

Wolves of Nakesht

by Janrae Frank

Oil-fed torches mounted on walls or atop street posts broke the dark streets into patterns of bright orange and deep shadow. Few people traveled the streets of Aekara at that late hours, and none walked boldly â save two plainsmen, one scarcely more than a youth, the other, his lean, weather-worn mentor. A slender girl waltzed between them, watching the swirling folds of her mid-calf skirt turn orange and red, then black as they passed from light to shadow and back. The elder warrior wore a lion's black-maned pelt as a jerkin. She slew the beast with a dagger, so the Euzadi called her the lion-hawk, Chimquar. All believed Chimquar a man.

The ringing clash of steel ended the quiet. The handful of people abroad halted to mark the direction of the sounds. Their errands would not bear close inspection and the fight meant first brigands, then guardsmyn. Chimquar and her

wards suddenly became the only people on the streets for many blocks around the clash.

Chimquar paused, listening to the sound of fighting coming from the direction in which they traveled.

"Do we go on?" Hazier asked.

Chimquar nodded, her hand resting on the hilt of her Sharani longsword. Her wards dropped back a short way as she had taught them. Makajia produced a long dagger from beneath her skirts.

A Sharani war cry carried down the street. "Aroana God defender!" Chimquar halted. It had been several years since she heard that cry on any lips save her own. For the first time she hesitated to answer it. She planned to join her sister, ending her long exile. Anaria, alone, would understand her concealment in men's raiment, first of her race in the far lands of men. The others would not, and Chimquar would once more be the scarcely tolerated outcast in their midst. Chimquar longed increasingly to see her homeland.

"Aroana! Aroana!" The cries came again, insistent, desperate. The Sharanis had no allies, no aid. Chimquar drew her sword, thrusting aside her concerns. They would have aid.

Chimquar saw three women at bay near an alley, encircled by swordsmen. The Sharanis had taken toll of their attackers, their swords gleamed red in the torchlight. Yet they could not hold much longer against so many. One woman fell as Chimquar reached them. The remaining pair moved to stand over their fallen comrade. A man lunged in; one Sharani shifted slightly avoiding his thrust and opening a long gash in his side.

"Aroana!" Chimquar shouted, entering the fray. The first male to turn died.

Momentary confusion ensued among the men at the unexpected attack by Chimquar

and Hazier. Makajia darted about, wielding her dagger to great effect. Three men fell in the first minutes of surprise. Chimquar's sword whirled in a circular motion, parried the attack of two foes, then slashed out, felling one. She eluded a thrust and lunged in under the man's guard; the dagger in her left hand catching the returning move of his sword and she sent her own blade home. Chimquar moved on another man. She had neither time nor light enough to mark the nature of her foes, yet she recognized the moving patterns of their attack. She fought Euzadis â renegades.

Hazier stepped back, giving ground. His shoulder struck a wall and his backward step came short. A sword arched at his head. He ducked forward, lashing out with his own weapon. The man sprang back, another rushed in. Hazier moved sidewise, his foot stuck something and he fell backwards, frantically blocking the rain of blows from his opponents with his sword and dagger. Makajia darted out of the shadows where she had hidden knowing herself overmatched by the warriors. Her dagger flashed. One man no longer endangered her brother.

"Renegade!"

The second man turned to see the tall man with the lion mane about his shoulders. His surviving companions were already in full flight. "Chimquar," he snarled, then fled.

Chimquar let him go. She stood nearest the fallen Sharani whose companions now stood off in the wake of their fleeing foes. Chimquar knelt, cradling the Sharani's head and shoulders, and glanced briefly at the returning pair.

Makajia tore a strip of cloth from the bottom of her white blouse and pressed it to the wound in the woman's ribs. The woman gazed up at Chimquar, astonished to behold a plainsman. Pain deepened the lines in the Sharani's weathered face;

herbreath came in ragged pulls. She and her companions all wore the Sharani Saer'ajan's livery and Chimquar marveled that they had come so far into these lands. The double-axe embroidered above the unicorn blazon marked the woman as ha'taren, paladin of Aroana, one of the elite from which captains and generals rose. Chimquar had been ha'taren, hence her greeting came automatically, "Kalur Aroana bai ew, ha'taren," she murmured.

"Kalur Aroana widare ew, Euzadi," the woman returned hoarsely. Her eyes clenched shut as a wave of pain took her. When it eased, she gazed again at the nomad.

"Tamlys Lodarien." She forced the words out, indicating herself. The Sharanis dropped to their knees beside her. Chimquar sat back, allowing them to bend nearer. One warrior clasped Tamlys' hand mutely.

"Meadusea." Tamlys named her first, then the younger one: "Katalla Maelistya."

