She moaned and wrapped her arms around her head as she fought back, forgetting everything but that threatening blackness flooding her.

She knelt in a silvery bubble, inside swirling, battering black forces... no escape... no... and it was pressing in... creeping like oily smoke... creeping in through interstices in her awareness. She fought, watching the shining bubble sag and begin to wrinkle. Frantically she propped the weak spot, then another section began to sag, and another. She raced her mind around in her bubble, stopping up drip after drip, and still the attack continued. She was so tired... so tired... and she held on desperately... so tired... so tired. Then a calm quiet strength poured into her, confidence. She drove the bubble out... out... out... against all the efforts of the attacker. Abruptly, without fanfare, the barrage was gone. Aleytys lifted her aching head.

She felt a touch on her shoulder and turned to face the calm woman kneeling beside her. "You helped me," Aleytys said wonderingly.

The strange woman smiled, the corners of her mouth wrinkling into gentleness and acceptance. Aleytys felt like a flower turning its face to the sun. "I help," the woman said. "Yes. Is bad, him."

Aleytys nodded, underlining her agreement with a soft explosion of breath. "Is very bad." She stared at the nomads with wide eyes. "You're from the Great Green."

"Yes, child."

Aleytys caught the woman's hand and clung to it, urgency sharpening her voice, raising its pitch almost to shrillness. "Take me with you. Please. I have to get away from him. Please. Take me away."

The woman patted her cheek with her free hand. "Yes, yes. We help. Be yourself. Not baby." She gently pulled her hand away. "Wait now." Stepping back, she touched her breast. "I, Khatayat." Then she named the others in order of precedence. "These. Kheprat, Raqat, Shanat, N'prat, R'prat." She pulled her hand in a small, tight circle. "We, Shemqyatwe. In mountain tongue, witches."

"And I'm called Aleytys." Aleytys started to stand up. Khatayat caught hold of her shoulder and kept her on her knees. "Wait," she said quietly. "Wait. Is not time. Hasya say we give first."

Aleytys frowned and shifted uneasily under the restraining hand. "Hasya?" She narrowed her eyes and looked quickly around. "Who's that?"

A smile lit Khatayat's face as she shook her head. "Not who. Is what. Mmm..." She pulled her brows together, searching her limited vocabulary for the right words. "Is... is honor. Yes. Like honor... like a command... like must do." She turned to Kheprat and the blind woman slipped a pouch from her

shoulder. Khateyat held the woven metal sack in front of Aleytys. "Hasya," she said simply. "Yours. Take please."

Aleytys fingered the pouch, eyeing it warily. "What's in there?"

"Is nefre-khizet. Like this." Khateyat held out her hands, touching her fingertips together, curving her thumbs around to form a circle. With a smile, she lifted her hands and set them lightly on her head. "I not know word."

Filled with curiosity, Aleytys fumbled at the fastenings on the pouch, jumping as the bag suddenly came apart in her hands, dumping the diadem in a heap on the ground in front of her knees. She picked it up, let it dangle from her fingers, marveling at the soft tinkle of the singing stones. The fine golden wires, spun into a half dozen exquisite flowers around jeweled hearts, glittered enticingly in the strong morning light as they hung, limp and supple, over her fingers. She touched the flowers and they sang again, a series of single pure notes that thrilled through her like a lover's kisses. She looked up, delight shining in her face. "You give this to me?"

Khateyat nodded. "Is Hasya," she said.

"But why?"

"A thing of power. Not for us. Bad for us. Too... too..." Khateyat struggled for words in her meager vocabulary of mountain speech. "R'nenawatalawa make us..." She licked her lips, tired by the search for elusive words. "R'nenawatalawa make us keepers for you. We bring. You take. Is done." She stood up. Behind her the other Shemqyatwe stood also, having said nothing the whole time.

"Wait." Aleytys jumped up and caught at Khateyat's arm. "If you leave me..."

Khateyat patted her hand. "We not go for little space. But no stay. Wagons wait." She flicked a finger at N'frat. "Kh'rtew sesmatwe," she said briskly. Dropping gracefully down, she arranged herself comfortably on the rock. Still silent, the others imitated her except for N'frat, who ran to the animals and knotted their reins to a low-hanging bydarrakh limb. She trotted back to the rock and dropped in her place in the circle, eyes shining with curiosity.

Biting her lip, Aleytys examined the bland unhelpful faces and tried to figure out what to say next. *Madar*, she thought, *I've not the faintest idea how to get them to take me. Maybe Mother didn't leave me enough cunning*. She looked down at the diadem still dangling from her fingers. Absently she stroked her hand across the jewels. With the notes chiming in her ears, she asked, "Who are the R'nenawatalawa?"

Khateyat rubbed her forehead. After a minute's thought, she pointed to the river. "Are there." Then to the earth where they sat. "Are there." Then to the sky. "Are there." Then back to the earth. "Most of all, are there." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "Is not... not... I know how to say."

Silence deepened again but this time it was more comfortable. The Shemqyatwe sat in their circle with a relaxed stillness that had the feel of eternity about it. Aleytys settled herself and looked at the diadem. Running her fingers over the flowers, she listened enchanted to the exquisite peal. "I wish my hair was clean," she said wistfully. She looked at the shimmering beauty in her hand and smiled involuntarily as the spell from the diadem spun around her mind and wiped away everything else. She lifted it carefully, afraid of bending the fragile threads. The flowers fitted around her head in a glowing wreath while the twin sprays of leaves curved down over her ears. She brushed her fingers across the flowers and laughed

joyously as her body acted like a sounding board for the music. She jumped up, smiled at the women, and danced around toward the river intending to see her reflection in the water.

Before she had taken two steps, pain drilled through her brain, blinding pain like white-hot needles. She screamed, dropped to her knees, clutching her head, then lay flat out, writhing on the rough granite.

The diadem chimed a lovely tune.

Khateyat leaped toward her and caught her struggling body in strong hands. In almost the same movement she reached for the singing diadem, intending to jerk it off. Her fingers whipped away as soon as she touched it, as a sudden agony ate through the tips and raced along her arms to her brain. She moaned and clutched her seared hand to her breast. R'prat and N'prat caught her and helped her up. Gradually the pain faded and she opened streaming eyes. She looked helplessly down at Aleytys.

Aleytys's writhing had stopped. She lay curled up, elbows tucked against her sides, knees drawn up tightly against her breasts. Soft moans slipped from her trembling lips and her face was a silent scream of horror. Khateyat knelt beside her and caught hold of her hands, calling on the R'nenawatalawa for strength. N'prat knelt beside her, her big soft eyes fixed on Aleytys.

Monsters swam in the blackness of Aleytys's mind, strange distorted reflections of old thoughts and old friends. She was falling down... down... down... into an endless abyss, falling past gibbering monstrosities that were sickeningly familiar. Distorted reflections of her own face were mocking her, calling words that clawed at her mind. Down and down... then the blackness exploded into a million tongues of fire screaming into lust, fear, hate... I... I... I... I WANT... I WANT... I... I... I FEAR... FEAR... I... I HATE... I... I... blackness... A gentler falling... the pain lessened... strength... peace from somewhere flowing in. She was a winter's leaf on a gentle day drifting, drifting through images flickering like bright flowers.

A pulsing blob of bluish flesh threaded with purple veins sat in translucent placidity in the light of a small yellow sun—smaller, far smaller than Horli, but bigger than Hesh, and disturbingly strange after her lifetime with the red and blue suns. Below it, the hill sloped away on all sides, grassy turf sprinkled with small star-shaped flowers, cheerful in their dozen bright colors. A graveled path curved down the hillside with sparks of blue, green, yellow, and red glinting up from the scattered pebbles on the path. Aleytys's disembodied consciousness found the colors odd in the unfamiliar yellow sunlight. The slight shifts in tone made her dizzy at first.

The view altered slightly. She was looking at the bottom of the hill where a procession garlanded with flowers paced in flowing grace along the path, chanting a nasal, high-pitched, monotonous song. The men were covered with a silky fur about two inches long, shimmering in assorted shades of brown ranging from a rich gold all the way to coffee-black. The women were paler, cream to amber. Both sexes had small round heads with mobile pointed ears. Each woman wore a drifting veil crossing from her right shoulder over her upper pair of breasts and passing under her left arm. The men wore nothing but that splendid fur.

Floating as a disembodied point about four man-heights above the slope of the hill, Aleytys watched the procession with intense interest. She counted seven males and three females. As they began climbing the hillside, though, a shivery foreboding chilled her enjoyment of the strange beings. She refocused on the obscene thing nestling on the top of the hill. *How can they?* she thought. And felt an immaterial shudder.

The leading four men knelt. Another, holding a flower-twined staff, stood off to one side while the remaining two took hold of the first woman's arms. Her eyes were glazed and dull; she seemed unaware of what was happening. He lifted her up. The blob formed a mouth, opening and closing now with great wet kissing noises. Aleytys tensed impotently as she watched in horror.

The men swung the woman back, then forward, flinging her into the gaping maw.

Aleytys screamed a long, endless soundless howl and went twisting and tumbling off into darkness.

A man sat in the light of the setting suns. Hesh was south of Horli so Aleytys knew it was another time, not this day... he was running his fingers lightly over a battered barbat.

The sound came faintly to her as if from far, far away, the rippling notes mingling with the whispers of water flowing past his feet. Aleytys willed herself closer, then gasped with joy. "Vajd," she whispered into the darkness. She saw with warm affection that he'd found himself another tree to sit under beside the flowing water of a river. She let her eyes wander over him, happiness hot in her, then she saw the scarred and vacant eyes and if she'd had corporeal eyes she would have wept.

A woman came walking through the raushani bushes lining the path to the river bank. Zavar. Aleytys smiled, or rather she felt the same warmth a body smile would have wakened in her. Van. She looked content, even happy. Her small pointed face had a new maturity and the breeze blowing against her abba outlined a far-advanced pregnancy. The impetuosity Aleytys remembered seemed to be muted, but her aura breathed the same tenderness. In the hovering blackness—a point awareness with fuzzy invisible outriding emotions—Aleytys felt a peculiar, uncertain mixture of jealousy and affection, envy and love.

Zavar carried a steaming mug of chahi. She knelt beside Vajd and put the mug in his hand. For a long time they sat there leaning back against the old horan, Vajd sipping at the hot liquid, Zavar resting close beside him in a companionable silence. The shadows lengthened and finally merged as the tip of Horli alone was left, a glowing ruby on the finger of the world. Then even that was gone. And Aleytys was rumbling over and over through that featureless blackness.

Laughter rippled in an arpeggio of delight. Bright disks skimmed across a greenish sky. Strange faces—enormous jade-green eyes, tiny mouths, crests of fluffy greenish feathers; three-fingered hands ending in dagger claws; male-female playing tag across the sky, bellies flat on darting disks circling in an intricate dance, laughing, screaming, laughing. ...

Worlds spun under her eyes like colored marbles.

In the blackness and emptiness a burnished silver mote flashed past boiling, burning suns. Three creatures skittered around a room of metal. Each had six appendages, multi-jointed with shaggy coarse black hair, twitching, swinging back and forth along the pale flesh, clawed hands, two fingers and an opposable thumb, great yellow eyes with slit pupils, flat noses with long, thin horizontal nostrils, long upper lip, mouth a wide gash filled with—an oddity she found disconcerting—perfectly ordinary teeth. Such a mouth, she felt, should have poison-dripping fangs at the very least. Antennae twitched above pompoms of orange fuzz. All three had an aura of determination, efficiency, passion. Aleytys watched with fascination as they moved about their incomprehensible tasks.

Colored lights flickered across walls and slanting boards covered with moving things and knobs and switches and dials and banks of levers and sliding pegs, all enigmatic to her. But the sets of clawed hands moved with expert ease over them, doing things, eyes watching, intent. A huge blank thing like a square blind eye—glassy, milky white—glowed suddenly. A black expanse dotted with silver specks flowed

across the square, then a mottled ball in green, white, and blue filled it. Aleytys watched, puzzled. The ball hung there, turning slowly so that the blue and green shapes altered. The white streaks floated and flowed like water. Suddenly she knew they were clouds. Clouds! *That's not a ball*, she thought excitedly. *That's a world. Hanging above? Below? No matter. This is how a world looks from way up*, she thought. *Jaydugar? Mother could have seen it this way. But who are those creatures? And when is this? Again...*

She tumbled away again through flickering images.

A woman's face, eyes wide with surprise, turned toward her. Pointed thin face, long narrow greenstone eyes, fair translucent skin, blushing to pale rose on the cheeks, wide mobile mouth softly curving into a happy smile, faint ghosts of laugh wrinkles flickering at the corners of her eyes—a face familiar but at the same time oddly strange, as if she were seeing it in another kind of light. Aleytys stared and stared. Suddenly the woman turned away as a tall man stood in the arched doorway behind her, his bright green eyes and flaming hair echoing hers. He smiled and held out a hand. “Shareem.” His voice echoed in Aleytys's ears, deep, musical. “Mother,” she gasped. *My mother*

Swirling blackness. Through the darkness faces swimming up, snatched past: human, humanoid, insectoid, bovoid... faces varying widely from the human kind, faces almost impossible to recognize as faces... whirling around and around... faster and faster... sucking her up behind them....

Aleytys opened her eyes and straightened her cramped limbs. She turned her head and looked up into Khateyat's anxious face. Shakily she freed her hands and pushed herself up off the rock. As she stood, she stumbled and Khateyat caught her, helping her to steady herself.

“Ahai ay-mi,” she breathed. “What a... what an experience!” She touched the diadem. “It seems to have turned itself off.” An odd feel in the air made her sweep her eyes over the faces of the nomad women. The Shemqyatwe, all but Khateyat, had backed off beyond reach and were looking at her with peculiar expressions. “What's wrong?” she demanded.

Khateyat said slowly, “What happened to you, Sezet Aye?”

Aleytys's eyes narrowed suspiciously. “How do you speak the mountain tongue so well now?”

With a quick flash of a smile, Khateyat reached out and touched Aleytys on the shoulder. “We haven't changed, daughter. Listen to yourself. You speak the medway.”

“Ahai!” She gave a startled little laugh and touched her head again. “It must have popped some of my mother's gifts awake.” Her eyes sparkled in her thin brown-amber face. She stroked the blooms of the diadem, smiling as a small shower of clear pure notes sang to her. “What else does this thing do?”

Khateyat shook her head. “We did not want to know and did not ask.” She glanced rapidly at Raqat and away, mouth twisting unhappily. “It had power.” She shut her mouth firmly.

Aleytys sighed. Looking down at her stained and dirty hands with a grimace of disgust, she said briskly, “Have you soap and a towel I can borrow? I need a bath.”

Khateyat laughed, the sound undoing the tension that had crept into the air. “Come, daughter, we have food and fresh clothing for you.” She flicked a finger at N'frat.

The young witch jumped up and scrambled over to her mount. She lifted a thick leather roll from behind the padded leather that served as a saddle, then trotted back to the river bank. Untying the thongs, she slipped the leather free and began piling boots, trousers, tunic, headcloth, cords, gloves, and some plain underclothes. Finally she took a soft thinnish square of material and a lump of soap and handed them to Aleytys.

Aleytys grinned. "I'm not sure I don't hold this"—she held up the soap—"more precious than the diadem."

Khateyat chuckled. "While you bathe yourself, daughter, we'll set out the food. I'm sure you'll find that equally welcome once you're clean."

Aleytys was aching and tired. Less than an hour ago she had been more or less resigned to suffering whatever Tarnsian had in mind for her, while now her emotion fluctuated unpredictably with the unexpected advent of a trace of hope. She took a deep breath and rubbed her hands across her eyes. "Bath first. Ay-mi, I need one."

She pulled loose the cord that gathered the neck of her blouse, slid off the rock, landing on the sand, ankle-deep in the cold water. Tearing the ragged, filthy garment over her head, she threw it into the water, laughing as it slowly disappeared downstream. Then she sobered and turned to face Khateyat. "I haven't felt him for a while now, but he won't give up. He could be here any time."

"One man." Khateyat smiled comfortingly. "He's insane. And powerful. Terribly powerful. It'll be much worse when he's close."

"Don't worry, daughter. You're not alone now." Khateyat's smile opened into a silent chuckle. "Take your bath, my dear. Please."

Aleytys gave a low gurgle of delight and kicked at the water. Unbuttoning her trousers, she kicked them off and sent them floating after the blouse, then patted her side where her pregnancy still made little show. "Vajdson," she whispered. "We've made it, I think we've really made it"

Humming cheerfully, she scooped up the soap and began rubbing it over her arms.

Khateyat's voice broke into her happy abstraction. "Haven't you forgotten something, daughter?" As Aleytys turned back to her with a puzzled look on her face, Khateyat touched her head.

Aleytys's hands flew up. "Oh," she said, feeling foolish. Flipping the soap onto the grass, she waded back to the shore, reaching up to pull the diadem off her head as she moved. It resisted. She pulled harder. Fiery needles stabbed deep into her head and forced a cry of pain from her as she sank to her knees.

With the river slipping smoothly past her body, she stared at Khateyat, horror cold inside her. "I can't take it off," she whispered. "It won't come off."

Khateyat waded out to her. Once more she tried to touch the diadem but gasped in pain and drew back a seared and shaking hand. "It defends itself," she said unhappily. "I can do nothing."

Aleytys clutched at her leather trousers, panic flooding her. "What did you do to me? Get it off me. Get that thing off me!"

Khateyat's strong face compressed with pain. "I can't, daughter."

Aleytys pushed at her and splashed back, ugly with fear. "They warned me about you medwey, they warned me. Aya-ai-Aschla, you've killed me!"

"Please, my child, believe me. I did not know." Khateyat pulled herself to her full height and frowned at Aleytys. "This was not by my wish. The R'nenawatalawa command us. My word, Ayeh."

Aleytys clenched her fists and fought her panic down. Eyes closed, breasts heaving, she forced herself to accept the Shemqya's words, feeling them most intensely to be the truth. "Yes," she said after a while. "You speak truth." Then, absurdly, her face crumpled. "How can I wash my hair?"

Khateyat gasped. "Aleytys!" she cried. "Look!"

Aleytys felt an odd lightness on her head. She stood still until the water smoothed. Her wavering reflection showed red hair straggling around a twisted face. And nothing more. Cautiously she touched her head. She was free of the incubus. It was gone, sublimated into the air like evaporating dew. Bewildered, resentment and fear-born anger chased out of her by astonishment, she turned to Khateyat once again. "What happened? What did you do?"

