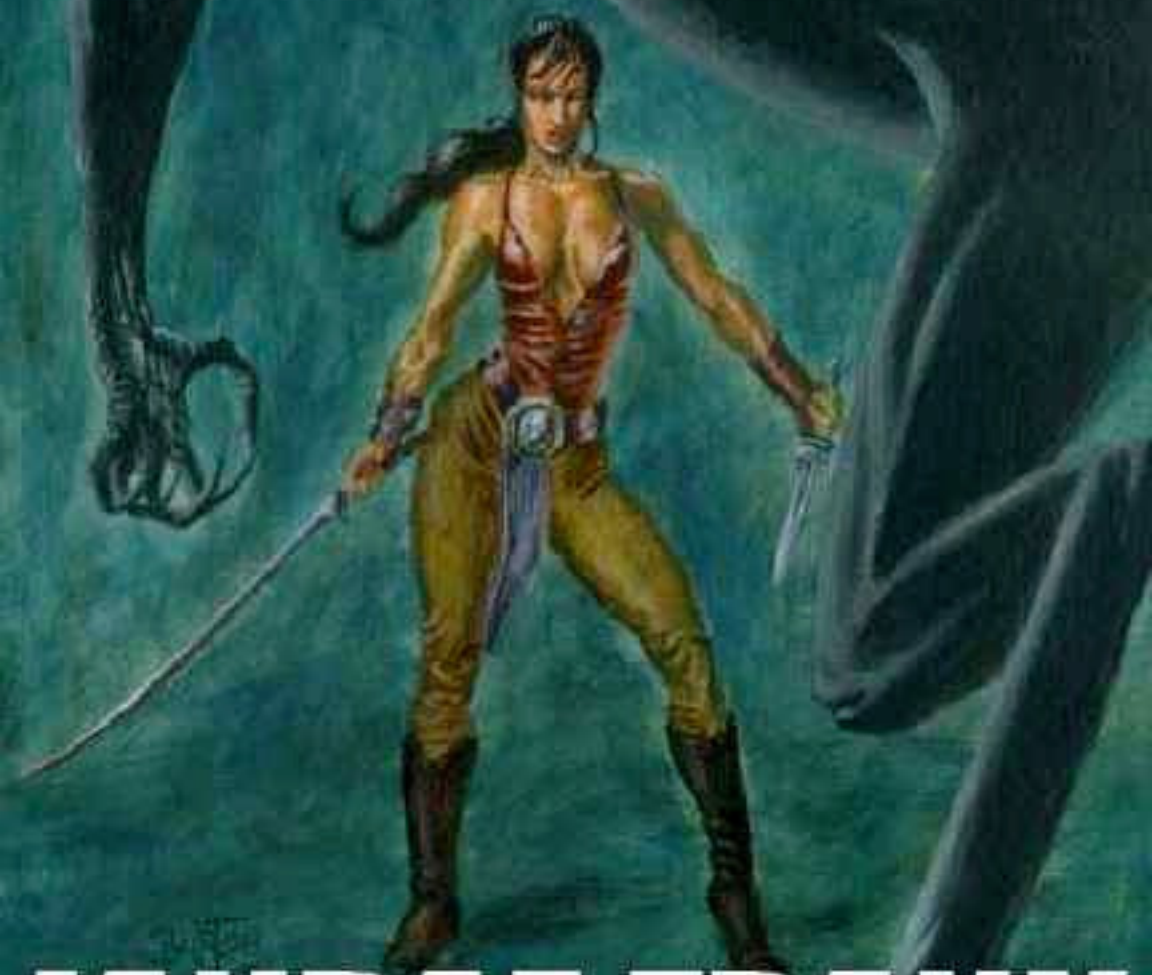


IN THE DARKNESS, HUNTING

TALES OF CHIMQUAR THE LIONHAWK



JANRAE FRANK

In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk
by Janrae Frank

Renaissance

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Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk

By

JANRAE FRANK

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First Book Edition

DEDICATION

To the Folks at the corner especially:

Andreas Black, Lord of Chaos

Daniel Arenson, the Summoner of Peers

Debbie Moorhouse, the Evil Squirrel

Dr. Tim Fisher, Growling Bear

Erin Denton, Theri of the Angels

Jean-Loup Benet, Lord of Wolves

Karen E. Taylor, The Candlelight Queen.

Kyle Kucek, The Infamous One

Lena Sawyer, Sims Queen

Luna Black, Sadistic Mistress of Crits

Mark Prins, Niwi the Dungeon Master

Morgan Sylvia, Her Royal Spookiness

In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk
by Janrae Frank

Sovay Jenifer Fox, Lady of Foxes

Thomas Stone, Hooligan from Hell

In addition, I would like to dedicate this to Lyn McConchie,
who continued to believe in me when I had nearly stopped
believing in myself.

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FOREWORD

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

To be asked to write a commentary to attend the work of another author, one whom I've in the past enjoyed, is a combination honor, burden, and responsibility. From the publisher's point of view it should be something terse and quotable and amazingly jam-packed with praise plus, if possible, spiced with comparisons to sundry bestsellers. From the author's point of view, she may not like to see her work misunderstood, or misrepresented even in a well-meaning way, let alone criticized if only a little within a great welter of praise. From an introductionist's point of view, it should be honest yet by no means "get in the way" of stories by revealing too much like some fool critic who outlines plots, reveals endings, or conveying to a readership the wrong set of expectations. An introduction is always of vastly lesser consequence than the work introduced, yet such matter is often read beforehand, so an introductionist should strive to do no harm.