Hazier joined his mentor. The lingering excitement of the battle and the nearness of members of his mentor's legendary race gave Hazier's face an expression disrespectful of the dying Tamlys. Katalla favored him with a savage, withering stare. Hazier dropped his eyes quickly. Chimquar caught the exchange of glances and their portent of trouble.

"The farther eastâ we go," â Tamlys struggled with her words â "the fewer allies we find."

"Chimquar is ever the Sharanis' ally."

"So." Tamlys sighed. "We have found you."

"No words," Meadusea said, concerned. "Rest, Tamlys."

"My time nears." Tamlys' voice steadied as though she found strength with acceptance. "I must speak. Jalaia Torrundar's daughter saidâ" Her voice dwindled off into silence. Then she spoke again, "She said: 'seek Chimquar.'"

Chimquar tensed, wondering how much they knew of her. Her left hand closed on

the leather pouch at her side and the lump of the crest ring it held. Ending her exile meant facing the nobles and ha'taren that had made her outcast. If these women knew that Chimquar and Tomyris Dovane de Danae were one, what would they do? But the Thunder God's daughter would never have betrayed her. Chimquar looked up. Katalla and Meadusea stared at her as if awaiting some response she had not given.

"Jalaia said you would aid us." Meadusea's soft, gave voice took the strands of the tale from Tamlys. "A storm separated us from our company. We could find neither them nor the object of our quest." She was older than Chimquar and no less proud. Chimquar saw the brief passage of doubt and confusion mingling with the sorrow in Meadusea's face. The ha'taren had never before encountered hostility as unreasoning as in the eastern Lands of Men. Chimquar averted her eyes. Meadusea's distress provoked memories best left alone. "Hazier." Chimquar spoke Euzadi. "Pile some bodies across the alley. They will return that way." Katalla's hand went to her sword, her black eyes narrowed. Hazier moved to his tasks and Katalla watched.

Tamlys opened her eyes and clasped Chimquar's hand. "A plainsmonâ I did not believe. But you will aid them. You will!" Tamlys' eyes searched the nomad's face, seeming to reach her soul (as some ha'taren could) and Chimquar tasted the full, bitter cup she had brewed in her youth. Chimquar beheld a great strength and gentle wisdom in equal measure in those searching eyes, provoking memories of her shield-sister, Shayla Odaren, who had not survived the Great War. She felt alone, walled out by her own choices. "I will aid them as far as it is in my power, Tamlys," she murmured. "I swear it! By the Powers of Earth, I swear it!"

"Jalaia spoke true," Tamlys whispered and died.

Meadusea slipped her arms under her shield-sister's body, took her from Chimquar and rose. "Those men will return."

"Yes." Chimquar scanned the street as she spoke. "How far are your horses?"

"Four blocks," Meadusea replied, calm despite the tears running down her cheeks.

"Makajia will take you to our meeting place. Go quickly."

"What about you?"

"Hazier and I will distract them. You get clear of the city." Chimquar gestured and Makajia moved to Meadusea's side.

"Meadusea!" Katalla cried angrily. "You listen to him? What more harm do we need?"

"Jalaia trusts him," Meadusea turned away, walking beside Makajia. The Euzadi girl's step had lost its gaiety.

Katalla faced Chimquar, her expression an open challenge. The brooding power in Chimquar's eyes forced Katalla to drop her gaze. The Sharani cursed under her breath.

The sound of footsteps mingled with shouts. "Chimquar," Hazier warned, "they come."

Katalla raised her eyes to Chimquar's again, held them a moment, then she set off after Meadusea and Makajia.

Chimquar removed a torch from a wall, scanning the bodies. Katalla needed to learn the lessons of those lands, as Azkani, the old Euzadi seer, had taught Chimquar. Anger casts a spear without gauging the distance. A half-smile crossed Chimquar's lips, remembering the hunched, arthritic old man that had taught her the Euzadi ways, making possible her concealment.

"Chimquar?" Hazier stood beside the bodies piled across the mouth of the alley.

The shouts and footsteps neared.

Chimquar glanced up and down the street, wondering how much more shouting it would take to draw the guards. She could not wait for them. "Torch the pile, Hazier," she said, quietly.

The youth wrestled a torch from its wall-mount, and they emptied the unguent contents from the hollow bases upon the bodies touching the burning end to their lacquered, leather armor. The flames licked up, greater and eager, filling the air with stench. Men in the alley howled in rage and frustration, turning back to find another path. Chimquar ignored them. Some bodies still scattered in the street wore Euzadi headbands of worked leather, the tribal marks obliterated with blood and black paint: Renegades, followers of Bakran, Chimquar's bitterest foe. Asking after her, the Sharanishad drawn Bakran's attentions. A cold rage kindled within her. Cautiously, she walked down the west end of the street. "Bakran! Bakran, do you hear me?"