"Nothing." The older woman was still grim-faced. "Forgive me, I did nothing. You will have to work out your own relationship with the diadem, I fear. Because of the R'nenawatalawa interest I know there must be purpose behind this pain. Perhaps that will make the pain easier for you to bear."

Aleytys splashed a handful of water over her hot, tired face. She sat down and let the water coil around her aching body. "You've been kind, Khateyat," she said tiredly. "I'm sorry I... I said what I did. It's just that... well, things are going up and down too fast for me to keep my balance." She spread out her hands and let the water run shallow over them while the cool flow coiled around her spirit and soothed her as it always did. River on river on river—Raqsidan, Kard, Massarat, Mulukaneh Rud—the water magic touched her. With a shiver, she abandoned her future difficulties. "I have to wash my awful hair."

Khateyat smiled tiredly and tossed her the soap.

Later, clean, tired, and comfortably full, she swallowed a mouthful of the spicy daz and smiled at the witches. "I feel a person again. Thanks to you."

N'frat grinned back at her. "A full belly usually leads to a rosy view of the world."

Aleytys looked around at the others, holding the mug cupped against her breasts with her two hands. She sucked in a deep breath, firmed her determination, and said, "I need your help. I have to cross the Wazael Wer. Will you take me with you?"

The six women looked uneasily at her, then fluttered glances around the circle of faces.

Eyes burning, face distorted with anger, Raqat burst out, "No!" She frowned around at the others. "We don't want outsiders."

N'frat bounced around on her heels and glared at her. "I wouldn't send a feeble sept back to that man." She shuddered. "Didn't you feel him? What's wrong with you, Qati! It's not like she wanted to live with us or came from some other clan." She snorted. "You didn't object to that man. No indeed, you didn't."

“N’frat’s right,” R’prat said shyly. “And the R’nenawatalawa said to protect her.” She turned to Khateyat, soft appeal in her big eyes. “Isn’t that right?”

Aleytys bent forward intently. “Please. Will you at least ask... ask *them*?” She felt strange saying the name, so didn’t. “Ask if *they* desire you to escort...” She broke off and stared back up the hillside. “Tarnsian. He’s coming.” Twisting back, she faced the women. “I can’t go back,” she said flatly.

“I understand. I—” Khateyat broke off as Aleytys crumpled over until her head was turning back and forth on the ground in front of her knees.

With a soft cry, Khateyat stirred and started toward her with N’frat and R’prat just behind. Together they made a circle around Aleytys and held her.

Raqat tugged at Khateyat’s shoulder. “No,” she hissed. “Let her fight her own battle. Who’s she we should help her? An outsider. A troublemaker.”

N’frat lifted her head. “What are you doing? Help us.”

“You don’t understand, baby.” Raqat took hold of Khateyat’s shoulder and shook her. “This is wrong, Khateyat. It’s wrong.”

N’frat snorted angrily, her young face filled with contempt. “Oh, I understand,” she said fiercely. “I understand. You’re jealous of this one. You’re afraid she’s stronger than you.” She nodded at Khateyat and R’prat, who bent over the straining figure, their eyes shut and their bodies tense with the effort they were putting out. “Look at them. They didn’t ask who she was. Get away. We don’t need you.” She rejoined the circle and held Aleytys’s pained face between her strong young hands. Staring into the blank dead eyes, she whispered intensely, “Fight, Aleytys. Fight. You’re stronger than he is. Fight.” She shut her eyes and let her strength pour out through her fingers.

Raqat stared at Aleytys, who was blinking and working her lips feebly as she fought off Tarnsian’s clawing attack. Flouncing around with an angry exclamation, she stared a moment at the cold expressions of Kheprat and Shanat, then ran off under the trees.

Skin flushing hot under the three sets of hands, Aleytys gave a twitching, trembling smile. “He quit,” she said weakly. “For a while...” She gasped and the taut muscles standing out under the skin like hard ropes jerked to softness until she was hanging heavily on their hands. “Help me up, please.”

Leaning on N’frat, she stumbled to her feet. Then she straightened and faced the line of trees that marked the river road. Black wings fluttered around her, blotting out everything else, an attack not in actual force but by threat to wear her down.

Tarnsian rode out from the shadow under the trees. She saw him as a looming black silhouette coming closer. Then a weight came back on her head, a pain like fire burning a circle around her temples. Slowly, reluctantly, she slid her hands over her ears. A single note broke on the air. The diadem. Behind her, she heard an exclamation that deepened into a slow basso groan.

The air around her took on a strange hard brightness and the absolute stillness frightened her more than Tarnsian’s tangible presence. Absolute stillness. Not a sound. Not a sound at all. She sucked in a breath, moaned, and clutched at her breast. She couldn’t hear her own breathing....

Tarnsian was riding toward her. His mount's strides were long, long, taking minutes to lift and fall. She saw Tarnsian turn his head—slow, slow, inching around—and see her. Saw him float down from the horse, taking forever and ever to touch the ground, floating down like a wind-tossed leaf. She saw him stand and stare at her, his face muscles flowing slowly into a grimace of hatred. Saw him reach slowly to his belt for his knife. Saw him take long, long minutes to complete the movement and long, long moments to pull the knife out and up. Saw him run and dive at her, diving slowly, slowly, slowly straight at her. Diving slowly straight at her as if the air were thick as water. Diving toward her, the knife thrust out, blade shining redly in the light of the suns.

And then her body moved. She gasped. Without her willing it, her hands moved up and out. She hung somewhere behind them, watching in bewilderment, not understanding what was happening with her own body. One leg came up and she pushed off the ground with the other, and the extended foot caught the arm that held the knife, sending the weapon spinning slowly, slowly spinning, turning in a slow adagio spiral.

She landed, knees bent, and sprang aside, easily avoiding his slow, twisting reach for her. Then her hands clasped themselves together, and as Tarnsian fell past her, slammed themselves against the back of his neck.

Abruptly his body speeded up. She heard a low cracking like a twig breaking underfoot. Sprawled out, arms and legs tumbling haphazardly, he hit the ground and collapsed in on himself, bounced slightly, and settled back, oddly flattened.

Aleytys stared down at him, horror growing sick in her stomach. Ignoring the startled exclamations from the Shemqyatwe, she dropped to her knees beside him and tried to lift him. His head dangled loosely. She touched his neck and shuddered as she felt the bones move under her fingers. His eyes were half closed, mouth slack and smeared with dirt. "I didn't mean..." She tried to brush the dirt off his face. "Tarnsian..." He was thinner, his face relaxed and quiet at last. He looked absurdly young, all the evil washed away.

"He never had a chance..." Helplessly she let the body drop.

Then she reached up and touched the diadem. Nausea surged through her at the ripple of pure notes incredibly lovely in the hush. She seized the flowers with both hands, trying to rip them from her head while the notes grew louder and louder and pain drove burning needles into her head. She screamed, then dropped a thousand miles into blackness.

When she woke, her head was in Khatyat's lap and N'frat was bathing her face with cold water from the river. She pushed their hands away and sat up, looking around her with a cold sickness in her stomach. "Where is he?" She stood and turned in a circle.

"We gave him to the river." Khatyat came to stand beside her.

Together they walked to the bank and looked down the serenely flowing water. "His spirit is returned to the keeping of the R'nenawatalawa," Khatyat said quietly, her troubled eyes on Aleytys's still shocked face. "When he is reborn may his life be happier."

"He was driven..." Abruptly Aleytys began to cry. Held in Khatyat's comforting arms, she sobbed until her throat was raw and her stomach muscles aching with the shudders that jerked through her body.

N'frat came up to them, carrying a steaming mug of daz. She looked gravely at Aleytys, puzzlement

evident on her small face. She stroked Aleytys's hair as the paroxysm of guilt and grief began to abate. "Drink this, friend. You'll feel better."

Aleytys gulped and took the mug, then took a swallow of the hot spicy liquid.

"He was a bad man, Ayeh. I don't understand why..."

Leaning back against Khateyat's shoulder, Aleytys gave her a watery smile. "He's the first living thing I've... no, the first person I've ki-killed with my own hands. And... and, in a way, it wasn't his fault he was the way he was."

N'frat looked at her and shook her head. "He was a bad man and it is a good thing he is dead." She rested her hands on her thighs and continued to stare gravely at Aleytys. "If you have an enemy and he attacks you, kill him. It's the way." She lifted her hand and tipped it palm up, moving it in a wide circle. "See the ways of the wild things."

Aleytys sighed. "We were taught differently in the mountains. However, I suppose I'll have to leave that learning behind me. I still have to get to the other side of the Green." She stood and stretched. "Will you take me?"

Khateyat sighed. "We will ask the R'nenawatalawa. Do you understand that that's the only way you can come with us? If they take you under their protection. Otherwise you will be killed if you leave this ground." She spread out her hands. "It is the law of my people. And it is a necessary law. The life on the Wazael Wer is hard."

"I accept that." She walked to the river bank and stood looking down at the water. "I have to. How do you ask them? And when?"

Khateyat glanced at the suns. "At moonrise." She chuckled. "You'll see how then." She nodded at N'frat. "N'fri, you and R'prat get camp set up, will you?"

"Yes, Khateyat." She hesitated, visibly distressed. "Raqtat is still gone. Shani went after her. I don't think..."

"Don't worry about them, child." With an unhappy sigh, Khateyat touched her on the cheek. "Just go and do what I told you."

Aleytys watched her run off. "Why..."

Khateyat turned away. "You do realize, Aleytys, that you can't take the horse with you."

"What!" Catching hold of Khateyat's arm, she demanded, "Why?"

"The sesmatwe take only half as much water. The horse is a luxury we can't afford." Khateyat smiled at her. "I think you have an affection for him. You would not enjoy seeing him in a stew-pot."

Aleytys shuddered. "Aschla's bloody claws!"

"If you leave the stallion here, the caravaners who come to the tjarat will find him and take him. They treat their horses well, especially such a fine animal as he is. There's no need to be concerned about his welfare."

Aleytys kicked gloomily at the grass. "I'll miss him," she muttered. "Madar, everything I have..."

"Come sit down and tell me what brings you here." Khateyat nodded toward the tree where Aleytys had been sitting when they first saw her. "I imagine it's a very interesting story."

2

Aleytys crawled out of her chon, stood up, and stretched, working the night stiffness out of her muscles, enjoying the slip of the supple leather over her newly filled-out flesh. She sat down in front of the low tent and pulled the thongs off her braids, running her fingers through the fiery red strands. As she shook the crimps out and worked the bone comb through the knots, nostalgia woke in her. An image of Twanit smiling at her and chiding her for vanity flickered momentarily through her mind.

She smiled, then took in with quiet pleasure the noises, sights, and smells of the awakening camp: the groans of the sesmatwe as the camp boys ran the shell teeth of the currycombs through their coarse yellow-tan hair... the soft hissing of the yd'r-pat fires with their thick herb-scented smoke... the strengthening scent of frying meat and hot daz as fire after fire flared up... the hoarse shouts of unseen men as they brought in strays... the joking calls between sept fire and sept fire as the women fixed breakfast and tended their infants and younger children. Those separate threads wove themselves into a vivid tapestry.

Aleytys tied thick braids with leather thongs and shook them over her shoulders so they hung down her back, a style cooler by far than when it hung in a free-flowing mass. She sighed and looked over at the chon erected next to hers. Khateyat was bending over the fire, stirring the pot of daz that hung from the forked p'yed. When she lifted her head and saw Aleytys watching her, she waved her over.

Aleytys tilted onto her knees and jumped to her feet "Good morning, has' hemet."

"Nathe hrey, young Aleytys." Khateyat put the spoon down and turned the frying meat over in the pan. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved." Aleytys wrinkled her nose. "After that ride over the mountains I just can't get enough to eat." She flipped a hand at the ragged line of blue marking the eastern horizon.

With a chuckle, Khateyat nodded and thrust the tines of a long-handled fork into a piece of meat and lifted it into a shallow bowl. "Here, Leyta. The daz is ready too; dip yourself a cupful." She piled the rest of the meat on another plate after serving herself.

Aleytys took the dish and looked curiously around. "Where are the others?"

"Lifting wards from the herd. The other clans are still too close. Raids. We leave the river tomorrow and can relax a little, thanks be." She spread a cloth over the extra meat and picked up her own dish.

Aleytys chewed the juicy mouthful, swallowed, and said earnestly, "I've been wondering about something. Why does Raqat hate me so? I haven't done anything to her."

Khateyat compressed her lips. She poked at the meat in her plate. "I think this animal must have fought every inch of the way across the Wazael Wer."

Aleytys felt her distaste for the intrusion, saw her shut-in face. She sipped at the daz and let it trickle down her throat as her eyes wandered around the camp. "Tell me about him," she said abruptly, waving her cup at the tall, thin man walking past them, chains clanking musically as he moved.

"The slave?"

"Um. I thought you killed all strangers."

With visible reluctance, Khateyat balanced her plate on her knee and turned to face Aleytys. "If I said forget it, hes' Aleytys?"

Aleytys's right eyebrow flicked up and she grinned. "Well."

Khateyat sighed. "For a grown woman carrying a child..."

Aleytys chuckled and cut another bite of meat. "Where'd you find him?"

"He's Raqat's, Leyta. Forget him."

"But, Khateyat my friend, I've the worst itch in my curiosity."

The older woman sighed. "Very well, but let it drop after. Please. He came with the fireball. It landed in a lake toward the western side of the Wer. We caught him as he came out of the water."

Aleytys looked shrewdly at her. "That's not all."

"He brought the diadem to this world." Khateyat spoke softly, eyes flicking restlessly around. "He stole it. He's a thief and a stranger, not to be trusted at all. For some reason the R'nenawatalawa forbade killing him. He's not to be trusted." She faced Aleytys and repeated emphatically, "Not to be trusted at all."

"I think..."

"What, Leyta?"

A flashing smile lit up Aleytys's face. "I think I like the wild ones best; I've had too much trouble from the righteous."

"There's wild and wild. Keep your head clear, young Leyta."

"Don't worry about my head. It's the other end that's restless." She chuckled, wriggling her behind on the leather.

Stavver walked past the fire once again, slanting a pale gaze down at her. She watched him as he turned around the edge of the herret and disappeared toward the river.

"Aleytys!" Khateyat's voice was stern. "It will take over five months to cross the Wer. I know the dark ones laid on us the burden of carrying you with us to the mountains, but... Will you think? If you indulge yourself, the bargain could be dissolved in blood."

Aleytys sobered. "Yes, has' hemet. I understand. I was only teasing." Bending toward the older woman, she touched her arm. "If I act like a thoughtless child now, it's only because this is the first chance I've had to play a little." She straightened and patted her middle. "Give me another couple of months and the little one will put all that out of the question, anyway." She drained the mug and sliced off another bite of yd'r meat.

Khateyat jabbed unhappily at the chunks of meat on her dish. "Leyta, I'm sorry. I wish..." She sliced off a sliver of meat, chewed briefly, and washed the mouthful down with a swallow of daz. "Wish it or not, you're going to be a wedge driving us apart." She took another bite and chewed on the tough fragment for a while. Then she saw five small figures riding back toward the camp. Swallowing hastily, she stood up. "Leyta," she said softly, then hesitated, glancing first at the girl, then at the approaching riders. "Will you... will you mind going somewhere else for a little while?" With a sigh, she held out her hands. "It's better to go lightly if you can. When you can."

Standing up quietly, Aleytys touched Khateyat's hand. "I know." She set the mug in the middle of the dish and handed both of them to the older woman. Then she turned her back on the worried face and strolled away.

On the far side of the herret, she looked toward the line of trees marking the location of the river. "Khatya's kind," she muttered, "but I'm an outsider. She'll always put her own first." She kicked up a clod of dirt that flew into the side of a tent, then rattled to the ground followed by the cry of a baby. Hastily she strode toward the river. "Get over the trouble lightly, Leyta. All things end, Leyta. Walk low and don't stir the grass, Leyta. Khas!"

She glanced back over her shoulder and saw the ragged white head of the slave hovering at a little distance. Whistling breathily between her teeth, she sauntered toward the trees with the white head drifting circuitously behind her. When she reached the bank, she scooped up a handful of gravel and sat down on a clump of grass. As she waited for the man to work his way inconspicuously to her she chucked the stones into the water one by one.

"That seems a profitless occupation."

She looked around, moved her eyes deliberately up and down his wiry body. "The slave."

He grimaced. "Call me Stavver." He lowered himself beside her and glanced swiftly over his shoulder.

"They can't see you from the camp. Besides, it's time for breakfast. Have you eaten?"

"Enough." He ran his eyes over her, avid curiosity strong in his face.

"You're from offworld?"

He raised his eyebrows, corrugating the reddened skin on his high forehead. "Right," he said. He glanced up at the suns and shifted into the thickest shade next to the rough-skinned bydarrakh. "How do you know that?"

"Khateyat." She swung around and sat facing him, her legs crossed, her hands resting lightly on her knees.

His skin, what there was visible around the patched leather coverings and shaggy beard, was red and peeling. Small translucent flakes floated from around his mouth and off his nose when he talked. *Long*

and skinny... no, not really skinny but... ai-Aschla... he'd fit through a knothole. My head would barely reach his ribs. He must have been very fair before Hesh went to work on him, like my mother. Excitement sparked in her. She leaned forward and stared at his eyes. *Khas*, she thought, disappointed, *like watery milk... the Vrya have green eyes*. She stifled a giggle. His moon-white hair stuck out in wisps and merged with a short scraggly beard.

"Satisfied, young mystery?" His long teeth flashed briefly under the straggling moustache.

"Why call me that?"

"Mystery?" He shrugged. "Aren't you? You're not one of the medwey. With that hair? And you're no slave. You pop up in the middle of nowhere sponsored by that bunch of witches. You're crossing this hostile territory for some secret reason of your own that no one in the camp understands. And for some reason you're under the protection of the local gods. So you tell me. Mystery?"

"Come to that, what about you?" She tapped her fingertips on her knee, jittering a little in response to her nervousness. "Why'd you come here? Why would any starman come to Jaydugar?"

He grimaced. "No choice. It was that or wait for some spiders who don't like me at all."

"Spiders?"

"RMOahl hounds sniffing on my trail. I had something they wanted." He narrowed his eyes and smiled at her.

"Khatayat says you're a thief. And that I shouldn't trust you at all." She looked disparagingly at the unkempt figure in front of her.

"Come here where I can talk to you." He spread out his arms and smiled lazily at her. She unfolded her legs and wiggled over the grass until she was sitting beside him, his arm around her shoulders. "Isn't that friendlier?"

"Not very wise, though."

He chuckled. "Raqt catches you, you'll get that fantastic skin clawed up some."

"So you're such a prize."

"A rarity," he said dryly, leaning back against the knobby trunk of the bydarrakh. "It's her brainstorm, not mine."

"What's it like, the world you came from?" She could feel her throat tightening as she came closer to the questions she was waiting to ask, but she tried to keep her voice casual.

"That was a long time ago, lovely, a long, long time ago. It'd take a year to tell you about the worlds I've seen."

"I have to get offworld," she said slowly. "You know about starships?"

"How do you think I got here?" He caught her chin and tipped her face up. "Who are you?"

“I was born in those mountains.” She jerked her head free and nodded toward the east. “I’ve spent my life up until the last few months in a mountain valley.”

“Mountain girl.” He sat up and turned her around, his hands on her shoulders. “You’ve no business out there.” He flipped a hand at the brightening sky. “You’d be eaten up like a mosquito in a pond full of frogs. Why?”

“Why?” She grinned at him. “My business.”

Stavver stretched out and smiled lazily. His eyelids dropped over his eyes while his moustache hid his mouth. He looked as relaxed as a cat on a hot day, but that was a pose. Aleytys could feel the intense vibrations of curiosity and growing excitement underlined by desire that rippled out of him. “How do you plan to get offworld?”

Aleytys hesitated, then shrugged. *What the hell*, she thought. “That takes a bit of leading up to. Umm. In your boasted wanderings, thief, have you ever heard of Vrithian?”

His face turned bland as a cream-licking gurb’s. “I’ve heard the name.” Tell me what you know.”

“Mountain girl. How the hell’d you know about Vrithian?” He watched her, a glint of speculation in his pale eyes.

Aleytys rubbed one hand up and down the soft leather of her trousers. The river whispered past with a gentle breeze wandering over its rushing water while she wrestled with her problem, remembering her mother’s warning: “Don’t tell anyone you’re part Vryhh.” And Khateyat said not to trust him at all. But... She turned to look at him, frowning intently as she struggled to estimate his potential danger to her. *I can handle him*, she thought finally. *After Tarnsian... but go slow*. “A man told me the name.”

“What man?” His body was very still while his face kept the bland sleepy smile. “What did he look like?”

She shrugged. “What difference does it make? You don’t know him, you never will.”

He reached out and pulled her against him. His hand cupping her shoulder, he gently caressed the smooth dark amber skin. With a sigh, she tilted her head back against his sinewy shoulder and tried to read his face. “You think he was Vryhh?” She chuckled and relaxed against him. “No. He was the dream-singer of my valley. And my lover.” She sighed. “He was just a little taller than me, with dark hair, brown eyes. Brown eyes....” She winced. “He’s blind now....”

His eyes narrowed in their webbing of sun-red wrinkles. “That why you left him?”

She drove her elbow into his stomach and jerked away from him, savagely exulting in the grunt of pain she drew from him. “Damn you! Ahai, ai-Aschla! I’d be with him now if...” She closed her eyes and felt helpless tears drip down her face. Agony burned like poison inside her at the sudden vicious thrust of loss and guilt. After a minute, she felt his hand moving soothingly over her back as he pulled her gently into the curve of his arm. He said nothing, just held her until the pain passed off.

She sighed and opened her eyes. “I left,” she said dully, “because they were going to kill me, tie me to a stake and set fire to me.”

His eyebrows twitched up, then down, and the lines at the corners of his mouth—half hidden by that

ragged moustache—cut deep into the tender skin. He slid his hand up and down her bare arm, pausing now and then to stroke the sensitive skin on the inside of her elbow. “I’ve been fascinated by you from the day the witches rode in with you.”

She relaxed against him, trying to figure out just what she was feeling. As he cupped his hand over her breast she felt her breathing quicken, grow more ragged. The turmoil of emotions tearing through her sent her mind rocking. She didn’t, couldn’t, think. She was on fire... hating him... desiring. He moved his hands over her body and she let him. Like a shadow at the back of her mind floated the cold thought, *He’s from offworld, and that’s where I need to go* .

She pulled back slightly. “Raqaat,” she breathed.

“The bushes... there’s an open space...” His voice was hoarse, urgent. Pulling her to her feet, he stumbled deeper into the raushani with her, propelled by the chill urging of prudence.

A while later he leaned on his elbow and watched her re-braid her hair. She brushed the dust and dead leaves off herself and slid the tunic over her head.

“You’re quite a woman,” he said thoughtfully.

She looked up at him, then lowered her eyes and picked up the lacing for her tunic. As she coaxed the thong through the small openings at her neck, she flicked a series of swift glances at him.

He scratched his jaw through the wiry beard. “You pull a man like a magnet, witch. Maybe it’s that a man knows there’s something about you he can’t get his hands on.” He watched her slyly. “I’ve known prettier women.” He let that sink in, then went on. “Women more interesting...” He shook his head, watching the flush of anger creeping over her cheeks. “Where did your dream-singer learn about the Vrya?”

With a disgusted sniff, Aleytys stepped into her trousers and laced them up. “All those women. Ahai! Why don’t you crawl back to Raqaat?” She jerked the laces tight and slapped them into a knot.

He caught hold of her ankle.

“Let go of me!” Breathing hard, she kicked out viciously at his face.

Chuckling, he pulled and caught her as she tumbled over, sitting her upright on the trampled grass. “Where did your dream-singer learn about the Vrya?”

“You’re a stubborn khinzerisar.”

“What’s that?”

She laughed and pulled at his beard, tweaking out a grunt of pain. He wrestled her over onto her back and glared at her.

“I’ll make a deal,” she gasped out.

“What is it?”

“Tell me what you know about the Vrya and I’ll tell you how... maybe... we can get off Jaydugar.”

He rolled off her and sat up. “That seems to be the only way I can get an answer.”

Aleytys pushed herself up onto her knees, brushed the debris off her clothes, and squinted at him past her swinging braids. “Put your clothes on, idiot. Don’t think you’re going to distract me with... mmm... your obvious physical attributes. If Raqat saw you...”

With a grin, he pulled on his shirt and trousers. “I feel like my skin’s crawling every time I put these on.” He sat down beside her, glancing up at the suns. “Time’s going.”

“How long?”

“Enough, if we hurry. I have to strike the tents soon.”

“Well?”

He rubbed his hands on the grass beside him, staring thoughtfully past his toes. “The Vrya, Aleytys, are holders of a secret I’d give you name it—up to and including the aforementioned physical attributes—to have.”

“Ahai, mi-mashuq, and what is that?” She remembered her mother’s words.

“The location of their homeworld, girl.” He sucked in a breath and stared avidly at nothing in particular. “It’s supposed to be the biggest, most fabulous treasure house in the whole damn galaxy.” He sighed and leaned against a ballut growing in the ring of raushani. “Word is they’re born wanderers, born collectors. Some call them misers; they never sell any of their treasures and no one else sees them...” His tongue ran greedily over his cracking lips. He locked his hands behind his head and stared with hungry eyes at the fragments of pale lavender sky he could see through the leaves.

“Here and there,” he said dreamily, “scattered across the stars and chasms of space, the Vrya go in their little ships, each one unique, each one designed, so they say, to fit the spirit of the master. I’ve seen them more than once...” His voice trailed off, his face gone blank with the intensity of his greed.

“How did you know they were Vrya ships?”

“Ha! No mistaking them... you wouldn’t understand.” He pulled his hands from behind his head, staring into the palms. “God, I’d give my... never mind.” He grinned wryly. “Damn bastards go where they want, when they want, like they owned the whole damn galaxy. People say—”

“They say... they say... don’t you know anything yourself?”

“Quiet, cat, you asked me.” He unfolded a long arm and cupped his hand beneath her chin. “So listen.”

She pulled his hand away. “All right. Go on. But hurry.”

“The Vrya are traders. They swoop down on a world and carry off whatever they want and they always want the beautiful and unique, creations born out of the sweat of genius.” His voice went soft again. “They come and take priceless things...”

Aleytys touched him on the arm; he jumped and looked annoyed, as if she’d pulled him from a pleasant dream. “What do they trade?” she asked. “Or are they just bigger and better thieves than you?”

“Oh, they trade.” His gaze grew even more abstracted while his fingers closed into tight greedy fists. “Constructs. Machines to do anything you want. It’s almost a sin to call them machines. If you want to—” He stopped and groped for words. “This damn impossible language! If you want... to change the face—yes, face—of a whole world and shape it closer to your desire, a Vryhh’ll make a construct to do it—a thing small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, I’ve seen one—if you have something he wants. Want a construct to weave or build or make. Ask, and a Vryhh’ll make it... if you have something he wants. And if you can find him.” He rubbed a long finger over his moustache. “A few fools tried to take the constructs apart to see how they worked.” He chuckled. “They stopped being fools and became corpses. I had something the Vrya might have wanted, but I lost it.” His hands closed again, squeezing until the knuckles went white with pressure, while his eyes closed to glittering slits as he frowned at her.

Aleytys watched the lurid sunlight pouring in red floods through the leaves. She turned her head slowly and examined his face. His nose jutted like the beak of a bird of prey.

“Vrya have been followed”—his voice was soft and he spoke each word slowly, rolling it over his tongue as if he liked the taste of it—“fooled, coerced, but they’re a sneaky, devious unpredictable bunch of bastards. Men have bragged of finding Vrithian, but they’re liars.”

“What do Vrya look like?” Once again her voice jerked him from his daydream and he grimaced. “You asked me about my love,” she said quietly. “So I thought you must have seen some of them.”

He scratched the loose skin off his nose as he examined her. “A little fairer and you could pass for one, though...” He peered into her face. “Your eyes are a shade too blue. I saw a Vryhh woman once—not too close, I was where I definitely shouldn’t have been—in the course of professional activity. She had red hair, green eyes, and the most unbelievable skin. Like yours, but fairer, milk-white. They say they’re all the same, red hair, green eyes, white skin. I heard an old man tell of seeing the same woman once when he was a boy just past puberty, and again some eighty years later. He was old but she hadn’t changed at all. Who knows, he could have been senile.”

Aleytys rubbed her back against the tree trunk, broke off a raushani branch, and fanned it back and forth in front of her, stirring up the stifling air.

Stavver narrowed his eyes and stared at her, a speculative glint in his roving gaze.

Abruptly Aleytys curved her mouth into a mirthless smile. “Khatayat told me not to trust you.” She shrugged. “What the hell, what can you do? I’m half Vryhh. My mother, sweet lady, abandoned me before I could walk, but she had an attack of conscience and left me instructions on how I could come to her. So, you help me and I’ll get you to Vrithian.”

He sat very still, eyes fixed on her. After a minute, he swallowed and sucked in a deep unsteady breath. “Why?”

“You’ve got friends... out there?” She jerked her head at the sky. “Who’d come here for you if you could call them?”

“Yeah, there are a few I could call.”

“Do you know about a Romanchi trader? Could you use its... its machinery to call someone to take you off this world?”

“A Romanchi!” He jerked up and leaned toward her. “You know where to find a Romanchi?”

“I think so. It brought my people here a long time ago. My mother said it should still be where it landed. She found the logbook in the library of the Mari’fat. . . that’s a guildhouse in my valley where we keep records. I had it, but lost it getting here. But I remember what she said in her letter. If I take you there, will you take me with you when you leave?”

“Of course,” he said smoothly.

“You’d leave me in a minute, you don’t fool me, thief.” She laughed. “But just remember this, let it sink in deep. I can get you to Vrithian. So keep hold of me, thief; take very good care of me.”

He scanned her face, his shrewd gray eyes narrow slits in his peeling face. “You’ve got the coordinates of Vrithian?”

“No, of course not. There’s a way, but I’m the key.” She stood up. “You’d better get back to camp, slave. It’s time to strike the chon and fill the water barrels.”

3

The huge wheeled wagons left the river where it curled toward the north. Followed by the grazing herd, the medway clan struck out into the empty rolling prairieland through day after unchanging day while Aleytys merged herself quietly into the Shemqya household, carefully avoiding Stavver and keeping away from Raqat. As the days passed, placid on the surface with their lack of overt event, she began to comprehend some of the undercurrents, noting the rivalry between her patronesses, the witches, and the male aspect of medway magic, Thasmyo, the Khem-sko. She settled down to the slow, uneventful progress across the undulating sea of grass, growing placid and contented as one of the yd’r cows, her baby rounding out her waistline more and more as the hot quiet days slid past.

4

The sesmat lay on the ground and whimpered. A swelling just above her left forefoot trailed a thin thread of sluggish blood. N’frat knelt at her mount’s head, tears streaming down her face. Khateyat bent down and touched her shoulder. “N’fri, you know what has to be done. When sarket bites there’s nothing we can do.”

With a hoarse sob, N’frat stood up, turning her face into Khateyat’s shoulder, her whole body shaking with the grief that tore through her. Khateyat looked over the top of her head. “Shanat. . . R’eShanat, do what is necessary.”

“Wait.” Aleytys walked around the herret and touched Khateyat on her arm. “I think I can help.”

“Leyta.” Khateyat shook her head, a warning dark in her eyes. “It would be better. . . ”

“I know and I wouldn’t interfere, except I do think I can help.”

“Help?” N’frat wiped her eyes. “Help, Leyta?”

“Yes. But quickly.” She looked steadily at Khateyat. “The poor creature’s dying. Will you permit that I try to heal her, has’ hemet?”

Khateyat returned the look. “Be sure you know what you’re doing.” Her troubled face warned Aleytys without any need for words that she must not fail.

Aleytys knelt beside the animal and placed her hands over the wound, letting the healing force flow out through her fingers while the black waters swirled around her, pouring through her so that she forgot the intrusion of the diadem, forgot everything but the pain of the animal she touched. She gasped with pain as the terrible poison kicked back at her, but sank her teeth into her bottom lip and hung on to fight the destruction of the venom. She would not let go. She refused to let go. *For Zavar*, she thought, *for Vajd*, *for N’frat*. Tears began to squeeze from under her hot eyelids.

Then the burning was gone. She opened her eyes and uncramped her aching fingers. When she looked down, she saw that the swelling was gone. There wasn’t even a scar on the leg. The sesmat twitched and surged to her feet. She pawed at the ground, jerked her head, looked around out of bright eager eyes. Aleytys laughed with delight. Then she tried to get up, almost falling as her knees gave way. With a little gasp N’frat was beside her, helping her stand. Khateyat took her other arm and steadied her.

“You have our gratitude, R’eAleytys yeyati. You’ve done what we could not” Khateyat glanced briefly at Raqat’s glowering face, saw Myawo frowning beyond the circle of women. “You’d better rest a while, Leyta,” she said quietly. “N’fri, go with her.”

“Leyta, Leyta, how do I thank you. . . ” N’frat slid a hand under her arm to help support her. Looking over her shoulder, she called to R’prat. “Take care of Shenti for me.”

“Sure.” R’prat took hold of the mare’s bridle and led her off.

“Come on, Leyta. You haven’t put up your chon yet, have you? You just sit and I’ll throw it up for you.”

“Thanks, N’fri.” Aleytys tottered off, leaning on the young Shemqya’s shoulder.

Raqat watched with smoldering angry eyes. “Intruder,” she spit.

Khateyat wheeled. “R’eRaqat,” she snapped. “You let your hate make you unjust. Feel shame that you can’t appreciate a generous act.”

Raqat stared sullenly at the ground. She kicked at a tuft of grass and slammed off without a word. Shanat trotted after her.

Khateyat sighed. Kheprat touched her on the shoulder. “It proceeds,” she said sadly. “There’s nothing you can do, Khatya. She has chosen her road and will walk it to her own destruction.”

“It proceeds.” Khateyat shook her head. “Why. . . why can’t she see the thief for what he is? Why can’t she see the woman as she is? Leyta’s a good little thing. I like her, Khepri. She’s got courage, generosity, even a little wisdom; much for her age.”

Kheprat smiled, her blind eyes glinting whitely as she shifted her head. “We live with it, Khatya, like the sun that burns and the wind that dries. Raqat has always been flawed. We both saw it long ago. Perhaps it’s better, though I hurt to say it. She would have been dangerous to the Zabyo. Now, perhaps. . . I don’t know. But it’s no failure of yours, sister.”

Once again Khateyat sighed. She patted Kheprat's hand. "We had best get our chon up, too."

5

Aleytys jumped as the hand came down on her shoulder. She swung around. "Stavver!" Closing her eyes, she thrust out an arm and steadied herself by grasping his shoulder. "You nearly scared me white-headed." She looked hastily around. "Get out of here. I don't want my eyes scratched out."

"You forgot the river already?" His voice was deep and caressing, while his hands flicked over cheeks, the points of her shoulders, the tips of her breasts, waist, groin, lighting fires inside her.

"Madar!" She twisted away. "Are you crazy, fool?"

"Crazy about you, witch."

She glanced quickly around at the thin screen of scrubby, stunted trees. "Look, all right, when you touch me, my knees go weak. I may be a woman in that, but I'm not a fool. Why do you think I've been keeping away from you? I start trouble, they throw me out. I'm dead. Dead!" She looked nervously around again. "Go, get out of here!"

"Deal?"

"What?" She pushed the tickling wisps of hair off her forehead.

"I'll go away now if you come to my chon tonight."

"You are crazy. Certainly not."

He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her into a stumbling walk toward the camp. Aleytys struggled, hissing angrily through her teeth. "Better be quiet, love," Stavver said coolly.

"All right, all right." She kicked at his shins. "But you come to me." She wriggled around and kicked at him again. "Let me go, or I'll bite, fool."

"Now, isn't that better?" He let go of her and stepped back. "I'll be there soon as camp's dark."

She shook her head. "Be careful, will you? It's my life you're fooling around with. What about Raqat? Won't she be wanting you?"

He shrugged. "She's bleeding. Won't let me near her a few days."

"She could still check up on you."

"No, sweet. She can't go near any man when she's in blood. She doesn't dare. She sits all bundled up in her chon and stays in the herret all day. If her shadow touches a man she has to be beaten and go through purification. If she breathes on a man, she's killed. So she won't be out. We're safe."

Aleytys gave a faint shiver of distaste. "Ahai, you make it sound so sordid."