"I hear you!" a male's deep voice answered east of her.

Chimquar's keen ears heard the movement of his men. At the end of the first block she thrust her torch into the southopening of the cross street. It was a dead end. "Bakran?"

"Speak one, Chimquar." He sounded pleased. "I have you this time."

Nay, Bakran. You do not have me. She spied an iron gate in the middle of the next block. A narrow balcony jutted from the stone mansion half a spear's length above and beyond the gate. Lit windows shone around it. She walked slower with Hazier at her heels. She heard men moving at either end of the street. "Hazier, that gate, the balcony, then the roofs. Confuse the Sharanis' trail when you find it."

He hesitated and she shoved him. "Go!" He gained the gate. Chimquar ran behind him, gauging the distance of the closing warriors. One reached her and she hurled the torch in his face, climbed the gate, and sprang at the balcony. Her hands caught the edge. She pulled herself up, swung one leg over, then the other. Chimquar stood silently before the closed glass doors. A soft harmony of lute and pipes came from within the room. Hazier waited on a sturdy vine-covered trellis beyond the balcony. Chimquar turned from Hazier to see a renegade climbing the gate. "Go on," she ordered the youth.

"Chimquar," he protested.

"Nay! Go on." Her voice rose slightly. "Go after your sister."

"You're going to get yourself slain." His words came bleak and drawn out.

Chimquar smiled at his concern. "I won't Hazier. Now, go!"

"Aroana defend you!" He swarmed up the trellis.

A thud, and the scrape of a scabbard on stone, turned Chimquar. The man had gained the balcony. She sprang before he could get both legs over, seizing his sword arm and jerkin with a twist that hurled him through the fragile glass doors. The tinkling clash of falling shard of glass preceded the woman's scream. Men's shouts followed immediately. Chimquar bounded across the balcony and went up the trellis to the roof. A man emerged onto the balcony, sword in hand, glanced about, and reentered the manor house. The garden below filled with light as men and servants poured out bearing weapons and torches. Chimquar crouched in the shadows of a chimney, watching until the confusion died down, then she crossed the roof, and sprang onto the next. She made her way from roof to roof, leaping the narrow streets until she reached the stable.

Chimquar dropped silently from the roof behind the stableman, startling him. He eyed her doubtfully. She threw a handful of coins at his feet. He stooped to

retrieve them and she slipped into the stable after her horse.

She rode quietly to the west gate. The guardsman there, accustomed to the strange comings and going of the nomads, let her out a narrow, postern gate. The morning sun rose on her right hand as she turned her little plains-bred mare north.

Makajia heard the peace bells jingling and sprang to her feet. "Chimquar!" she cried joyously, then paused to ascertain the direction and raced off. Her skirts swirled around her legs, scarcely hampering her stride. "Chimquar!"

A slow, shy smile tickled the corners of Hazier's mouth. He glanced at Meadusea, who sat across from him, then leaned and picked up a silver bracelet set with turquoise stones, which Makajia had dropped. The girl had been polishing and adding the last touches to her handiwork.

"You are fond of your mentor," Meadusea said.

Hazier watched Makajia running. He could barely see Chimquar. "When I was a child, I ran to him like that."

"Little flower," Katalla said sarcastically. She stood beneath the cottonwoods lining the stream bank, pulling a cream-colored shirt over her mail. She flicked her wet braids out and laced the cuffs tight. Then she picked up her brown tunic, stalking to Hazier and Meadusea.

"I did not understand Chekaya's words," Hazier said, shaking his head.

"You insist on that name." Meadusea grinned wryly.

"Chekaya," Hazier struggled silently with his common. "A swift cat à dog footed. Chekaya Tamures' powerful Chekaya."

"You can quit calling me that," Katalla said with asperity.

Hazier dropped his eyes, his mouth twisting petulantly.

"What goes here?" Chimquar drew rein near Hazier. Makajia slipped off behind Chimquar and took the reins close to its head like a squire for a knight.

Meadusea had seen squires, pages, stable hands, and nomad boys hold or take a horse for warriors and nobles, but never before a non-Sharani girl.

Meadusea rose with Hazier. The youth clasped Chimquar's arms in brief greeting.

Chimquar turned to Meadusea. "Kalur Aroana bai ew, Meadusea." Chimquar's soft accent mingled Sharani and Euzadi.

"Kalur Aroana widare ew, Chimquar."

Katalla stood mute and hostile behind Meadusea. Chimquar reminded herself of her promise to the Tamlys, refusing to be provoked, yet denying Katalla a proper greeting. The young Sharani was slender, promising more speed than strength.

Meadusea had shorn off her umber braids as a sign of her sorrow, tying a suede band around her head. She was the same height as Chimquar, large-boned and powerful where Chimquar was lean and long-muscled.

Chimquar ran her thumb and forefinger down her seamed, sun-battered face. A score of years on the Great Plains of Murshay'di had burned her darker than the Sharani, aged her face to match her years in a way that the long-lived Sharani did not. "You buried Tamlys?" she asked tersely. She walked past them, heading for the stream. Hazier walked beside her.

"We did." Katalla stalked after the Euzadis.

Makajia led Chimquar's horse beneath the trees, tethering it with her own.

"You're not a friendly one, are you?" Meadusea said, her words milder than true annoyance.

"I'm no village gossip!"

"I didn't suggest it," Meadusea said smoothly.

"We should return to Shaurone," Katalla broke in. "Tamlys is dead. Leave this quest to Anaria!" She halted, facing off in front of Meadusea.

"Go if you wish, Katalla. I will not."

Chimquar knelt by the stream, bringing up a drink in her cupped hands. Her insides rolled. They were looking for her.

"Tomyris is as dead as Tamlys!" Katalla sounded exasperated.

Four rough-edged words forced themselves from Chimquar. "Tomyris Danae is alive."

"I knew it!" Meadusea exclaimed. "I knew it!"

"Where is she?" Katalla demanded dryly, coming to stand above Chimquar.

"She doesn't want to be found." Chimquar stood, walking away.

"At least we could carry some word to her sister," Meadusea suggested.

"I am taking you to Anaria."

"Plainsmon!" Katalla snarled. "I don't like you ? and I don't trust you.

Meadusea's making a bloody fool of herself." Katalla's hand went suggestively to her sword.

"You'll be the bloody fool," Chimquar warned softly.

"No man is my equal!" Katalla flung back.

Chimquar stared silently at Katalla, struggling to rein in the temper she had spent years learning to control â it was still like a green broken horse.

"Believe what you will. Time is short. Those men already track us, and Anaria is three days north." I'm keeping my promise, Tamlys.

"So close â" Meadusea breathed.

Chimquar turned toward the horses. How much more hostile would Katalla be if she knew Chimquar was Sharani? Chimquar felt her choices slipping out of her hands.

Katalla would count it betrayal. So would most of her people. It might be best

to send some word to Anaria with Meadusea, and then put as many leagues as possible between herself and her homeland.

"Chimquar." Hazier still walked beside her. "My mount pulled up lame."

"Free it," Chimquar said, obeying Euzadi custom. She halted, looking back at Meadusea. "You have Tamlys' horse?"

Meadusea nodded.

"I want it."

The three tall, deep-chested destriers lifted their heads at the warriors' approach. Round shields hung from their light cavalry saddles and twin javelins hung at the right sides. A wry, satisfied smile came on Chimquar's lips. Even a fool must see these hybrids are the finest steeds on this continent. She remembered the lush green of the northern valleys whereher people bred mares to unicorn stallions. Her memory conjured images of the small crofts and the temple where she and Anaria had spent many summers, learning the ways of the ha'taren there. Chimquar's smile deepened. It would be so good to see those valleys once more. Then abruptly she wrenched herself from those thoughts; she would never see those valleys again?not now.

Chimquar headed for a sorrel stallion, flaxen-maned, tethered apart from the others. "That one?"

"Yes," Meadusea answered. "Adoni."

The stallion put his ears back as Chimquar approached. She whispered to him in Sharani. His ears pricked up and he quivered. Chimquar ran her hand over him, speaking low to conceal her fluent use of the Sharani tongue. She loosed him and Adoni let her mount. She exulted at the smooth, easy power of the stallion as she swung him around. Her hand dropped to Tamlys' shield and she lifted it from

the saddle, slipping her arm through the straps. It still felt right. She sent the stallion into a canter, then a full gallop, reined in and turned back.

Meadusea and Katalla came alongside. "You may have all of Tamlys' things,"

Meadusea said, "save her sword."

"Payment for his trouble?" Katalla said, sneering.

Meadusea gave the younger woman a severe glance, started to speak and Chimquar

interrupted. "I didn't ask for anything save the horse â which I have need of. I

don't ask for her sword." Chimquar idly rubbed the hilt of her sword. The

gesture drew the Sharanis' eyes.

"A longsword." Meadusea was clearly surprised. "I've not seen a plainsmon with one."

"I'm not Euzadi born." Chimquar left them.

Hazier discarded his own saddle and shifted his saddlebags to Chimquar's mare.

He looked up as his mentor joined him. "I'm ready." He said.

"Me, too!" Makajia tossed her head haughtily and swung into the saddle of her black filly.

Chimquar moved across the plains, hazier and Makajia behind her, the Sharanis last.