“That’s life, little cat.”

“Well,” she snapped. “It won’t happen next month. You’ll have to find yourself another bed-warmer.”

“Now, love... ”

“Done call me *love*, you... you af’i!” She pulled away from him. “I won’t have it.” She laughed fiercely as she edged toward the trees. “Next month I’ll be too damned pregnant for you to touch.”

“Too bad. Then we just have to make the best of what we’ve got” He grinned at her. “See you tonight.”

6

Horli hung a hot red circle behind Aleytys with blue Hesh a scorching boil on her right side. Wisps of the hydrogen ring joining the two pasted gold glints on the fuzzy red. Behind the herretwe, the yd’rwe spread out into the ragged crescent throwing up a haze of dust as they edged over the land, grazing as they walked. The wagons were pulling farther and farther ahead as the bottom edge of Horli cleared the flat horizon line.

Aleytys walked beside the pacing team of yd’rwe pulling the Shemqyaten herret, keeping the leaders in line with the side rein attached to a halter. Just ahead of her the wagons of the haryo-tep rumbled over the wiry grass and just behind, in unspoken and unbroken order, followed the herretwe of the other septs of the clan.

Her moccasins, laced high on the ankles, swished along step by step, putting the miles behind her. Her sleeveless tunic and leather trousers were packed neatly in a small leather hon Khatyat had given her and now she wore the traveling gear of the medway: long loose trousers of coarsely woven cloth, dyed deep scarlet, gathered in at the ankles to keep the dust out; a tunic blouse with a high gathered neck and wide loose sleeves that reached to her knuckles, scarlet to match the trousers; a white headcloth clamped to her head with knotted scarlet cords.

She paced placidly along in a kind of mindless glow. Behind her, so much in her ears that she had ceased to notice it, came the rolling thunder of the hundreds of yd’rwe hooves and a crunching sound as tongues tore up mouthfuls of tough, wiry grass bleached a pale yellow by the suns. Step. Tear. Step. Tear. Stride by stride, mouthful by mouthful, the herd moved along, covering nine to ten stadia each day.

Aleytys’s shadow stretched out ahead of her, slowly shrinking as the twin suns moved hour by hour up the curve of the sky. She felt fit and strong, contented, a little like one of the yd’r cows. Sweating, hot, dusty, heavily pregnant, she walked beside the animals and rejoiced in the smooth sliding of her muscles and the strength flowing in her body. Underfoot, the springy grass pressed up against the thinning leather of her moccasins, living grass pressing up from the source of life, the flesh and bones of the world. Aleytys vibrated to the almost tangible forces streaming up through her feet from the elemental Jaydugar.

“Leyta.”

She lifted her head, pushing back the edges of the fringed headcloth. “N’frat?”

The shaggy sesmat bobbed her triangular head over Aleytys’s shoulder. She scratched the mare’s nose.

“Shenti,” she chuckled. On the sesmat’s back N’frat peered anxiously down at her. “Do you want to ride in the herret for a little, Leyta?”

Aleytys blinked lazily. “No,” she said, her voice slow and dreamy. “I feel fine, N’fri. Anyway”—she nodded back at the suns—“it’s only an hour or so till we have to stop for high heat. How long till water?”

N’frat fiddled with the reins. “After the stop, ride, Leyta. You’ll need your strength.” She pressed her lips together, her young face full of trouble. “We aren’t going to camp tonight. We’ll be moving all night.”

Frowning slightly, Aleytys examined her face, then said, “But”—she waved a hand at the yd’rwe—the herd, that won’t be good for them, will it?” The lead rein jerked her attention away for a minute. She pulled the straying animals back in line, then turned back to N’frat. “Aren’t we supposed to reach water tonight? Srima said something like that this morning. At least I remember. . . .”

“Poisoned.” N’frat’s face turned hard. “The Khem-sko rode ahead to check it and found a family group of ghekhsewe dying there from the water. He sent a boy back and went on to the kedya-water. We’ll get there tomorrow and we’ll hold ch’chyia to search out the bwobyan who did it.” Her set, angry face softened. She smiled at Aleytys. “You be sure and ride. I’ll take the chanerew.” She clicked her tongue and the sesmat loped ahead to join the group of Shemqyatwe.

Aleytys kicked unhappily at the grass. Poisoned the water. The ultimate crime in this dry grassland. Her mouth twisted. *I’ll start believing in my curse after all*, she thought. *Everything I touch . . .*

The wagons were silent that night, none of the whistletalk and laughter that usually accompanied the march. The only noises in the tense, angry silence were the miserable bawling and the occasional grunting roars from the harassed animals. They wanted to lie down and rest. The calves wanted to suck. As the night progressed they began to bawl constantly as their stomachs cramped and their bodies passed from tiredness to exhaustion. One after another the calves lagged behind or fell under the trampling feet of the adults. Aleytys lay in the herret and shivered as the plaintive blats of the abandoned calves echoed along her sensitive nerves until she lay in a shaking heap, hands pressed over her ears.

The march trailed on and on, a nightmare of heat and noise as the second day began, but just before high heat the weary and irritated herd plowed into a shallow lake and sucked up huge gulps of the muddy water. Aleytys climbed out of the wagon and stretched her cramped limbs. All along the line of march she could see the circling vultures. She turned reluctantly toward the herd, her mouth tightening in a grim line as she marked the thin scattering of calves.

N’frat saw her and rode over.

“How bad is it?” Aleytys asked, her voice low with pain.

“Of the calves, two thirds are gone. It could be worse.” N’frat rubbed her hand across her worn and dusty face. “We’ll just have to butcher fewer at the killing ground. Leyta. . . .”

“What, N’fri?”

“The people’s temper is. . . they’re very angry, Leyta. I know you had nothing to do with this, but you understand how they feel about outsiders. They’re in a mood to tear someone apart. You’d best stay hid. This is clan business. Leave us to it.”

Aleytys nodded. “Thanks, N’fri.”

As Aab and Zeb floated up from behind the horizon and full dark lay over the plain, the clan gathered about the fire built of hoarded wood burning redly on the muddy shore of the shallow lake. They sat grim-faced, boiling with barely suppressed anger, in an arc a double herret-length from the fire. Myawo walked into the circle of light and paced solemnly to the furs piled on a sesmat leather in front of the fire. He sat down and crossed his legs, fitting a small drum in the space between his knees.

After a moment of silence, he touched the taut hide, letting his fingers ripple over the drumhead. Left hand keeping up the ripple of sound, he stared into the flames and began to beat their rhythm into the drum with his right.

Raqat leaped onto the sand beside the water's edge, the firelight slipping redly over her oiled body. Feet beating in a strong counterrhythm to the drum, arms curved up over her head, hands angled out like small wings, she circled the fire once, then stood swaying, arms outstretched toward the silvery reflections of Aab and Zeb floating on the still black water of the muddy little lake.

Silently, one by one, the other Shemqyatwe stepped into the light, sitting down in a tight arc facing the Khem-sko. Khatyat's voice blended softly with the crackling flames as she chanted in the archaic tongue. "R'eN'frat, khesawsef weret kehkwew chre yaqaskh."

N'frat swayed up onto her feet. Her clear young voice floated up and out as Raqat moved again, weaving a connecting thread between the soaring chant and the rattle of the drum with the fire-painted undulations of her body.

Out in the darkness, seated on the Shemqyaten herret, Aleytys watched the dance, feeling a little uneasy but drawn by an insatiable curiosity that wouldn't let her stay in her chon. She glanced around at the silent camp. *I shouldn't be out here*, she thought. *They chained Stavver*. She shivered. Power swirled in heavy whorls out from the lakeside. Her head began to throb.

"N'taheytyaaaa. N'tahetya. N'tahtya." N'frat's voice rippled pure as mountain water. "Metawet ni nya net yari tw'n megheh h'wew... tw'n megheh h'wew..." The pounding n's and m's broke over Aleytys's brain like white water in river rapids... hammered at her. The flames reflecting on Raqat's driving body, the complex and jarring rhythm of the drum, the low undersurface hum from the seated medwey, the tangible streamers of power... her eyes blurred as these things wove into a throbbing knot around her head, tighter and tighter around her head. Her lungs strained with the thickening air; she panted, scrubbing at her face until her skin burned.

A delicate ripple of sound, cool and refreshing as fresh mint, knifed through the overheated night. When she reached up, her fingers stroked cool metal. There was a physical weight binding her temples now, and a thousand tendrils of pain burning into her brain. Frightened, she pulled her hands down and stared at the leaping flames.

The singing ended suddenly in a high, questioning, demanding note. The dancer stiffened and was abruptly rigid, hands reaching urgently toward the moons. The drum halted in midbeat. Myawo held fingers poised inches from the surface of the leather. The tension in the air thickened as all the medwey riveted their hot, angry eyes on Raqat, waiting....

"Bwobyan in'm?" Myawo's voice rang out deep and commanding. At last Raqat's voice came in answer, a hoarse scream that finally modulated into staccato negatives. "Nin. Nin. Nin... nin... ninnnnn..." She collapsed into a panting, sand-smearred heap while the fire dulled as if shrouded by a black mist.

Aleytys clutched at her head, shuddering at the chiming music under her fingers. The fire entered her brain, and without willing it, she was suddenly on her feet. She was walking, threading her way stiffly through the medway. She was looking out through her eyeholes, prisoner in a body she couldn't even feel. Stiffly, then with rapidly improving ease, the body moved toward the fire.

Terrified, Aleytys screamed but her mouth made no sound as she felt it curving into an empty smile. She could see Khateyat's disturbed frowning face. *The diadem*, she screamed to her, *not me. It's doing this, not me... not me... not meeeee*. The body stopped in front of the fire.

Aleytys crouched inside in pain and darkness like a wounded animal. Her mouth opened and she spoke words that came from... she didn't know. A deep amber glow spread over the scene as, fleetingly, she felt a presence stir at the back of her head, then forgot it while she listened to what her mouth was saying.

"The water poisoner." The voice that came out of her mouth had a vibrant hoarseness, a swelling power unlike her usual tones. "He knows and he's fighting you." Her arm came up and gestured at the panting figure on the sand. "He defeated you. Defense is easier than attack. He does not know us and we are stronger. We follow his traces. Look for the poisoner in the tents of the Hawk. This one can guide you there. They plan to come for the herd at dawn." On her head the diadem chimed softly.

Myawo watched her, his eyes glittering hostilely.

A caustic laugh bubbled from her stiff lips. "Don't be a fool, sheman. Forget your petty vanity. The tanzweyn tanchar wait." She took another step closer to him. "Hadn't you better get ready to take care of the tanchar instead of grumbling at us?"

A deep growl made them both twitch. "She's got you there, Khem-sko." His face set in lines of cold anger, Thasmio snapped, "Woman, you give us a name. Give us a place."

Aleytys felt a loosening in the grip holding her prisoner in her head, although the ghost image of the diadem still hovered above her. She could see it reflected in the haryo-tep's dark eyes. At the same time she felt the heat of the fire on her face. As she sagged and swayed Khateyat jumped up and caught her. Holding her steady, the Shemqya said softly, "Do you know what you've said, hes' Aleytys?"

Aleytys nodded wearily. "I heard the words, though I didn't say them. I have to talk to you. Please? Later?"

"Yes, of course, but answer the haryo-tep, child."

She leaned back against the Shemqya, legs feeling like wet string. "Yes," she said tiredly. "Give me a mount and I'll take you to them."

Head spinning, Aleytys felt herself hoisted on the back of a sesmat. Myawo rode up beside her, his aura glittering so that she saw him less as a man than a great reptilian jewel. "Go," he hissed.

She closed her eyes. Surrounded by that odd amber glow, a pull like a string tied to her mind lined away to the west. Without hesitation, she led the attack party toward the dry camp where the tanchar dozed unaware of the approaching danger. After about a half hour's steady plodding, she pulled up and pointed. "There," she mumbled. "Just over that rise."

Thasmio shoved past her and slid off his mount. He brought his hand down in a taut, angry gesture and

the men dismounted, gathering in steaming silence around him. Myawo sniffed at the air. “No wards,” he grunted. “Stupid.” He dismounted also and jerked his head at Aleytys.

Reluctantly she slid off the sesmat and joined the group. The men opened their ranks and let her through them until she stood in front of Thasmyo. “What more do you know?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing.” She flicked an uneasy glance at the scowling, angry faces ringing her. “Only that the ones you want are there.” She nodded at the top of the low knoll.

“Come.” Thasmyo swung his arm at the top of the rise. They crept up the back of the knoll until they could peer over the top, partially screened by knots of long grass. Below, sleeping in pools of moonlight, huddled forms of about twenty men lay stretched out with their heads toward the tethered sesmatwe. Thasmyo squatted beside Aleytys and peered intently at the standard fluttering from a pole stuck in the ground. “Tanchar,” he grunted.

Aleytys swallowed. “You have them,” she whispered. “Let me go back to camp.”

“No,” Myawo hissed.

Thasmyo nodded. “Healer,” he said softly. “We need you if some are injured. You will?”

Reluctantly Aleytys nodded.

“Good.” He looked grimly around at the men. “Go,” he whispered.

The zabyn around him nodded silently and began creeping down the hill. Aleytys knelt and wrapped her arms over her breasts, her hands cupped over her shoulders, shuddering at the violence in the air.

When the ragged line of men reached the bottom, she saw sabers glinting silver in the moonlight, then red as they hacked at the sleeping figures. The tanchar scrambled blearily out of them—blankets but the surprise was too complete. Before they managed to get on their feet, the shimmering lunar curves of the sabers slashed across their throats. Howling mad in fighting blood fury, the zabyn cut the surprised men into bloody fragments.

Forgotten on the crown of the little hill, Aleytys crouched on hands and knees, vomiting until her body was one great ache.

7

Raqat pulled the leather doorflap back and looked down. In the darkness of the chon Stavver was a pale blur against the dark leather. She tied the flap open and moved on her knees back to the sleeping man, bending over him to stare into his night-veiled features. *A secret face*, she thought. *I was sure I knew him once. Before that woman came.* She touched his cheek. *Now, maro, you look at her... You don't look at me like that.... She's carrying another man's child and you can't keep your eyes off her.*

Abruptly the chon seemed to be closing in on her. She pulled on a sleeveless tunic and crawled outside.

The night was still warm. Aab had already set and Zeb was just a silver bead resting on the dark line of

the horizon. The stars hung low enough to pluck like flowers. Raqat took a deep breath. Moonset meant that dawn was close. She looked around. The yd'rwe were a vast cloud spreading like an inkstain across the gently rolling plain. The Shemqyaten herret loomed just to her left with Aleytys's chon huddled close beside it. Since the raid on the tanchar, the redheaded witch held a peculiar position in the clan, not one with the zabyn but not counted as a stranger either. Raqat snorted with sudden rage and ran out from between the circle of tents.

She ached to be alone, to have no one smothering her with the effluvia from their night thoughts, to have no snoring in her ears, no paining-pleasing presence beside her. She snatched up a heavy stick and ran up the shallow slope of a small elevation, not a hill—scarcely more than a mosquito bite in the earth, just a gentle rise up a long slope breaking off like a wave to drop straight down two meters at the crest.

At the top of the rise she tramped the grass down, beating around with the stick to drive away snakes and stinging bugs. Then she slumped down into the grass, dropped her head on her knees, and began crying... huge soft, half-stifled sobs that shook her whole body. As Zeb slipped down behind the western edge of the world, she pulled in a deep unsteady breath and wiped her eyes. "Khas," she muttered. Feeling a presence, she looked up. Myawo stood a few feet away, hands on hips, watching her.

She glared defiantly at him. "You come to mock at me too, Khem-sko?" To her disgust her voice broke on the last word. She cleared her throat and spit at his feet "No, R'eRaqat."

She stiffened with surprise and suspicion. His voice was gentle and he even gave her the respect title. Peering through the heavy darkness, she tried to read his expression.

"After all," he murmured, "you're zabya." He moved closer and dropped beside her. "I'm a cross-grained man with little to recommend him to a woman." His voice turned liquid soft, caressing her like gentle fingers. "I resent it, you know, mari Raqat." His voice sang like music in her body. "I resent the presence of that stranger in our camp." He stopped speaking and ran his fingers up and down her arm.

Raqat began to breathe faster as she felt the tight muscles of her shoulders and neck loosen under his smoothing hands. With an involuntary shiver she turned toward him, relaxing as he eased her down on her back and continued to work the tension out of her muscles. When she was soft and limp, he drew his lips across her face, moving a hand down over her shoulders inside the unfastened tunic to squeeze her throbbing nipples. With the other hand he worked the hem of the tunic up over her buttocks until it was bunched around her waist. Raqat sighed and moved her knees apart for him.

Sometime later she sighed again, lifted the hand that lay heavily on her breast, and held it between her own. "If only..." she murmured sadly. "If only things could be like they were before she came."

Balancing on one elbow, Myawo freed his hand and stroked his fingers along her jawbone, his thin mouth twisting into an unpleasant smile. "Get rid of her," he whispered temptingly into her ear.

Raqat swung an elbow and knocked him away from her. Jerking upright, she glared at him. "Stick my hand in the fire for you?" She laughed fiercely. "Not a chance." As she watched him unwind his spindly length and sit up, she faltered a little in her determination. "I couldn't," she said slowly. "The R'nenawatalawa..."

He reached over and caught hold of her hand, running a series of light kisses up her arm. "There are more powerful patrons."

Relaxing under the skillful caresses, Raqat lay back but she still shook her head dubiously. “Not for a Shemqya,” she murmured.

“A Shemqya with the protection of a Khem-sko?” Raqat’s native shrewdness began to reassert itself. In spite of the wash of emotion inside her, she pulled away and asked dryly, “Why? You don’t care what happens to me.”

Myawo straightened his back, crossed his legs, and meticulously retied his shoes. His round black eyes held hers with compelling force. “The diadem. I want it.”

The corner of Raqat’s mouth twitched up in a fleeting smile. Meeting his gaze squarely, she said, “That I believe.” Then she shook her head, a tinge of regret in the smooth lines of her face. “Even she can’t take it off.”

“If she were dead. . . ” His voice was soft and smooth as silk.

“The R’nenawatalawa protect her.” Desire fought with caution in her.

“Against Mechenyat?”

Raqat caught her breath, fear vibrating tautly through her lush body. “The Coiled One,” she whispered, crossing the fingers on both hands. Her eyes slid uneasily around as if searching for something at the edge of vision. “No!” she said suddenly. “No. . . .” The second time her voice faded weakly.