A large herd of long-horned bison and antelope moved away from the riders passing them down wind. A sleek, black-flecked shape stalked the edges of the herd, singling out a young antelope that had wandered too far from its fellows.

It sprang suddenly. The antelope fled, bounding and turning. The hunting cat moved with it, never missing a turn, anticipating its prey's each move.

"There!" Hazier pointed. "Chekaya!"

Katalla saw the swift cat bring down its prey. "I no longer mind the name." Her voice was soft and without its usual harshness. "There is a sudden, swift beauty

to the beast."

A long, low howl slid across the plains. It was answered from the east and west. Chekaya abandoned her fresh kill. The herds broke into a panicked run, which quickly became a stampede. The howling rose again, louder, higher pitched with an almost human wail rising with it. The very air seemed chilled. The horses danced nervously as Chimquar and her companions drew rein. Chimquar's eyes raked the land, knowing that true wolves could not panic Chekaya, knowing the strange sound she heard. Hazier's lips part in a word of dismay that went unspoken. Then the sorrel stallion, Adoni, struck the earth with his cloven forehooves, threatening to rear.

"Nakesht," Chimquar hissed. Then two outriders topped a distant rise. "And Bakran!" She pressed her knees to the stallion and galloped north. The open, bereft of a Euzadi wagon-ring was no place to battle the man-wolves of the Nakesht. The unlikely alliance of Bakran and the Nakesht puzzled Chimquar. The Sharanis unsheathed their swords, galloping at Chimquar's heels. The difference between their steeds and the plainsbred horse sowed at once.

Makajia's small size and lightweight compensated for the difference between her filly and the Sharani's, but her brother fell father and farther behind.

Chimquar looked back at Makajia's shout, and saw a Nakesht wolf plunge out of the tall grasses. She gestured sharply for the Sharanis to go on, and swung back with one of the javelins to hand.

Hazier slowed. "No!" Chimquar shouted, and Hazier clapped his heels to his mare's sides. His mentor charged the wolf. The javelin left her hand in a smooth throw. The wolf stumbled and fell. Chimquar circled back, watching for more wolves. She felt the stallion tense to rear. A wolf erupted out of the grass

before her. Adoni lashed out with his forelegs. Then a hard weight slammed into Chimquar. She struck blindly at the bulk of the snarling wolf carrying her from the saddle. They hit the earth together. It snapped for her throat, its teeth closing on the heavy thickness of the lion's man around her neck. Chimquar wrenched its jaws apart, threw herself and the wolf sidewise, twisting its head as her weight came down on the beast. Bone snapped. She released it. A man lay dead with a wide, golden slave collar around his neck: with his death the power of the collar had been broken and his true shape restored.

Wolves harried her stallion. Chimquar's dagger appeared in her hand as she got to her feet. A tearing pain ripped her left arm. The sudden weight of the wolf threw her off balance. She slashed at it. Her dagger glanced off the wide collar, sinking into its shoulder. She twisted the blade, jerking it free.

Yowling, the wolf turned to rend the hand that held the blade. Chimquar's dagger plunged and ripped. The wolf no longer moved. She shifted the dagger to her left hand, fighting the pain in that limb. Chimquar drew her sword and stood, facing the wolves. They circled her warily while others bayed the stallion; she and Adoni had taken toll of them. One charged. She stepped aside; her Sharani longsword raked its ribs. A growl made her whirl; she swept her sword in a low arc. The second wolf dodged. Then the first one, ribs bleeding came about with its companion. Chimquar impaled one, kicked the other in the head, and free her sword before a third attacked. A javelin impaled the fourth.

"Aroana!" Meadusea came. She and her bucking mount fought in fierce unison, centaur-like. Her bright blade slew and none of the wolves breached her guard. She drew them from the stallion and Adoni broke for his new master. Chimquar caught the saddle and swung up. Meadusea saw her and turned, racing after their fleeing companions. The wolves regrouped to pursue when a high, eerie wail rose

behind them. They melted into the grass, returning to their master.

Katalla rode rear guard to the youth and his sister ? a sign to Chimquar that her prejudices did not usurp her ha'taren honor.

Chimquar fumbled with the saddlebags to free them, then dragged them across her lap, feeling inside for cloth to bind her arm. Her hand closed upon a horn, then the cloth.

"You're hurt." Meadusea dropped back to ride beside her.

"I've taken worse," Chimquar replied brusquely, working one-handed.

"Rein in. I'll help."

"No." Chimquar shrugged off her concern and finished. She reached into the saddlebag, bringing out Tamlys' horn. The Sharanis should have mounted guards on the outer perimeters of their encampment. She fingered the horn. Its call would carry a good distance on the open plains.

"They will be back?" Katalla asked as Meadusea and Chimquar reached her.

"Yes." Chimquar gazed at the northern horizon, her eyes hard and distant. "Their master with them ? and Bakran." A Euzadi curse rolled off her tongue. Hazier glanced back. Makajia's color deepened. Neither offered to interpret for the Sharanis.

"Bakran?" A curious expression crossed Meadusea's broad strong-boned face.

Chimquar started to answer when Katalla interrupted savagely. "You know them?"

"I know them." Chimquar's words emerged taut. Her knees pressed the stallion's sides. She moved past Katalla and Hazier. "Let the horses breathe."

"You know them?" Katalla came alongside Chimquar.

"Bakran is my enemy," she answered harshly. "That is a tale I do not wish to tell." Bakran had burned too many villages ? slain too many peopleâ A

fair-skinned face came to mind. Chimquar fought remembering, her face twisting.

"That isn't enough."

"Don't push me!" Dark, violent power blazed in Chimquar's eyes.

Katalla dropped her eyes, unable to meet that power, but she had recognized its nature. "You're part Sharani! A half-breed?"

"I said, I am not Euzadi born." Chimquar's voice softened strangely. "Now drop back beside Makajia."

Katalla frowned, but obeyed.

Chimquar felt tense and uneasy. If Katalla thought further she would realize there were no Sharani or half-Sharani males Chimquar's age. Only a flourishing slave trade had kept large numbers of males in Shaurone during the time when the Waejontori curse prevented the birth of sons to Sharani women. The numerous males in the household of Chimquar's ma'arams had not been Sharani. Chimquar hoped Katalla would not recall all aspects of the curse, which had ended several years before her birth.

Chimquar counted on the hours it would take the Nakesht to recover his precious collars. Night would come, bringing the full moon, Tala Who Loves Earth: the full light of She Who Holds Back Darkness would deter the Nakesht from battle as the distant, disinterested sun did not.

She kept her companions moving all night, alternating the pace to spare the horses. Chimquar held herself apart, avoiding Katalla's questions and provocations. They diminished the distance to Anaria's camp enough to halt at dawn.

"Makajia," Chimquar called, dismounting. She led her stallion farther from her companions.

The girl came, leading her black filly. She held her head high, but her dark eyes were dull with weariness.

Chimquar caressed Makajia's head. "You've not ridden so long and hard before." Makajia smiled shyly. Chimquar still wondered how the girl could be so bold and wild one moment, and so shy and quiet the next. Chimquar bent to look her in the eye. She had tried not to make the girl an outsider among the Euzadi as she had Hazier. Chimquar knew she had caused Hazier's life to be more difficult than it should have been. He was her pride, but Makajia was her jewel. The warrior straightened, swinging Makajia up. She giggled, threw her arms around Chimquar's neck, and pressed a kiss on her cheek. Chimquar held her briefly, fiercely as though to press all of the love of many years into the embrace, then set her down and stood back. She took the horn from the saddlebag and slipped the strap over Makajia's head. "I have something for you to do, little one."

"I can do anything!" Makajia asserted proudly.

Chimquar pulled off the saddle and pack from the stallion. "It's half a day's ride to the ruins, Makajia. We can hold off the Nakesht and Bakran there."

Chimquar took her crest ring from her pouch, pressing it into the girl's hands.

"You know where I have said Anaria's camp is?" Makajia nodded. "Give that to her. Blow Sharani calls all the way, Makajia. They will come to you." Chimquar lifted the girl onto the stallion's bare back. Every ounce of extra weight gone, Adoni could probably outrun the wind spirits. She put the reins in Makajia's hands. "Adoni! Davan, Adoni! Volasyar!" Chimquar cried in Sharani. The stallion leaped away, running like dark flame before a gale. One person whom Chimquar loved would survive her â at least. Chimquar smiled slowly. She picked up the saddlebags and threw them across Makajia's filly.

"What have you done?" Katalla demanded, rage coloring her voice. "Are you mad?"

"She will reach Anaria." Chimquar was grim.

"She bears no arms!"

"She's no warrior!" Chimquar growled back, looking up from the saddle. "But nothing can catch her."

"They'll tear her to pieces! You know the ways! Why didn't you teach her the ways!"

"What goes here?" Meadusea joined them, watching the fading figure of Makajia.

It was already too late to overtake the girl.

"The half-breed has sent the girl to Anaria â weaponless! Those creatures will tear her apart!" Katalla's face was a dark mask of rage.

"Half-breed?" Meadusea pulled that out, staring curiously at Chimquar. "You mean Sharani, Katalla?"

"Yes!" the woman snapped.

Chimquar stood still under Meadusea's scrutiny. "Sharani sword, words, and some ways. There are no Sharani males your age."