“With the diadem,” he whispered, smiling at her, bending over her so that his dark strength threatened to crush her. He caught hold of her hands and stroked the palms with gentle fingers. “With the diadem, there’s nothing we can’t do.” Back and forth, back and forth, the fingers caressed her hot palms. “It’s so easy,” he whispered. “So easy. She dies. The diadem is mine. You have what you want. I’ll protect you, my word on it. I’ll swear by *him*. You’ll be first in power among the Shemqyatwe, stronger than them all, stronger than Khateyat. Think of it. . . think. . . think of all we can do. . . ” He let his whisper die into a soft hiss, leaving her imagination to work on its own. Slowly he stroked her palms, feeling, as his fingers moved, the muscles tighten under them as if the hands were about to close.

Suddenly Raqat jerked away and leaped to her feet. “No!” she shrieked. She ran down the slope, the skirt of her tunic flapping noisily on her sturdy thighs. At the heret she paused, leaning on the corner while she caught her breath. When she looked up, Aleytys stood in front of her.

“He was not telling the truth,” Aleytys said quietly.

“You followed me.” Raqat backed against the wagon side and clutched at a huge back wheel.

“No. I didn’t have to. Raqat, I. . . I can’t hurt you. Don’t you know by this time I’m not your enemy?” Aleytys bit at her lip and wrung her hands, her agitation like an itch under her skin. “He. . . he’s using you. Don’t let him.”

Raqat straightened, eyes flashing. “Leave me some dignity, woman. Do you have to strip me of everything?”

“Raqat. . . ”

Raqat pushed away from the wagon and brushed past Aleytys, leaving her standing helplessly in the darkness before the dawn, the sparse morning dew cold on her feet and a worse chill in her soul.

When Hesh was sending up a fan of blue light beside Horli, Raqat slipped out to the water wagon, eyes on Stavver's shaggy mop of white hair. He turned when he heard the sound of her feet, the buckets hanging from the yoke swaying a little as he moved. "Slave," she rasped. He glanced at her silently and set the buckets down so that the ra-mayo could fill them.

"Slave. Slave. Slave." Her voice was shrill with a break in it like a sob. "Stay away from her, you hear me?"

Stavver turned his back on her and bent down to lift the yoke back on his shoulders. She hooked strong hands on his arm and whirled him around. "Look at me," she said hoarsely. "Stay away from her." Her lips began to tremble as he didn't respond. "Well?" The word quavered uncertainly.

Stavver shrugged. "I hear you," he said insolently. He settled the yoke on his shoulders and walked away without another word.

After the fires had burned low that night, Raqat slipped out of her chon. She crept to the shabby patched hutch Stavver slept in and edged the doorflap back, holding her breath as she peered in, scourged by jealous imaginings. He lay nude and alone on the sleeping leathers, sweating a little in the hot still air of the night. Weak with relief, she crept in and shook his shoulder.

"Stavver," she whispered urgently. He mumbled and snored. She shook him again. His eyes blinked open. "Wha..." he mumbled.

"Stavver, it's me. Raqat."

He pushed himself up, his face pinching together in an irritated frown. "Raqat? Dammit, woman, I just got to sleep." He yawned and stretched. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. Late. Does it matter?" She caught at him with small hot hands. "Stavver, I need you."

The corners of his mouth turned down in an unpleasant grimace. "What happens," he said coldly, the tone of his voice an insult in itself, "when a slave refuses an order."

Raqat licked her lips. "It... it depends. He could be killed."

His voice full of contempt, Stavver said softly, "Move your ass out of here before I kick it out."

"Stavver..."

"Go ahead, tell the clan I can't stand you anymore. And watch the grins on their faces when they go to the execution." He grinned nastily at her.

Whimpering like a sick sesmat, she turned on her knees and crawled out of the chon, then ran blindly until she bumped into a slender body.

"You!" Her hands curled into claws she swung at Aleytys's face.

Aleytys caught her arms at the wrists and held them until Raqat broke into wild sobs, her body shaking

with the storm of emotion inside her.

Holding her in a tender firm grasp, Aleytys sank to the ground with the sobbing girl, comforting her as she would have comforted Twanit in one of her crying fits. “Shh... it’s not so bad. You have many and many who love you, Qati. Qati, oh, hush, my dear. You’re stronger than you know. You don’t stand alone, my dear, little one. Mmm... mmm... time heals these hurts. He’s a thief, a stranger...” As she stroked soothing hands over the shivering back, Aleytys felt the grinding pain inside the girl. Helplessly she tried to comfort, then reached out with her mind to touch, heal, sooth, turning the empathy that brought understanding inside out so that Raqat felt peace flowing into her tormented soul.

She drew in a long quavering breath and pulled away from Aleytys. “Why... how can you...?”

“Touch my hand.” Aleytys stretched out her hand palm up. She knelt quietly, knee to knee with Raqat, eyes holding hers.

Hesitantly Raqat reached out and, after a minute, touched trembling fingers to the narrow palm.

“What do you feel?”

Raqat frowned. Impatiently she snatched her hand away. “You know what I feel.”

“Yes. More than you know.” Aleytys sighed. “I can’t help it, you know. I don’t mean to pry. But I feel what you feel, so how can I not hurt when you hurt? Please. I can help. Will you let me?”

Raqat jumped up. “I don’t want help. Keep away, keep out of my mind!”

“Raqat...” Aleytys stood up and held out her hands. “Please.”

Hesitantly, reluctantly, Raqat reached out and placed trembling fingers once again in Aleytys’s grasp, then closed her eyes as she felt the warmth and tranquility pouring like honey over her troubled soul.

For several minutes the two women stood in the silvery moonlight like statues, not speaking, not moving, scarcely breathing. Then Raqat sighed deeply and gently freed her hands. “I... I thank you, Aleytys.”

“Raqat... “

Raqat looked back over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“Be careful about the Khem-sko. Please?”

Raqat laughed and walked wearily back to her chon.

8

A huge face floated in blackness, turning and turning. Gleaming wetly, slit pupils distended to pointed ovals, the great yellow eyes searched blindly, inexorably narrowing the swing until they pointed directly at her. Thin horizontal nostrils rippled as he—it, whatever—sniffed some illusive odor. The wide gash of a mouth opened in a travesty of a smile, revealing oddly human teeth. A coarse furred claw lifted into view, pointed straight at her.

Aleytys writhed on the leathers, sweating, panting in horror. Her eyes snapped open and she stared up into the stifling blackness. *Ahai*, she thought, *I'd rather not have this gift... sometimes*. With a weak laugh, she turned over and shut her eyes again.

In the musty blackness of his chon Myawo crouched over a greenish fire that reflected onto the intricate painted patterns on his skinny naked body. He swayed and hissed sibilant syllables at the fire, which sprinkled a purplish dust that burned and produced a coiling, swaying snake of smoke. Around and around the painted glowing body the smoke crept until the chon was filled with it.

Aleytys groaned in her sleep, shivered, and clutched at the leathers with hands tightened into claws.

A hairline of light shone around the flap of Raqat's chon. Inside, the small stoneware lamp burned redly, throwing dancing shadows on the curving leather walls. A finger of greenish smoke crept inside, spreading into a cloud to fill the chon. Slowly, imperceptibly, it thickened over the sleeping form of the girl.

Raqat stirred, then sat up, a blank glassy look to her eyes. She rubbed clumsily at her face and sat numbly staring at the lamp. Slowly, eerily, the smoke coiled around her and settled in a purplish green film on her dark skin. After a minute, she groped under the leather and drew out the knife she'd taken from Stavver so many months before. She knelt beside the lamp and began running a piece of leather up and down the silvery steel blade. Up and down... up and down... she fought against the obsession... up and down... against the hate... up and down... guilt and anger churned in sour bile, burning in her throat... up and down... the leather slid smoothly over the shining metal... *No, no*, she thought, *I don't hate her*. Up and down... the anger grew like a thing with a life of its own... up and down—*When she's gone, everything will be all right again*.

Dropping the bit of leather, she tilted over onto her hands and knees, still clutching the knife. Muttering incoherently, she crawled out of the tent.

Outside, clouds from the western mountains drifted across the faces of the moons. A strong westerly wind swept through the camp, pulling the soft leather of her tunic taut against her body and whipping her unbound hair around her face in a wild dance. Through the muted clamor of the dry storm Raqat moved calmly, steadily, almost blindly.

Aleytys writhed in her sleep, trying to wake but like in a nightmare she struggled and struggled in futile effort that repeated endlessly, going nowhere.

Raqat pulled the flap aside, stooped, and crawled inside. Aleytys lay half covered, her braids spreading in a sprawled V. As Raqat crept near, she saw the diadem flicker into a ghostly glow, half in, half out of reality.

Aleytys groaned inside her body and struggled to move, then a low note chimed through her paralysis and she opened her eyes to find the nightmare was real. She gasped at the sight of the savage face hanging over her, just visible in the pale light thrown out by the diadem. She licked her lips and hunched backward, digging her elbows into the leathers.

Eyes blank, lips spread in a mirthless grin, Raqat lifted the dagger.

Aleytys called hoarsely, “Raqat, don’t—” She saw the knife waver, saw and felt a kind of terror in the girl, a terror that was immediately overlaid by a sick rage. Aleytys reached out to touch her, to try to reach through to her.

The diadem chimed and the chon filled with amber light. Raqat leaned forward as once again the diadem chimed in a ripple of soft notes, enticing notes. She dropped the knife and it seared the skin on Aleytys’s stomach for an instant before her body went numb.

As Raqat touched the diadem Aleytys could feel the touch vibrating through her body. She tried to move. Only her eyes responded, rolling wildly in a mask she couldn’t move. The rest of her lay flaccid. Behind the straining body, Aleytys saw the flap pulled back again. Stavver’s pale face floated into the darkness framed by the opening, his moon-white hair whipping like tendrils of smoke in the wind. Her eyes pleaded with him to do something. She screamed her agony, but no sound came from her mouth. The only sound in the chon was the lovely light chime of the star-jewels.

Raqat’s body jerked and writhed as the diadem fought with Mechenyat, the battleground her mind. . . .

Aleytys felt something, something thin and wispy, driven out of Raqat. . . something that burned along her own nerves and thrilled through her body. . . sucked out of Raqat by the jewels. She heard their singing, a soft lovely ripple of notes. Eyes blinked open, far back in the darkness of her mind, large amber eyes grave and somber. She felt like dying. . . she didn’t want to die. Blackness closed around her tormented mind.

When she opened her eyes a few minutes later, Raqat was gone and Stavver was kneeling in the entrance of the tent, the moonlight painting horror on his face. The hot weight was gone from her head. She swallowed painfully and licked dry lips. Raising on an elbow, she croaked, “Where’s Raqat? What happened?”

“When I touched her, she ran out.” Crawling into the tent, he knelt beside her. “So that’s where the diadem went.”

With a broken cry, she shoved herself up, made clumsy by the weight of the baby in her womb, almost knocking him over as she clutched at his shoulders. “Get it off me. Please, Stavver, get it off me!” She dug her nails into his flesh, frantic with the urgency of her need. “Get it off me. *Get it off me!*” She buried her face in his chest, tears pouring down her face, her body shuddering with the hard sobs born out of her terror.

He grimaced and patted her shoulder. “Quiet, woman, or we’ll have the camp in on us. Look. I wish I could help you, believe me,” he said dryly. “I’d like to have the diadem back.” He shook his head. “I stole it but I can’t control it.” Tipping her head back, he brushed the tears from her face with gentle fingers. “Just cool it, love. When we get off this world, I’ll find a way.”

She caught hold of his hand. “They smell it. They sniff and sniff and smell it out. I’ve seen them.”

“They?”

“Your spiders. Big yellow eyes. All hairy.”

“RMoahl hounds!” He peered intently into her tired face. “Where?”

She shrugged. “Not here, not yet. Soon, I think.”

“All the more reason to get off this damned world.” He patted her shoulder absently, then pulled a leather over her naked body, gently running his fingers over the swelling at her waistline. “Get some sleep. We’ll see what to do about Raqat in the morning.”

As she closed her eyes, he backed out of the tent and stood up. The night was dark and stormy, though the wind had died down a little. A few obese raindrops splattered down on his face and shoulders.

He looked around, then slipped through the slumbering camp toward his own chon.

Horli climbed up above the edge of the world, turning the day red, sending long scarlet-tinged shadows racing across the sun-dried grass. Aleytys thrust her toweled head out and stared around. With a tired groan, she ducked out the door and stood up, dangling a towel from one hand. “Another day.” She grunted and put her hand on her waist. “He kicked me, little brat.” Happy for the moment, she danced to the river to take her bath, reveling in the bright cool morning and the warm glow her lively baby spread through her body, but most of all in the abundance of water that let her bathe for the first time in a month.

Whistling cheerfully, she scrubbed herself clean, then splashed out of the river to rub herself dry with the towel. She gathered her wet tangled hair and tied it back with a thong so it wouldn’t slap across her face. As she pulled on the tunic and trousers she frowned back toward the camp that was hidden by the thick growth of trees and bushes. She laid her hand on her side. “They never bathe, Vajdson; it’s like they’re afraid of rivers. Funny, the Shemqyatwe are always clean in spite of that. Ahi, little one, I can’t complain, it leaves the river for me.” She flipped the towel over her shoulder and started back toward the camp. In the shadow under the trees she turned around and looked up and down the river, reluctant to face what waited for her in the chon of the Shemqyatwe. Then she saw Raqat.

“Raqat?” Aleytys gasped and ran toward the girl, who sat on a rock in the full light of the rising sun, her body unnaturally still. Aleytys stumbled to a stop. “Raqat?”

There was no answer, so Aleytys scrambled cautiously over the pile of rocks working her way toward the seated girl, her thickening body making her a little clumsy. “Raqat,” she called urgently as she moved. “I don’t hold grudge. It wasn’t your fault, last night. I know that. Come back to the camp. There’s no need for this.”

Raqat sat very still, hands on knees, feet planted flat on the ground. Aleytys edged nearer. “Raqat?”

There was still no response. Aleytys felt the morning’s contentment draining away. Balancing her body over the rocks, she worked close enough to touch the silent figure. She reached out, then pulled her hand back.

She stood frozen beside Raqat, the murmuring river soothing her anguish with its liquid susurrus and the

green-on-green-on-green shifting, twisting shadows. For an instant she was back in the Raqsidan, dreaming into the dancing water, then she blinked and smiled sadly. “How long ago that was.” She sighed. “I wish I had that innocence again.”

With a sigh, shuddering at the waxy texture of Raqat’s flesh, she took the Shemqya’s arm and pulled her to her feet.

All day the men cut wood and built it into a pyre, crossing and crisscrossing the logs until the pile was man-high. In the camp, the women worked in uneasy silence at their daily chores.

The Shemqyatwe washed Raqat’s unresisting body and anointed it once more with her special oils. They unbound her hair and combed it carefully, spreading the curling—strands neatly across her shoulders. They slipped a long embroidered dress over her head just as the rim of Horli slipped behind the horizon. The dress was sleeveless with panels of intricate embroidery, lines coiling into obscure diagrams and medallions. Around her head, they tied a band of heavy cloth covered with the same designs.

Khateyat stood up. “Keep watch,” she said quietly to the others. “I’ll be back in a little.”

“No!” Shanat jumped up. “Let her pay.”

“Shanat!” N’frat caught her hand and tugged, her round face twisting into an angry frown. “It wasn’t Leyta’s doing. You know Raqat had stopped pushing her. And she was helping Raqat break loose from that sartwen. You leave her alone.”

“Both of you sit down.” Khateyat spoke softly, but they obeyed instantly. “This is very bad of both of you. Compose yourselves.” She frowned at the girls. “Take care of Raqat. I’ll be back.”

She found Aleytys sitting on the river bank, staring somberly into the water. “Tell me, hes’ Aleytys.”

With a sigh, Aleytys lay back on the grass and looked up into the night-shadowed face of the Shemqya. “Raqat came into my chon last night with a knife, intending to kill me.” She closed her eyes and plucked at the grass with nervous fingers. “I was dreaming. I saw the Khem-sko. His body was painted. He was bending over a . . . a fire. It was strange, green, he dropped powder on it and smoke crept out, coiled around him, snaked out and into Raqat’s chon. It . . . it settled on her.”

“Mechenyat!” Khateyat dropped to her knees and stared unhappily at her hands.

“What?”

“Never mind. Go on.”

“Once, you said the diadem defended itself . . . it did. I couldn’t move. She touched it; I felt the battle in her. Ahai, Khatya . . . I couldn’t move, I couldn’t make a sound. The dust was drawn out of her, driven out. Before I could even try to do anything, she ran out and I . . . I fainted. When I opened my eyes again, there was no sign of her anywhere.”

“You didn’t call me. Why?”

“No.” Aleytys moved uneasily. “I was afraid. And exhausted.” She pushed herself upright and sat with legs splayed out to support her thick middle section. “I thought morning would be soon enough.” She twisted her head and looked wearily at Khateyat. “I was wrong. I seem to make a habit of being wrong.”

The older woman touched Aleytys’s head with a gentle hand. “You’re young,” she said quietly. “You’re very young.”

Aleytys caught hold of the hand. “Will I...” She swallowed. “Will I get any older? What’s going to happen to me?”

Khateyat tightened her fingers comfortingly and smiled. Moonlight glinted off her teeth. “You’ll be safe until we reach the mountains. The R’nenawatalawa protect you.”

“But... Myawo?”

“Raqtat was flawed. Warned now, we are no longer vulnerable.” She sighed. “Be careful, Leyta. Keep away from the people.” She pressed her full lips together. “Leyta.”

“Yes?”

“I’m fond of you, you know that.”

“I... ”

“Yes, yes, there’s no need to answer.” Her eyes focused on the distant mountains. “I have many responsibilities. My people come first, Leyta. They must. I can do little to help you.”

“I know.”

After a moment’s painful silence, Khateyat spoke briskly. “Don’t come to the Nesweym’wet tonight.”

Aleytys looked up sharply. “The death fire?”

“For Raqtat.”

“But she’s not dead.”

Khateyat looked across the river, her face quietly sad. “Her mind is gone. We shall give her me’twat to drink, and then, as she is Shemqya, we shall give her to the Nesweym’wet and return her body to the earth and the air and the R’nenawatalawa that her spirit might go free.” She bent down and stroked her fingers along Aleytys’s hair. “For the sake of my people, Aleytys, they mustn’t see you tonight.” She got to her feet, moving heavily.

“Wait.”

“What is it, Leyta?” Impatience sharpened Khateyat’s voice.

“Tie me.”

“What!”

“Tie me, please.” Aleytys pushed her unwieldy body up onto her feet. “If the diadem takes me again... do you see?”

Khateyat nodded briefly. “Wait here.” She climbed away up the bank, her shoulders hunched as if she were hoisting yoked water buckets. Aleytys turned back to the river, lowering herself carefully onto the grass. She stared at the water, waiting.

Khateyat came back, short lengths of rope dangling from her hands.

9

The pains were coming closer and closer together. Aleytys clung to Khateyat’s hand while fear and pain jumbled in her. “Khatya,” she gasped. “Mother...”

“Hush, Leyta, everything’s fine. Don’t worry.” Khateyat’s voice cut through the pain mist and spread over her spirit like a soothing oil. She squeezed Aleytys’s hand and brushed the hair back from her sweating face.

Aleytys panted and trembled. The low curving roof of the chon seemed to push down on her so that her breath caught in her throat and her head throbbed. She wriggled and tried to sit up but firm, gentle hands pushed her down again.

“Khatya,” she gasped out. “Not in here. Please. Not in here.” She shoved the other hands away and rolled up onto her knees. “Help me.”

“There’s no time.” Kheprat touched her shoulder with a warning hand.

“Help me,” Aleytys repeated urgently, then grunted as another pain rippled through her. “I want to be by the river. Please.” She twisted her head back and forth, sweat beading her forehead. “*Ineed* to go to the river.”

Khateyat examined her closely a minute, then she nodded. R’prat and N’prat took Aleytys’s arms and helped her out of the tent. The other women rolled up the birth leathers and followed. Kheprat shook her head disapprovingly and held out her hand for Khateyat.

It was very early morning. Horli was thrusting her tip over the mountain like a ruby on the circle of the world. The narrow strip of trees on the river bank wrote with long shadows in red-tinged calligraphy across the sandy stone-pointed earth while the river danced down the slope, clear and cold, blue-green-blue, with a low musical roar that was like cream along her nerves.

They spread the leathers on a level grassy spot warm in the rich red light. The two young Shemqya helped her down. The pains were clutching at her almost constantly now. She stretched out, letting her spirit drift, to merge with the water and the air and the sky, then the pain became a force welling up from the blood and bones of Jaydugar herself.

A loud wail cut through the quiet murmurs of the morning. Aleytys felt limp and wrung out. Khateyat’s face smiling, gentle, loomed over her. “You have a son, Aleytys.” Another angry, demanding cry clipped the end of her words. “A strong and hungry boy.”

10

The wagons moved clumsily up the slopes of the mountains and trundled along a rutted road into a wide, steep-walled valley. Sitting beside Khateyat, Aleytys pulled the neck thongs loose and bared a breast so Sharl could nurse. "This is where you winter?" She looked around at the barren steamy valley. "How do the yd'rwe eat?"

Khateyat didn't speak for a moment, concentrating on urging the team through a downslanting S-curve. Safely around, she relaxed. "We slaughter all but the breeding stock." She pointed to the rocky ground below with its scattering of hot springs leaking steam into the air. "This is the killing ground. There..." She nodded at a monolithic cliff rising, to be lost in the ceiling of cloud. "Around there the grass is thick and lush, the floor protected from the worst of the winter winds. It is a good place. We've had to fight for it a number of times."

"Fight?"

Khateyat shrugged. "Often another clan grows greedy or the winter is harder than usual, so that the less sheltered. places are not good enough to sustain life, so they come with men and magic to challenge us." She frowned. "If this winter is bad, we're weaker by one."

"My fault."

"No. Not you. The Khem-sko's greed."

The silence between them lasted until the herret rocked onto the floor of the valley. Then Khateyat sighed. "When we camp, Leyta, I don't know what Myawo will try."

"Well, my dear friend, I won't be troubling you over the winter. There's a place I have to reach as soon as possible. The Bawe Neswet."

"Ah!" Khateyat glanced at her. "I know it." She began threading through the scattered boulders toward the narrow neck beside the cliff. "It's an ill place, bad feeling there."

"Hopefully I won't be there long." Sharl stopped sucking and began kneading her soft flesh with his tiny hands, so she shifted him to the other breast. "Greedy little gurb," she murmured happily. "No." She turned back to Khateyat. "I'll be calling for help offworld. Could you make a map for me so I could find the place?"

"Yes." Khateyat pursed her lips. "Take the slave with you."

"Hai?" Aleytys stared at her, startled.

"Before Myawo uses him again." Khateyat grunted as she swung the herret into the inner valley. "He's stirring Shanat to rebellion, using her grief for Raqat. This is very bad."

"You're stronger than he is. The other four of you. Why do you tolerate his mischief?"

"We need him in full strength. He is the male aspect of our skills. Male and female make a whole and if broken..." She shrugged.

Aleytys took the baby from her breast and pulled the neck of her tunic shut. She reached behind her, spread a cloth on her shoulder, and lay Sharl over it, patting his back briskly. "Can you get the chains off his legs?"

"Yes. That and food and mounts." She laughed. "Keep out of sight, my dear, and let me arrange your escape."

11

The baby gurgled and stretched his mouth into a wide toothless grin, reaching up with clumsy, groping hands for the braids swinging past his face. Aleytys laughed and turned her head back and forth, dancing the tickling ends across his nose. "Hee, baby," she whispered. As she tickled his stomach, he kicked his feet energetically, laughing with every muscle in his small active body. "Ahi, baby, ahi, Sharl, my dream-singer boy, my Vajdson."

Sharl lay against her legs, his diapered bottom resting on her stomach. She picked him up and rocked him back and forth, crooning softly.

In the steamy barren valley to her left far, far below, the drying racks were almost full. The bloody butchering ground was out of sight around a bend in the rocky walls, but even up here on the cliffside vagrant gusts of wind carried the stink of the blood that had run rivers into the collecting buckets as half the herd was slaughtered in preparation for wintering.

She glanced down at the valley and shuddered at the memory, glad for once to be an outsider, since she was not permitted to touch the meat. Women carried buckets in a steady steamy line to the vats for blood sausage. Men labored, bloody to the elbows, swimming in sticky, sweet red blood, slicing the meat from the bones in long, thin strips. The rest of the women pounded herbs into the strips and hung them on the smoking racks where the smoke and the sun turned them rock hard as the days passed.

Sitting above the low-hanging clouds of mingled smoke and steam from the hot springs, Aleytys sniffed the fresher air and leaned back against the granite wall that rose straight up over her head for at least thirty meters in a massive cliff sliced from the side of the mountain. She pulled the cords off her headcloth, flipping the ends back so that the wandering breeze could get to her face and neck. The baby was making a small but intense hot spot, so she lifted him and laid him down on his sleeping mat in a brush-shaded niche. He worked his mouth, sighed, and slid back into deep sleep. She touched him gently and relaxed against the rock.

She tilted her head against the stone and dreamily watched the suns slip down toward the mountains. Hesh was back on the south of Horli with the ragged ring of hydrogen rather thicker and brighter on this side of the world. "Almost night," she murmured lazily. She touched the thin warm soil beside her. "In a way I hate to leave you, Mother Earth." An answering warmth flowed up through her. Her eyes drooped shut and she drifted into a comfortable doze.

A chuckle cut into her dream. She opened her eyes and stretched. Rubbing her neck, she looked around to see Khateyat standing on the narrow track.

"Tscha! A pair you are, sleeping peacefully away while the whole world works." Khateyat sat down on a small boulder and smiled at her.

“You startled me.” Her eyes closed halfway, Aleytys grinned sleepily back. “I didn’t expect anyone up here now.” With a grunt of effort, she stood up, shaking out her stiffened joints. She looked down at the distant drying racks and turned back, puzzled. “They’re not working anymore.”

Khateyat was watching her, a grim look on her face. “The butchering’s finished. Leyta, I’m sorry, I let too much time slip past. You’ve got to leave. Quickly. You should have gone before.”

Aleytys stood up. Glancing at the suns, she nodded. “As soon as it’s dark.”

“Myawo’s been busy but he hasn’t forgotten you. I saddled sesmatwe for you and the slave, put food and things the baby needs in the saddlebags. And a map to the Bawe Neswet. Go now.” She glanced nervously down the trail. “Don’t wait for dark.”

“Khatya...”

“No, no.” She jumped up and paced feverishly back and forth on the narrow trail. “I’ll distract him. Somehow. Take Sharl and go. Or you’ll never get away.”

Aleytys bent down and picked up her sleeping son. “I have to thank you, Khatya.”

“No time for that, Leyta.” Khateyat pushed at her with shaking hands. “Go. Go.” Her words tumbled out nervously, short, sharp, clipped. “Hurry.” She pushed Aleytys onto the downtrail ahead of her. “I’m afraid... run... hurry.” Her hands fluttered against Aleytys’s back in a series of short quick taps.

Out of the drifting veils of smoke and steam a soft, insistent drumbeat thrust like poking fingers up the side of the mountain. Khateyat stiffened. “Too late,” she said somberly. “Listen.”

“A drum. I’ve heard drums every day since we’ve been here.”

“It’s the Nayal.” She was silent a minute, then burst out, “I didn’t want your blood on my people’s hands.”

“I’m not too fond of the idea myself,” Aleytys said dryly.

“The Nayal...” Khateyat’s face crumpled. “I came... you’ll feel the summoning in a minute. I should have sent you away before. You couldn’t know. I’m sorry, Leyta.” She turned away, letting her hands drop helplessly.

Aleytys grimaced. “You’ve got more to worry about than a little guilt, my mother.” She reached up and touched her temple with a long slender forefinger. A ghost tinkle floated for a second on top of the drumbeats. “The diadem protects itself. Remember? I don’t think it’ll let them kill me.”

Khateyat picked nervously at the wide bracelets on her wrists. “Ah, hem-has,” she moaned.

Aleytys drew her hand gently along the grieving face. “I’ll fight it, my best mother. I don’t want to hurt you and I don’t want them to die. Even Myawo, since you need him.” She looked down at her baby sleeping peacefully through all the emotional storms. “But promise me...”

“What, daughter?”

“Take care of Sharl if I’m killed, please. Love him for me, please?” She held the baby against her breast and stroked her hands gently along his back. “He^{has} to be loved,” she whispered intensely. “He must be loved.” She held Khateyat’s gaze with hers. “You know how much this means to me. I told you about my life.”

Khateyat nodded quietly. “You needn’t worry, daughter. He will be my son. If it is necessary.”

The slow drumming began to pulse in Aleytys’s blood. She rocked restlessly from foot to foot. With a little gasp of pain, she thrust the baby into Khateyat’s reaching arms. Eyes shining fiercely, she ran downhill a meter or so, then fought her way back. “Khatya, the mounts... Stavver... Have them all ready for me... in case. Please?” Khateyat nodded, holding the baby against her breast. “I’ll have two sesmatwe west of the camp,” she said hurriedly. “Stavver with them. Break free if you can. And, Leyta, fight. Let there be no blood.”

Aleytys gasped out her thanks and ran stumbling down the steep track, pulled faster and faster by the pulse of the drum.

As Aab and Zeb swept up toward apex, Aleytys stood restlessly kicking at the dirt inside a circle drawn on the ground. A sharp tap on a tenor drum shattered the tense silence. Aleytys started, then turned to face the boy drummer, poised warily on her toes. Myawo walked heavily, portentously, into the ring of firelight, startling a giggle out of her. He was naked except for a narrow loincloth, his body painted in snake patterns from head to foot with paint that glittered and glistened in the firelight.

She sobered immediately as a chill walked her spine, born of the aura of power pressing out from him so solidly that it was almost tangible. His little posings and pomposities melted away under the glow of that tremendous power battering at her. She faced him defiantly.

Myawo stopped just outside the line he’d drawn an hour ago in the gritty dirt. He smiled at her, triumph glittering in his round eyes, then began to walk slowly around the circle, slow heavy words falling like drops of blood from his lips, the sound weaving in and around the *tink-tink* of the small drum. The beat quickened. His footsteps quickened in turn, changing into a wild stamping dance as the Khem-sko summoned the last drop of power he controlled, summoned the dark boiling forces of Mechenyat. His voice shrilled into a compelling rhythmic chant. His hands reached out, catching handfuls of firelight and moonlight, which he wove into a silken gleaming rope. Almost forgetting her own peril, Aleytys watched, fascinated.

The rope trailed him as he stamped around the circle, hovering in long, slow undulations in midair, stretching out longer and longer... red and silver... fire and moon... silver and red... strands weaving in... over—around... around... and around the circle... weaving a fence around her.

Pain shot through her head as a familiar weight pressed down about her temples. She shuddered out of her half-dream. Her hands began to stiffen, fingers curving into claws. When she lifted heavy reluctant arms to touch her head, wooden fingers traced the graceful curves of the petals, warm-cool through the numbness. Her brain ached. She was being thrust aside again... like before....

She fought. Myawo forgotten, she clung to her fingers, to her feet, to her body, to her tongue. She fought. It was like hitting a cloud of steam, painful and futile. Then agony shot through her nerve ends until her body was a sheet of pain as her fingers crossed the line.

She gasped as she felt the influence of the diadem peeling up and off like a worn-out snakeskin. Opening her eyes, she faced Myawo, who was standing in one spot, shifting on his feet in a broken rhythm like the fluttering leap of the flames in the fire. The tail of the light-rope dipped across her shoulders and left a line of fire that ate at her skin. She moaned and writhed in the agony of that touch.

Then the diadem spilled the power-pool over her again, so fast she had no time to struggle, leaving her backed into a corner of her mind, staring out of the peepholes in her skull. Horrified, she watched her hands drop down, then stretch out, pointing directly at Myawo. Horrified, she sensed a sick, oily power flow down through her cringing body, to pool at last in her shaking hands. She darted around in her head like a mikhmikh in a cage, trying to force a way out to her body again. But there was no way.

The light-rope flicked across her shoulders again. In the pain of the touch, for a brief moment, she could force her arms down to her sides. Straining desperately, she gasped out, “Khem-sko, don’t... keep... keep away from me.... I can’t hold... if I touch... touch you...”

Chant broken off, he clutched at the disintegrating rope of light and stared at her.

She staggered around in the circle, her thin brown arms corded with the effort she was making to keep them down. She got close to the line and jerked herself away, almost toppling over with the violence of her struggle, got close again, jerked away.... Shuffle... shuffle... legs like sticks... board-stiff arms thrust out like spears... a puppet on strings pulled by an idiot puppeteer. Once again her outstretched fingers, splayed out, bending slightly backward, crossed the line.

Fire flowed like water over her whole body. Her mouth stretched open in a soundless scream. She twisted, twisted, struggled to break away... shuffle... shuffle... legs like sticks... forward... one step... jerk sideways... forward... inch by searing inch. She felt the tendons in her neck harden into ropes.

Myawo backed slowly away, inches from the thin fingers with their jagged nails and work-roughened skin, the killing rope spun from fire and moon dropping from flaccid hands, melting into the fleeting sparks.

She strained, pleaded with her eyes. *I can’t help it*, she wailed inside her head, *I can’t stop it*.

He began to chant once more, moving his hands in slow circling mandalas written in lines of green and purple fire.

Wind swooped in like a blast from a deep winter storm and caught at her, spun her around and around until she felt invisible hands clutch at her waist, her arms, her legs. Dozens of hands. With needle-pointed claws that sank deep into her trembling flesh. Howling wordless syllables that crept slyly into her brain in the shape of obscene whispers, the winds slashed at her with those numbing claws, whirled her around and around. But the claws slipped out as easily as they went in, so that the buffeting hands got no grip on her, but they spun her until her mind reeled, until tears streamed from her aching eyes.

Through the howling of the demon winds and the harsh gutturals grunted out of Myawo’s throat she could hear—growing louder and louder—the lovely ripple of notes singing out from the crown flowers. The blackness of the night took on a flickering amber glow.

There was a rising frustration in the wind’s howls, then Myawo’s chant grew louder. Aleytys shrank inside her skin from the sound. Horrible throat-tearing syllables not meant for human throats drowned out the chiming of the diadem. Weariness spread its own poison through her body but the winds would not let her rest, winging her through complicated pirouettes.

The chant seemed to harden. She felt icy bodiless hands cup around her arms and legs. This time they held, swooping her into a widening spiral that swung her higher and higher off the ground until the chant fires were red pinpoints on the black surface of the world. Higher and higher the icy hands carried her, until she spun through the edge of a cloud that flowed around her like cold and scentless smoke.

The hands dissolved and she fell, tumbling over and over through the air while wind whipped her hair back away from her face, a natural wind born out of her plunge downward toward the distant earth. She smiled, remembering nestling in the hawk's brain—a hundred years ago, it seemed—and then felt a little sad to be ending the tale of her adventure here.

Then the diadem chimed a single piercing note, drifting through the air like a floating spark. Her fall slowed. Her feet dipped until she was upright, drifting downward more and more slowly until she touched the ground as gently as a falling leaf.

A stone came flying out of the darkness and crashed into her shoulder. She gasped. A second stone flew past, just missing her head. A low animal growl rumbled from a dozen throats and filled the still night air with menace. More stones came and the growl grew louder as the medway gathered courage. A rock hit her leg. Another struck her shoulder.

The driving urge to life that had impelled her through the traumatic occurrences of the past months flared once again and sent her fleeing blindly into the darkness. She stumbled and went down again and again as her feet hooked into unseen obstacles, scrambling up each time, her breathing sobbing in her ears as the howls of her tormenters jerked her onto her feet and away from the mob.

She heard a new sound ahead, the plaintive mewling of irritated sesmatwe. They loomed up like pale shadows as she rounded a boulder and moved from the shadow under the trees. Stavver caught her as she staggered to a stop.

“Leyta.” Khatyat patted her shoulder. “Here.” She held out a leather-wrapped bundle. “Good journey and may the rest of your life be blessed.” She touched Aleytys's cheek. “My daughter.”

Stavver pulled himself up on the riding pad. “Get mounted,” he said impatiently. “We've got to get out of here.”

Aleytys nodded and swung up on the sesmat, balancing carefully so that she wouldn't wake the baby.

“Here, Leyta, put this around your shoulder.” Khatyat handed her a folded piece of leather. “A babysling.”