"None?" Katalla gasped, eyes wide, then loathing twisted her features. "God damned, skin-changing wolf-bitch!"

A tremor of rage ran through Chimquar. The back of her fist bloodied Katalla's mouth the same instant her left foot snapped into the young Sharani's stomach.

Katalla landed in the dirt, sobbing for breath. She rolled on her side, drawing her dagger. Meadusea placed her foot firmly on Katalla's arm. A glance passed between them and Katalla sheathed the blade. Chimquar left, leading the filly apart.

"What is your name?" Meadusea asked gently, following her.

Chimquar glanced up sharply. "That's none of your concern."

"It is hard in these lands."

"You think it is hard now?" Chimquar murmured, her voice rough. "I was first in these lands. First!"

"The way you reared the girlâ"

"Is none of your concern!" Chimquar snarled. "On that stallion she is safe. She can out ride the wind-lords."

Meadusea shook her head. "I want to understand you. But the way you have reared the girl to be soâ"

"Don't say it!" Chimquar's voice rose in warning. "Should I have made her an outcast in her own land? None knows better than I what it means to be outcast. You don't want to understand â you want to excuse!" Chimquar mounted and moved away. Hazier joined her, but kept his questions to himself.

Mid-morning the wolves returned, pacing them, their cries keeping the horses and riders tense. The Sharanis held a javelin ready, shields rested on their arms.

Chimquar searched the grasses with her eyes, her ears anticipating the cries of the Nakesht master and Bakran's men. Chimquar mused grimly, It is odd Bakran has not attacked. Some aspect of his deal with the Nakesht must be holding him back.

He must want my head badly.

The roofless hull of a stone house rose in the distance, the south wall gone completely, the east side a sloping fragment. Chimquar kicked the filly into a canter, then a full gallop. Hazier sprang forward with her. Meadusea and Katalla came a few strides behind. The sudden full flight triggered the actions of heir pursuers. A high human wail wounded. The wolves answered and came leaping at the heels of the racing horses. Chimquar drew her sword. The wolves avoided her

blows, concentrating on her horse.

Six beasts splintered from the pack, out-stripping the horses to gain the ground ahead of them and turn, teeth bared, to halt the flight. Chimquar's filly plunged into the middle of them. A wolf fixed its teeth in the filly's throat.

Chimquar leaned out to cut it away. The filly stumbled and fell, hamstrung.

Chimquar sprang free a moment before the beasts swarmed over the hapless horse, landed wrong and stumbled, falling. She lost her grip on the sword and it lay a yard off. She stretched her hand to reach it and a wolf landed on her. Chimquar

dug her right hand into the folds of skin around its throat, twisting hard. Her left hand got the dagger from her boot top and with it opened the beast's belly.

It was a naked, gutted man with a golden collar she saw dead. Another wolf, charged. Chimquar flung herself out of its path, her hand closing on her sword.

She rolled over, the steel blade flashing in the morning sun. The wolf dodged neatly and came back. Chimquar gained her feet and impaled the lunging beast.

"Heads up!" Meadusea extended her empty sword hand to Chimquar. Chimquar took the hand, springing up behind the warrior. Meadusea's gelding covered the last yards swiftly, jumping a small pile of tumbled stone to enter the ruined dwelling.

Chimquar leaped down, turning to face the wolves with steel. The cries of their master rose and once more the wolves held back. Then Hazier and Katalla reached the dubious fortress.

A line of horsemen drew up twenty spear-lengths from the ruins. One man sat at their head, his huge body muscled to grotesqueness. A bright, crimson scarf made a headband holding his black mane from his face. He rode out a few yards and shouted, "Chimquar!" Surrender and the others go free."

"Lies, Bakran!" I know you too well. "You've already promised them to the

Nakesht!"

A gaunt figure rose at Bakran's feet. His horse shied. Wolves gathered about their master. Bakran's horse reared. He cursed, struggling with it, then brought it back to the Nakesht.

The master raised one hand and dropped it. The wolves surged forward and their master ran among them, crying them on. The renegades followed.

Meadusea and Katalla took the empty expanse where the south wall had stood.

Chimquar dropped back along the east wall fragments. Some would come that way and, on foot, she would have a better chance there. Hazier wavered in the middle. Chimquar gestured sharply at the Sharanis. The youth went to their side as the men struck.

The wolves circled the ruins with their master. Chimquar listened to the cries of the battle, scant spear-lengths from her as she watched the wolves. Her instincts were to aid her companions, yet she waited, knowing the Nakesht would come. She had to hold the rear when they came. An image of Makajia on the tall stallion, her neck pressed against his, his pale mane whipping around her narrow face came into Chimquar's mind. Then the first wolf came over the wall. She sprang before it, her sword impaling it in mid-leap. Another attacked as she kicked her blade free. Her dagger grazed its ribs and it turned, coming again.