“Thanks, Khatya.” She slipped the strap over one shoulder and settled the baby on the opposite hip. Khatyat put a hand on her knee. “I've told Stavver how to go.” A howl came from the trees and she went on hastily. “R'nenawatalawa bless you.”

Stavver gave an impatient exclamation and rode off. As Aleytys kned her mount forward, she called, “I wish you really were my mother.” She kicked her heels into the sesmat's side and plunged into the darkness after Stavver.

Stavver jabbed at the fire. "Another day probably," he grunted.

"Ahi, at last." Aleytys stretched and yawned. "It's been a long journey for me. You think we'll have to wait long for your friends?"

"Depends on who answers." He stared at her across the fire, frowning slightly as she bent over her sleeping baby. "Stop fussing with the kid and come here."

She lifted her head and smiled sleepily at him. "No."

Jumping up, he strode around the fire and pulled her to her feet. "You weren't so reluctant before."

She eyed him calmly. "I was already pregnant then. I don't want to have your baby, Stavver." She pulled back against his hold, quietly trying to free herself. "I'm tired, thief. We have to get up early."

He caught her by the nape of her neck, his long wiry fingers closing around her heavy braids. With his free hand he caressed her face, then her breasts. Feeling her response, he bent his head and kissed her eyes lightly, then her mouth. . . until Aleytys broke free, breathing hard. "No," she said. "I meant it, thief." When he reached for her again, she slapped his hands away. "Don't be a fool. You know what happens to people around me."

He grunted and shrugged. "Have it your way."

"Yes. I will." She moved calmly away and settled herself in her blankets. "You better get what sleep you can."

He snorted and sauntered into the darkness.

Aleytys lay back and closed her eyes.

Later that night out of the blackness of sleep a pinpoint of light opened into a strange, frightening image. Aleytys stirred and muttered incoherently in the grip of the dream. His nerves on alert, Stavver whipped up and looked around, then saw Aleytys twisting about in the blanket and muttering. He reached out to wake her, then pulled his hand back and waited for the dream to stop.

In the viewscreen, mile on mile of rippling prairie flowed past like wrinkled tissue paper. The sensory fibers that were twisted into long feelers growing out of the orange pompoms on the side of his head twitched erratically as Sensai increased the magnification gradually, watching the world turn slowly under the ship.

Aleytys cried out, repelled by the hairy monstrosity that she felt staring down on her.

Ocean. Mountains. Plains again. A lake like a splash of blue dye. Sensai tapped the screen. "There, that's where he went in. The ship's on the bottom of that lake, dead."

Mok'tekii clicked his nipper claw. "Hai, koeiyi Sensayi, the diadem is activated. The ship may be dead, but the thief isn't." His nostrils wrinkled and waved with worry.

Chiisayii clattered into the room, dragging a trolley with piles of boiled tamago and slices of shimsi arranged in intricate patterns on a hexagonal amber tray. The Third waited in silence for the others to notice his presence.

Sensai cut off the screen. "Waii, the thing we feared. But it won't be long now before we have it again." He swung his body around and moved for the food.

Aleytys shuddered as the light clicked off, then grew quiet when sleep took her again.

Stavver watched her face smooth out. "Over," he muttered. He shoved the blanket back and knelt beside her, shaking her awake.

"Wha... Stavver? I thought I told you..." She rubbed her hand across her face and pushed herself up. "What do you want?"

"You were dreaming. I know those dreams of yours. What did you see?"

"Ahai, my friend, if I dreamed true it's bad news for us. I saw the ones you call RMoahl hounds. They're up there now, up above Jaydugar." She pointed at the starlit sky above them. "They know where your ship is and they smell the diadem."

He settled back on his heels. "So that's how they do it Damn. How much longer till dawn?"

Aleytys shrugged. "An hour, hour and a half."

"No use wasting more time. Get up. We'll leave now."

13

Aleytys thrust her fingers under the sling-strap to ease the ache. Although it was still quite dark down in the ravine, up above the rim was blood red as Horli poked her head up. Aleytys shifted wearily on the uncomfortable leather, knocking a fretful cry from Sharl as his sling bounced against her hip. "Hush, baby," she said softly, wiggling her hand into the enveloping folds of leather to touch him reassuringly.

Ahead of her, his outline fuzzy in the red-tinted gloom, Stavver rode steadily on without speaking or looking back. Aleytys made a face at him, then relaxed. She patted the mare, uncomfortably aware that the sesmat was tiring. The spring had gone out of her stride. Aleytys bent over and stroked the shaggy neck, the clumped coarse whorls of fur damp and sticky under her fingers.

"Stavver," she called impatiently. His head turned briefly. "Stavver, can't we stop a little?"

"No." His voice floated back, cool and definite. She glared at the thin stubborn back.

"I'm hungry," she yelled. "Are you so scared of those a'finit spiders you don't dare wait even to eat? Ahai! I'm hungry!"

"No."

With an angry shrug of her shoulders, Aleytys banged her heels into the sesmat's flanks. The tired animal lengthened her stride for a few paces, then slowed to a jolting trot. Sighing, Aleytys pulled the mare back to her loping walk.

The narrow track began to slant more steeply until her thighs ached from the effort it took to hold herself on the back of the sesmat. When the crack widened and flattened, Aleytys sighed with relief. She shifted the sling-strap again and grimaced as her empty stomach rumbled briefly. She glanced at Stavver's back and shrugged. *No use bothering him*, she thought. She shifted on the leather, putting her weight on one side to ease the ache in her buttocks. In a few moments she shifted back again, then reached up under her headcloth and dug strong fingers into the stiff muscles knotted at the back of her neck. She arched her back to stretch the ache out of it. Far ahead, down a sharp slope, the black rock walls snapped open against a background of red-tinted steam.

The tired sesmat stepped on one of the round stones cluttering the path, going to her knees as it turned under her foot. Aleytys jolted forward on the hairy neck, then, as the sesmat heaved up again, bumped her nose on the mare's coarse neck hair. She wrapped her fingers in the hair and pushed upright again.

A short lance whistled past her head and clattered on the far wall, knocking some loose rocks into a small slide that rolled past the mare's forefeet. Aleytys jerked back, startled, then cried out when a line of pain cut across her head as a lance twitched her headcloth away.

Clutching the babysling in her arms, she dived off the sesmat's back and pushed herself behind a pile of boulders, hitting the ground before the last lance clanged against the stone. She grunted as pain shot up from an ankle twisted at a bad angle under her crouching body. She eased it along until she could rub it while she moved to peer around the rocks at the backtrail.

Sharl started to howl, frightened by the sudden roughness that snatched him from his comfortable sleep. Patting the leather bundle nervously, she tried to steady her own nerves, helped by the fact that the trail was empty each time she looked. She rocked Sharl against her breast, whispering soft, soothing words. As she calmed herself, the baby quieted, dropping into a deep sleep. She slipped the sling-strap off her shoulder and tucked the leather bundle behind a huge boulder.

Wincing as her bruised ankle knocked against the rocks, Aleytys crawled around the rocks so that she could get a better view of the trail.

"Ahai!" she whispered, dismayed. Five men were walking toward her, taking their time, wide grins on faces absolutely certain of her. She knew them all. Her arms began to tremble. "Myawo," she whispered tensely. "Where is he?"

Still on hands and knees, she crawled back a little and looked the other way down the trail. "Stavver," she muttered. "And where the hell is he?" The ravine wall bulged out so that all she could see was glittering gray rock. "Khas!" She looked back at the five men. With a fierce pride she stood up, tossed her hair back over her shoulders, and limped out to the middle of the trail, her back to the approaching men. Stavver was standing farther down, his sesmat dead at his feet. A short lance menaced his throat while another poked him in the small of his back. Aleytys swallowed and glanced over her shoulder. The five men behind her were spreading in a narrow arc, a feral grin on each of the coarse faces.

Sliding her hands up and down her upper arms, she swung her head to the right and then to the left. The side walls rose too steeply, offering no way out. She whipped her head back, facing the group around Stavver. Myawo grinned at her as he stepped from behind them.

Breathing faster, pride draining away as panic jarred through her, Aleytys wheeled and darted at the five men. She managed a few running steps, then floundered to a halt as three lanceheads stabbed at her.

Slowly, step by step, she began backing. Five mouths stretched in animal grins, teeth glinting whitely in the red-brown faces; five pairs of shallow animal eyes focused on her with hot anticipation. The medwey drove her back step by step toward Myawo, forcing each reluctant retreat with short jabs of the lances. Clutching at her hair in an agony of fear and frustration, she was herded backward, step-jab, step-jab. "Ah, Madar..." she groaned. "Help me..."

A cluster of sweet pure notes chimed into the tensely throbbing air. Aleytys gasped and crashed to her knees. Afraid before, she was almost paralyzed now. "Now..." The word was a long-drawn-out wail.

A single high note shivered and slid down scale to a basso growl. The five men slowed grotesquely into a ghastly parody of human movement. Then they weren't moving at all, they were hanging poised in midstride. Aleytys swallowed painfully and tried to stand up. It was oddly hard to move, like wading in half-set gelatin. Then her hands moved. She watched them flutter like moon-moths. "No," she whispered. She felt a shudder run along her bones as her lips didn't move and the sound echoed only inside her skull.

Helplessly she watched the flitting hands slow and fasten around one of the lances, pulling it from the medwey's stiff fingers. She watched out of the eyeholes in her skull with tears sliding down a face set stiff as a mask.

The butterfly hands on the end of the thin arms pushed steadily at the medwey's chest with the point of the lance. *Like sewing leather*, she thought wildly. Push in, pull out... pop—pop—again and again... and then five men were dead.

They didn't even know it yet. Caught in the time-spell, they hung and wouldn't fall. The lancehead had no blood on it; there was no time for the blood to fall. Prisoner in her head, she watched the thin brown fingers open and the lance hang motionless in the air as her touch left it. She watched the slow dance of the walls past her eyes, walls painted a flickering amber, as her body turned and moved to the other group of men.

She faced the men around Stavver. Thin brown fingers reached smoothly out and plucked a knife from a belt, slashed one-two-three through the other throats, and then swung to Myawo, the other faces flowing past, caught smiling triumphantly, unchanging over the new mouths carved into the stiff, resisting flesh of their necks. "No," she shrieked to the thing moving her. "Please, no." She struggled against the hold on her body. "Please. Don't destroy these people. Don't. The others are dead and he can't hurt me... or you. Whoever you are, hear me, I beg you. The zabyrn need him or they are destroyed. Please..."

The body she rode stepped back, past Myawo, back farther... one step... two... Then the low hum that thrummed just on the edge of awareness squealed up again to a high shrill keening. Abruptly the knife hilt was cold against her fingers and she could feel the warming breeze brushing against her face.

With a low moan, she opened her hand, letting the knife clatter onto the ground. Behind her, she could hear another clatter and a series of dull thuds. Knees folding under her, she crumpled down, rocking back and forth, her arms wrapped around her head.

Stavver grunted. Edging around the pool of blood leaking from the slashed throats, he stopped beside Myawo. “Why the hell’d she leave you alive?”

Myawo grunted and stepped back from the thief, eyeing him warily, hand curled around the hilt of the knife stuck in his belt. Nostrils flaring, he backed away without a word.

Aleytys looked up. “Stavver!” she called sharply. “Leave him alone.” She closed her eyes a minute, then turned her heavy head to Myawo. “Go away, will you? I promised Khateyat... Ahai, Khem-sko, do you know how close you were to dying? Go away and leave us alone. I don’t know if I can hold again.”

As Myawo hesitated, eyes glittering wildly, Aleytys groaned, “Ay-mi, man, are you such a fool? Even without this...” She slapped a hand against her head. “Even without the magic, Stavver could take you out. Look at him. Don’t you see how he’d like it?”

Stavver grinned at Myawo, lifting the knife he’d scooped up from the blood-pool.

Sullenly Myawo circled around the rumbled bodies and trudged up the trail, disappearing around the bend.

Stavver turned the knife over in his hands, lips tightening as the blade glinted cleanly in Horli’s light. He glanced at the pools of blood and back at the polished knife. “How the hell do you do it?” he muttered.

Aleytys turned her horrified gaze from body to body to body. Sick and shocked to the depths of her being, she closed her eyes and beat her fists slowly and steadily on her thighs with tears dripping over her contorted face.

Stavver shrugged his shoulders, vaguely irritated at such excessive reaction. Kicking a small rock, he watched it bounce off a pile of boulders and thud meatily into one of the bodies sprawled on the track, face thrust into a great puddle of blood that was trickling muddily downhill.

Small black bugs were already buzzing noisily around, crawling over the bodies and crouching in blissful greed at the edges of the congealing blood-pools, sucking tubes thrust deep in the steaming liquid. The sweet musty smell of too much blood grew nauseating. He backed away to find Aleytys’s eyes fixed on him.

“I couldn’t help it.” She swallowed and rubbed the back of her hand across her burning eyes.

He smiled and tapped her on the head. “Poor little cat, you’ve had a hard time.”

She closed her eyes and leaned back against his hand. “I feel horrible. I almost wish I was dead. Stavver...”

“You don’t mean that, Leyta.”

“Stavver...”

“What?”

“I’m cursed. You better leave me.”

“Now, I know you don’t mean that.” He chuckled. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself.” He shook his head and ran his fingers under her eyes, wiping away the tears. “Get the kid. What did you do with him?”

“Sharli!” Aleytys jumped to her feet. “Ahai, I forgot Sharl.” She ran back up the trail, shivering as she passed the huddled bodies. Hastily she knelt and folded back the flaps of the babysling, to find Sharl lying curled up inside, sucking peacefully on his fist. With a weak laugh that trembled on the dry side of relief, she ducked her head and slid the strap onto her shoulder, settling it against her neck. As smoothly as she could, she stood up. The baby grunted sleepily, wiggled himself comfortably against her hip, and went calmly back to sleep.

As Aleytys walked back downhill to Stavver, a storm of black bugs whirred around her, diving at her legs, crawling on the wide leather trousers. She looked down.

The leather was stained and crusted with patches of blood. With a gulp, she stuck out a moccasin and examined the soft leather. It was soggy with blood. Her mouth twitched and her stomach knotted. “A good thing I haven’t had anything to eat.”

For the next hour she trailed along behind Stavver, the leather of her high-topped moccasins drying until it was stiff and hard as wood. With her braided ankle sending twinges up her legs and the boots rubbing blisters on her heels and toes, she limped painfully out of the ravine and onto a trail that wound precipitously down the crumbling cliffside, Aleytys halted a minute and scanned the valley. It was a wild and abstract landscape—angular swatches of gray and coffee-brown rock, curving organic patches of green, the dark glinting line of the river looping through it all, all crossed and recrossed by vertical columns of white steam pouring up from scattered fumaroles.

The valley drowsed under a rolling, eddying ceiling of steam. Hesh and Horli together made a vague reddish blur above the eastern edge, most of their light filtered out by the cloud layer. The damp heat from below flowed up and slapped her in the face. She put her hand on Stavver’s shoulder and stood close behind him, looking at the eerie scene. “The Bawe Neswet. The ship is supposed to be somewhere out there. Can you see it?”

“We’re too far away.” He cocked his head around and examined her face as she leaned up against him. “Can you keep on for another hour?”

“If I have to,” she said wearily.

“We can rest when we get to the river.” He pointed, then patted the saddlebags he carried over his shoulder. “Get some food, rest a bit.”

Aleytys pushed away from him with a laugh. “I’ve come halfway around a world, but I swear this is the longest part.”

Stavver nodded as he started cautiously down the narrow path. “You’ve got a longer trip than you know waiting for you, Leyta. When we get to the ship.” He edged around a corner. “Be careful here,” he called back, his voice muffled by the stone. “Goes down fast and the outside is breaking away.”

“Hai, my friend, I hear you.” She looked dubiously at the precarious track. “Well, baby,” she muttered, shifting the sling to a better balance. “Before we leap, we have to walk.” She started cautiously after Stavver.

An hour later Aleytys collapsed in a heap on the bank of the river. “Not one more step,” she said firmly.

“And *Ineed* a bath.”

Stavver sat down on a large round rock. He wiped a hand across his sweaty face and grinned at her. “You’ll wear your skin off one of these days.”

Aleytys laughed. After the harrowing in the early morning, this noon under a roof of steam seemed peaceful and a trifle enervating. She leaned back against a tree and watched the leaf shadows chase each other across her body. She sighed and contemplated her feet. The dark stains on the soft leather sent a shiver through her. “Stavver,” she called plaintively.

He was looking thoughtfully at the eddying water and didn’t seem to hear her. “Stavver!”

“Hmm?” he said absently. “What is it?”

“Help me take my boots off.”

He frowned impatiently, then walked over to her. “Here,” he said. “Give me your foot.” He pulled off one boot, forcing a grunt of pain from her. Tossing it aside, he worked the other free and dumped it on the ground. Running a finger over her red raw feet, he said thoughtfully, “Why don’t you stay here while I hunt for the ship?” He massaged her feet until she sighed with pleasure. “Take your bath. Feed the kid. I can move faster alone.”

He glanced at the river. “You better make it a sponge bath. Tropical rivers have a habit of nasty surprises. You won’t be afraid if I leave you alone?”

Aleytys’s mouth twisted into a wry grimace. “Afraid? It’s other things should be afraid of me.”

He laughed. “Point to you. By the way, if I find the ship, I’ll send the call out and see what answer I can get. I might be gone a long time.”

“I understand.” Using his arm as a prop, she struggled to her feet. “Ahai,” she wailed. “I think I’m ruined.”

He chuckled. “Take your bath. Think how much better you’ll feel.”

She stepped away from him, turned suddenly serious. “You be careful, Stavver.”

He shrugged and plunged into the leafy tunnel where the path continued from the river. Aleytys watched him disappear, then moved back to her howling baby. She unwrapped him and put him to her breast, where he began sucking eagerly. “Hai, my greedy little singer-son.” She rubbed her fingers gently over the back of his small head, then drifted into a dreamy trance while he filled his belly.

An hour later she was scrubbing her hair with soapweed, whistling cheerfully.

“Aleytys.”

Her head snapped up and she dropped the soapweed into the water. Stavver was standing against the tree, his thin mouth stretching into a wide grin.

“You found it! So soon!” She laughed, then spit as lather slid down her face into her mouth and eyes. “Ahai!” Ducking her head under water, she flailed around, swishing her hair back and forth. Laughing and

sputtering, she scrambled with flying arms and legs up onto the bank. Breathing rapidly, she grabbed hold of his arm.

He laughed himself then, pushing her away. "Aleytys, you're dripping half the river on me."

She bounced on her toes impatiently. "Never mind that. Tell me!"

"I found the ship," he said patiently. "And a friend was close enough to answer. She'll be here in a few hours."

"She?" Aleytys grinned at him. "One of your women friends."

He chuckled. "She wouldn't thank you for the name. Maissa walks on her own feet."

"Good for her."

He reached out and stroked his thumbs down her wet cheeks. "Water sprite," he said huskily. His hands moved down and cupped briefly over her shoulder, then slid down farther onto her breasts. Aleytys sighed and melted against him for a brief moment, longing... then she pushed away, breathing hard. "I told you, my friend. I don't want another baby."

He scowled angrily, then turned away and disappeared into the jungle.

Aleytys's brows arched up in surprise, then she shrugged and walked over to her clothing. She pulled the tunic over her head, picked up the bloody trousers and examined them, distaste strong in her stomach. She looked down at the tunic, whose lower edge hit her halfway down her thighs. "I'm covered," she muttered. Dropping the trousers into a heap, she pulled the thongs tight at the neck opening of the tunic. Then she picked Sharl up and tucked him back into the babysling. "Hai, baby, not long now."

Stavver came back out of the jungle and frowned at her. "Come on. We've a way to go and Maissa will be there before we are."

Aleytys slid the strap of the babysling over her shoulder and looked around for her moccasins.

"Move it, will you?"

"All of a sudden you're in such a hurry." She searched among the roots for the elusive footwear. "What did I do with..."

"Leave all that junk," he called impatiently. After fidgeting a minute, he disappeared around a bend.

With a sigh, Aleytys abandoned the search, adjusted the strap of the sling, and trotted after him. The track wound under an arching green roof in a mottled green twilight. She jogged along, thinking acidly, *Never again. I'm going to fix it somehow, so I don't ever have to depend on anyone else again for anything*. "For anything," she repeated aloud.

As the track moved beyond the trees, Aleytys blinked the half-light out of her eyes and peered across the open space stretching out till it was lost in the mists from the geysers. A wide apron of lava flowed across the valley floor ending at her feet in a paw whose stony nails had dug a semicircle of hot springs. The churning waters in the small round holes bubbled and boiled and spit streams of pressured steam into

the air, where the erratic winds tore them into shreds and pasted the shreds against the cloud ceiling. Stavver stood at the edge of the lava, waiting for her.

Aleytys fidgeted from foot to foot. The ground was uncomfortably hot. Out on the barren blackness a blunt cone like a child's top thrust its point at the sky while its bulging bottom rested in lava clinging to the supporting fins like hardened taffy. She sniffed. "So that's a starship."

Stavver chuckled. "Disappointed?" He pulled a straying tendril of hair until she yelped and rugged it out of his fingers. "That stubby monster—it's bigger than it looks from here—brought your people here." He looked with respect at the ship. "Three thousand years and the fuel cells still have power."

"Hai?"

"If you think I'm going to explain matrix engineering and fuel economics to you, woman, forget it."

"I wonder if you could." She eyes him skeptically. "How much do you really know about those things?"

"Not much," he conceded. "Come on."

Aleytys grinned. Mocking his strut, she started off across the skimpy grass. After a few steps, she yelped and lifted her foot. Hopping unsteadily around in a little circle, she examined the bottom of the injured foot. The sole was tender where the skin rubbed against the ground, but the pain was coming from her big toe where a sliver of black glassy stone stuck into it with dark red blood welling out from around it "Ahai," she breathed, pain vibrating in the taut word. She jerked the sliver out and grimaced at the blood dripping onto her hands.

"Where the hell are your boots!" Stavver's irritated voice startled her so that she dropped her foot and nearly rumbled onto her face.

"Af'i!" She steadied herself and glared at him. "You yelled for me to leave all that."

He shook his head in disgust. "Give me your foot." He knelt and examined the wound. The blood was clotting, the cut sucked closed so that it was rapidly disappearing. "You heal fast," he said, rather startled. "Think you can walk?"

She freed her foot and balanced on it. "Of course."

He stood up and brushed his knees off. "I'll have to carry you on the lava," he said grumpily.

"Why? Hai, it's just flat rock. I've walked barefoot on worse."

"I should let you try it." He crossed the grass in two long swinging strides. "Come here." She picked her way carefully to him, stopping beside the spill of lava. "Look at this stuff," he grunted. "Feel it, but be careful."

She touched the rock. "It's rough. So what?"

"That nice flat rock will wear your feet off up to your knees before you get halfway to the ship. And fry what's left."

"Hai." She lifted her arms. "So I ride."

“Give me the baby first, then I’ll do my best with you.” As he slid the sling over his shoulder, he glanced at the ship. “Thank God it’s no farther.”

After a hot and sweaty struggle, he dumped her on her feet, then stretched and rubbed his tired back. “Ever consider losing some weight?” He slipped the sling off his shoulder. “Take this little lump of lead.”

Aleytys snorted. “You would do it. Prove your manhood or what?”

“Hah. Look at my boots.” He lifted a foot. The boot sole was thin as parchment.

An hour later, Aleytys sat in the open lock, her legs dangling over the edge. Sharl sucked vigorously at her breast, putting his whole body into eating, wriggling like a puppy and socking his small fists into her soft flesh. Overhead, the steam blanket eddied and pulsed, bouncing all the heat that rose from the black blanket of lava back down to earth right into her face... or so it seemed to her. Wiping her hand across her face for the hundredth time, she grimaced at the boring scene spread out before her.

The ever-present wind squealed around the ship and sent a skittering flow of grit rattling across the lava. Sweat oozed from her pores and stood on her skin in round globules that refused to evaporate into the saturated air. Each breath she sucked in was heavy and unsatisfying. She shifted restlessly and looked back over her shoulder at the man stretched uncomfortably on the dust-littered, age-torn matting.

His eyes were closed, but they twitched nervously under the pale lids. His breathing was slow and steady, peaking every moment or so in a tenor snort. As she watched, he stirred and sat up, blinking sleep-dulled eyes. The dry skin on his hands rasped loudly in the lock as he rubbed his palms across his lined face. “What time is it?”

Aleytys leaned out and peered up at the sky. The red blur with its pale blue ghost was well into the afternoon slide for the western horizon. “About sa’at haftuman,” she said thoughtfully.

“That means a lot,” he grunted. “Translate.”

“About six hours till Horli-set.” She sniffed. “And you were in such a hurry. This Maissa of yours certainly isn’t.”

Arms unfolding, stiff as a wooden doll, he pushed himself up and moved to stand beside her in the lock. “Have you dreamed any more about the RMoahl?”

“No. How much longer before her ship comes?” She lifted Sharl to her shoulder and patted him gently to burp him.

“I don’t know,” he said absently.

“She won’t get lost?”

“The beacon is going.” He stretched, pushing against the rim of the lock with his hands and feet. “I’ve told you that a dozen times.”

“I feel... I don’t know.” She reached out and took hold of his leg, the solid feel of his flesh comforting to her. “Speaking of the RMoahl, there’s some kind of danger—or something—getting close, Stavver...” She rubbed her hand up and down his calf. “I’m not exactly scared. Just a funny feeling in my middle.”

“It’s the humidity.”

“I don’t know.”

He moved out of the opening and scuffed around the lock for a minute, then he disappeared into the interior of the ship.

“Phah!” She spit disgustedly. “I’m turning into a walking rock.” She looked down at Sharl. He was curled up in his usual placid sleep, his small face dusty and smudged. She brushed the dust away, pulled her legs up, and leaned back against the edge of the high round opening.

Overhead, the steam suddenly glowed a brilliant golden yellow. The glow began to coalesce to a hard core of light as she watched. She clutched at the lock edge and yelled, “Stavver!” The lower curve of a radiant golden sphere poked through the steam. “Stavver!”

“What is it?” His voice echoed metallically. “Your friend. At least, I hope so.”

He stepped back into the lock and leaned out beside her, scanning the steaming sky. He grinned. “The *Butterball*. Maissa, all right.”

“*Butterball*?” she said, eyes wide with surprise. “What an odd name.”

He climbed out onto the ladder. “She’s an odd one herself. Stay here till I get things set.” He slid down the ladder, holding on to the uprights and letting his feet hang free.

The yellow glow intensified. As she watched the glowball slide out of the steam, a slender black needle sealed in the middle flickering in and out of visibility, she heard a throbbing whine. Then—*pop*—without any further sound the splinter was sitting on its tail, surrounded by the wavering translucent curtain of light. It all looked like magic to her.

“Hai, my Sharl,” she said softly, patting his solid little bottom. “There’s our ride. Ai-Aschla, I just don’t like having to let other people run my life. Sharl, baby, I can’t help it right now, but give me time...” She smiled affectionately at him, then watched Stavver run across the lava and halt just outside the wavering curtain of light.

14

Maissa narrowed her pointed amber eyes. She looked Stavver up and down. “Well,” she said dryly, “you look like hell.”

With a careless shrug, Stavver took another step toward her.

“Uh-uh. Stay right where you are, dear old friend. Or I’ll skewer your hope of heaven.” She swung her hand up, pointing a schenli darter at his navel. “Now,” she said briskly. “Tell me why I’m here.”

Stavver looked thoughtfully at her. She was exquisitely tiny, with coffee-brown skin, and long black hair springing sleekly from an exaggerated widow’s peak. Her arms and legs were well-shaped but so delicate that she looked as if a breath would blow her away. He grinned at her, knowing how fatal an

illusion her fragility was. "I crashed," he said. "With the RMoahl diadem." His mouth twisted as he saw avarice part her dark lips and the pink tip of her tongue come flicking through.

"I heard you were after it." She took a step forward, then danced back warily, the darter aimed steadily at his stomach. "So the hounds are after you."

"Right. I tried to lose them." He shrugged. "Burned my ship out."

"So all you've got is the diadem."

"Not even that." A wry grimace twisted his thin face. "Lost it"

"Flat broke, then?"

"I'll have to owe you this one."

She tapped the end of the darter against her mouth, eyeing him thoughtfully. "You're a bastard, Miks, but you pay your debts. Umm. I've got something almost set up. I know you're a loner, but, dammit, you're also the best thief around. Favor for favor?"

"Agreed."

"Come on, then." Maissa moved toward the flickering force-field. "Take my hand." She frowned when he didn't move. "What is it?"

"Look over there." He turned to the old ship and waved to Aleytys. The tiny figure in the moon of blackness waved back, wriggled around, and started down the rickety ladder. "She comes too."

Maissa frowned angrily. "I draw the line at your barbarian girl friends."

"Not a girl friend. She got me here when I promised to get her offworld." He raised a mocking eyebrow. "You did say I pay my debts."

"You are a bastard. Since when does a bed promise hold you down, thief?"

He grinned at her. "Now, Maissa, let old grudges lay. This girl might prove useful."

"A barbarian?" She raised on tiptoes and placed her palm on his forehead. "No fever. You sure you feel all right?"

"This one's different, love. Got a psi rating you just wouldn't believe. Xenopath. Empath. Healer. Who knows what else? And, my dear, you could walk her fully clothed along a street and expect four out of five men to react." He shrugged. "Worse comes to worst, we could get a price for her from I'kuk."

"Does this girl know the kind of man you are, bastard?" Maissa wrinkled her nose.

"Last resort only, love. I like the kid."

Maissa glanced back at the ship. "What's that she's carrying?"

"Her child."

“Yours?” Maissa scowled. “Nope. Told you, she’s no playmate of mine.”

“Then you must be slipping.”

“No, my dear one. Fool around with her and you end up fried.”

“Well, well, never thought I’d see the day. All right. She comes too. With the kid. But this is one hell of a favor, Miks. You’re going to owe your skin. And I’ll be sure to collect.” She grinned maliciously at him, her amber eyes dancing with triumph.

“My skin is yours.”

“You better get your little friend. She looks damned uncomfortable out there.”

Stavver glanced over his shoulder at Aleytys, who was picking her way slowly and carefully across the lava, wincing as her tender feet touched the hot surface. He watched her a minute, then sneaked a look at the boiling cloud cover.

“You’re nervous as a flea on Baltis. Expecting company... ? Oh, ho, I see. The hounds.”

“Right.” He swung around. “Wait a second till I fetch her and then we get out of here fast.”

“Got you.”

As Stavver ran toward Aleytys, a gray pebble-shaped object broke through the layer of steam and began settling toward the ground. He scooped up Aleytys and tossed her over his shoulder, Sharl howling as his sling slammed back and forth. He darted across the lava, caught hold of Maissa’s hand, and popped through the barrier. The tiny woman swarmed up the ladder and vanished inside. Aleytys followed more clumsily, hampered by sore feet and the babysling. With Stavver hovering impatiently behind her, she stumbled into the lock.

As Stavver pushed Aleytys into the bridge, Maissa flicked a switch and the viewscreen sprang to life. The gray pebble-shape hovered beside the shield. Finger tapping the glass, the tiny woman stared into the screen. After a minute, she glanced up and back at Stavver. “I guess you were telling the truth.” She sounded somewhat surprised. “That’s RMoahl, all right.”

“Anything you could do?” He looked over her shoulder, frowning at the sight of the ship.

“You wasted a lot of time,” she said absently, reaching toward the control surface. With a delicate forefinger she touched a blank glassy square. Its pale pearly glow strengthened a trifle. A feeling of stirring life flowed up his legs, unconscious response to a subtangible vibration.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Let them think we’ll surrender. I expect they’ll be on the codar in another minute. Surprise is the only way we’ll get free.”

“It’s hard to fool those spiders.”

“Hmm.” She glanced back at him, suspicion flickering in her eyes. “I thought you said you lost the

diadem. Why're they still on your tail?"

Stavver shrugged. "Want to search me?"

"Umm. No time now. But you better have a nice story ready for me, love."

The dark leather face of the RMoahl Two suddenly filled the screen. Maissa hastily waved Stavver out of the range of the viewscreen. She tapped another square. "Yes?"

"Ship." The big voice boomed majestically into the little control room. Maissa hastily lowered the noise level.

"Acknowledge. Why do you block us?" She spoke coolly, her face a bland mask.

"Drop your shields."

"I've done you no harm. Why hassle me?"

"Drop your screen."

"Very well, but I protest. I've done nothing to you."

Maissa touched a third square. "My shields are down."

"Acknowledge." The big coarse face blinked off the screen.

She swiveled to face Stavver. "On the floor," she whispered tensely. "Flat out. Miks, tell her. We'll be moving fast and I imagine you don't want her smashed flat." Behind her, the screen showed the big gray ship settling leaf-light onto the black rock.

"Open the hatches." The face was back. "Send out the thief and the wearer of the diadem."

"Look. I don't know what you're talking about."

"The woman and the man." Although the face showed no change of expression, the basso voice boomed impatiently.

Maissa shrugged and reached toward the ranked series of glassy activators. With a quick ripple of her fingers, she wove a brief pattern across the panel. In the viewscreen, the earth seemed sucked away from beneath them. In an instant, Jaydugar was a mottled ball spinning in blackness. Concentrating fiercely, Maissa danced her fingers over the panel, trailing behind them fleeting flickers of light.

Finally she leaned back and ran her eyes across the lights and readout dials. Then she stood up and hitched a hip on the panel's edge. "Well," she said calmly. "We made it."

Stavver sat up. Rocking his fingers on his bony knee, he raised his eyebrows. "The hound?"

"We busted loose and we'll stay loose."

"You're a wonder, my sweet. How?"

“I had something a Vryhh male wanted. He fixed the ship for me.” She rubbed a thin finger over her pointed chin. “Just a little warning, Miks ol’ buddy. You try to take this ship away from me and you’ll get the nastiest surprises.”

“Why, Maissa, the thought never entered my mind.” He grinned at her.

“Now, my lying friend. So you lost the diadem. Ha! You get your story ready. And make it good.”

Aleytys sat watching them, her eyes bright with curiosity. “He’s telling the truth,” she said calmly. “He lost it and I got it. Not that I want it.” She stood up and walked over to the control panel, touching the cool surface of the screen with exploring fingers. “Ugly as a hairy sept.” She swung around to face them. “As Stavver will tell you, the diadem and I are intimately attached.”

Maissa stared at her, surprised. “Since when does a barbarian speak the interlingue? Stavver teach you?”

Stavver put an arm around Aleytys’s shoulders, avoiding the babysling by stepping to her left side. “I told you she was talented, Maissa. I certainly taught her nothing.”

“And she’s got the diadem? No wonder you wanted to bring her along.” She eyed Aleytys speculatively. “Where is it?”

Aleytys shuddered. “Here.” She tapped her temple with a forefinger, evoking a ghost chime that vibrated faintly in the tension of the bridge.

Hugging Aleytys against him, Stavver said, “You’re tired and hungry, Leyta. So am I. And I suppose you want a bath.”

She chuckled. “Ahai, you know it.”

Maissa spoke sharply. “Before you two get involved with your stomachs, where do you want me to send this ship?”

Stavver rubbed his finger across his scraggly moustache. “I think we’ll leave that up to you. I want to ransom my skin, my sweet. After that...” He shrugged.

“Then we head for Lamarchos.”

“Huh. If that’s your scheme, my love, you’ve got holes in your head.”

“Hear it first before you judge.”

“I will. Be sure of that.” He turned to Aleytys. “Come with me. While Maissa’s setting course, I’ll show you how to get around.” Glancing at the silent woman, he said, “Have you got something she can wear?” He flipped his free hand along his body. “And me?”

“You know where,” Maissa said briefly. “When you’ve got her settled, come back here. We’ve got talking to do.”

Feeling lost in this place where she had few clues to tell her the unwritten rules of conduct, Aleytys leaned around Stavver’s propelling arm. “Could I come back when you’ve done your talking?” She

looked wistfully at the viewscreen with the black of space in it and a dusting of stars. “I’d like to watch the stars pass.”

Maissa shrugged. “Don’t touch anything.”

“I thank you.” She smiled and let Stavver lead her out of the room.

Trailing brief rainbows, the stars spun in an endless dance across the darkness. Aleytys watched with a hunger grown rapidly insatiable, a desire to know. . . . She bent her head over her sleeping baby, then held up a hand and watched the polychromatic glitter flash palely on her skin. *I’m here* , she thought. *I’m really here. And it’s just the beginning.*