The day-old wound throbbed and hurt, slowing her dagger hand. Teeth closed on that arm, tearing the wound further. Chimquar cried out in pain and anger, bringing her sword blade down on the beast's back. It writhed, snapping in bloody circles on the ground. Two more danced around her. Chimquar fainted at one, then pivoted to meet the charge of its mate. The wolf dodged too slowly and died. It was easy telling which wolves were truly dead, for even in their death throes

they had turned to men. It was like fighting in an illusion or a dream, slaying beasts but felling men, but Chimquar had no moment to consider the eeriness of the battle.

Teeth raked her calf. Chimquar twisted, landing a sword blow on the wolf's head. She whirled back, kicking and striking with sword and dagger. The battle became a blur; she ceased to think, reacting by reflex. She moved and fought in a sea of teeth that threatened to overwhelm her. Some wolves got past her. Only the death of their master could stop them.

The hollow, whistling laughter of the Nakesht Master drew Chimquar. She glimpsed him half a spear-length beyond the wall watching. Anger and desperation became a hot, screaming rage within her. All the long bottled and controlled energies became a violent strength. She broke from the wolves, vaulting a low piece of wall. "Aroana God! My God!"

The master's note changed. He retreated. His wolves drew together, swarming over the warrior, clinging to her like ticks. Chimquar cut them away, the force of her rage making her oblivious to her wounds. The Nakesht retreated again, waving his arms and crying in his strange, whistling tongue. Bakran appeared, stepping into Chimquar's path.

"You're a dead man, Chimquar!" He said coldly.

"Man?" Chimquar paused, laughing crazily. "I'm a woman!"

An incredulous expression entered Bakran's face. Chimquar rushed him, her blade dancing swift and hard about him. He dodged, gave ground. Chimquar moved after him, breathing raggedly, her strength faltering. Bakran's sword left a bloody furrow across her ribs. She brought her longer weapon down, biting into his arm. Bakran lost hand and weapon. Chimquar left her sword standing in his stomach. She lurched toward the retreating Nakesht, her sword arm pressed against her

ribs. Her rage-born strength drained away as her pain overtook her. She staggered, went to her knees, then fell on her face. Her left hand lost the dagger as she fell.

The core of her awareness fought the darkness lapping at it. Clawed hands pulled at her, turning her over. The mate to her lost dagger slipped from its arm sheath into her hand. She thrust up into the face of the Nakesht Master. He fell dead across her.

Chimquar heard horns blowing and many Sharani voices shouting. She tried to get up, but her body would not answer her will, and she passed out.

A soft voice chanting her name and wet drops falling on her face touched Chimquar's drifting awareness, disturbing the warm, fuzzy haze enveloping the warrior. A sweet-sharp fragrance colored the air she inhaled, it cleared her head as she took a deep lungful of it. Heaven Flower so far from the western forests? She felt for Makajia. Her fingertips brushed the girl's tear-streaked face. Chimquar opened her eyes. The outlines of the Euzadi girl's narrow, creamed-coffee face slowly congealed.

"Chimquar!" Her chant broke off with a fresh, joyful sob. She buried her head against her guardian's chest. Chimquar stroked her head and shoulder, awkwardly, her limbs feeling stiff and weak. Chimquar murmured soft, meaningless words to Makajia, soothing, reassuring.

Light flowed in suddenly. Makajia straightened quickly. Chimquar levered herself up on her arm. Makajia snatched several pillows, shoving them to her back.

The slender figure standing in the tent's entrance lowered her lamp and limped in. She placed the lamp on a small table beside the dim candles, then moved to

Chimquar and knelt.

Chimquar looked into the unchanged face of her youngest and only surviving sister, Anaria. After so many years among the lesser races, the imperceptibly slow aging of her long-lived race startled her.

Anaria raised a flask to her sister's lips and Chimquar drank. It filled her body with warmth, eased it, clearing the last cobwebs from her mind. Pollonae.

"Anariaâ"

"Shhh, Tomyris. Just listen to me." Her voice was soft, yet stern. "You and your children are coming home. I am not surprised to find you are Chimquar. I've suspected it since talking to Aejystrys Rowan several years ago in Vallimrah."

Anaria waved aside Chimquar's attempt to speak. "Not all like that fact. But if you are not ha'taren enough to face them, you will be of no use to the High Priest Sonden who sent us after you. Shaurone is growing, changing. Great deeds are in the offing." Her sternness dissolved into a child-like lostness. "Do I have to beg you again? Or will you listen this time?"

Chimquar remembered a very young girl crying, pleading, and cursing her on a moonlit wold. She could not repeat that night's decision. "I want to go home," she said, and then smiled.

THE END