It hardly seems possible that over a quarter-century has passed since I first read a tale by Janrae Frank. When I first encountered Chimquar the Lionhawk, I was astonished by the character. This was in the mid 1970s, a decade that culminated with my editing my first anthology, the award-winning *Amazons!*, which included a Chimquar story. I had earlier published a chapbook consisting of another of these

stories. Up until this time the sword and sorcery genre consisted primarily of muscle-man stories and if there was an occasional Amazon, she was often more of a busty beach babe suited for illustration by Frank Frazetta or Boris Vallejo, appealing mainly to newly pubescent boys with fetishes for enormous rear—mere pin-up girls holding swords a mite awkwardly, without sufficient musculature to actually swing a weapon.

The exceptions, from C. L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry to Joanna Russ's Alex, were so rare you'd be hard-pressed to find even those rarely in print examples. The influential heroic fantasy books of the 1960s and 1970s were first and foremost Conan the Barbarian, plus a whole host of imitations, including Brak the Barbarian, Thongor the Barbarian, Elric the grotesquely civilized albino, and Fahfrd and his cosmopolitan buddy, the Grey Mouser. Some of it was good stuff, but if you could find any interesting woman character in any of it, her presence would be mostly transient and secondary to the male leads. Many of the girlfriends of Fahfrd and Grey Mouser were pretty darned thrilling, but they were still ultimately "just" girlfriends, whether or not spooky unusual ones. Robert E. Howard ranged from the sort of women characters who fell slavishly at the feet of Conan, to the warrior Belit who caused Conan to rest at *her* feet, but still in all, Conan was the star.

In the wake of the anthology *Amazons!*, however, a floodgate opened, and amazon heroic fantasy became a commonplace. For a year or two these included pretty good books exploring genuinely imaginative landscapes. In a very short time, however, the "women writers' perspective" of

sword and sorcery began to resemble nothing so much as it resembled historical love stories, which is to say, bodice rippers, somewhat liberated from the damselish weaknesses of girls in love, but even so less about magic and adventure or heroism as about the sentimentality of getting together with some hot swordsman.

In the standard bodice ripper the girl would follow the man she loves halfway round the world and have some nice adventures in the name of love, sometimes in the guise of a lad, sometimes among the "baggage" of campfollowers, even on rare occasion having a token fight scene or two of her own. But always her obsessions, and the excuse for the adventure, was romantic love. In the amazon heroic fantasy, the woman and her man might well have greater parity than in the standard historical love tales, and in the fantasy worlds not every turn in the plot is defined or needed to be defined by where the king or Conqueror is headed with love-stricken maiden fast behind. But with a few distinctions in mind, amazon heroic fantasy became, all too often, the same as the Historical Harlequin Romance that sublimates valor, duty, revenge, or honor as inconsequential when compared to falling in love and allegedly having that love reciprocated.

And hey, that may not even be a bad thing, to assume pure love is better than pure mayhem. But what always drew me to heroic fantasy was the valor and the magic, and I was sorry that the great influx of women writing heroic fantasy post-*Amazons!*, when that sub-genre truly exploded in the 1980s, so swiftly scooted over to the love-angle. To this day

the amazon heroic fantasy genre more resembles harlequin romances than it does heroic adventure.

Chimquar was ahead of her time in the 1970s when amazonian heroes were not yet commonplace, and even after the explosion of women's fantasy from the 1980s to the present, Chimquar remains a spectacular exception to the love-story-disguised-as-heroic-fantasy usually encountered. She was neither sex-object for slightly masochistic boy readers, nor was she the center of an idle love fantasy for dissatisfied housewives to read about. She was an adventurer bold, sometimes very angry, a little mad perhaps but with good cause. The heart of the tales is always action, but we have also a rich and unusual surprisingly thoughtful character who achieves a considerable depth of heroism and tragedy.

Her culturally intergendered nature was a fascinating addition. This was highly original at the time of first composition, and surprisingly not exploitive. Had these stories gotten the attention they deserved in the 1970s they might have been recognized as ground-breaking, as were the intergender characterizations in Ursula LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* and John Varley's Gaea series, which were among the works that helped bring science fiction to maturity. All these years later when GLBT fantasy and science fiction is sufficiently common it even has its own awards and award categories, Chimquar may not seem as novel as she would have seemed twenty-five years ago when nothing like her had ever been seen in heroic fantasy. The stories really were in the vanguard, not in the wake, of changes that occurred in genre fiction during the 1970s.

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by Janrae Frank

Chimquar the Lionhawk *honestly* was the female equivalent of Conan, not just a love story heroine snipped out of her bodice and put instead into a brass bra; not just a bathing beauty with pipe-cleaner arms following after some muscled hero. This wasn't some adolescent sex fantasy acted out as adventure prose, it truly was about valor and strength of body and of purpose, and will, in a highly imaginative context.

With such raw strong stuff so rightly comparable to the then-faddish Conan, I thought the author would soon be well-known, and I would be able to play the boastful editor about being first to publish such a significant writer. The responses I had, as editor, to the two stories I did publish, encouraged my believing success was right around the corner for Janrae Frank. But the amazon fantasy sub-genre too soon meandered toward an archly commercial variant of the bodice ripper and there was, perhaps, no room for seriously hard-hitting pulp adventures such as Chimquar's.

I had mentioned to one of my own New York editors that I believed there was a novel by Janrae Frank going the rounds, and she (the editor) should really try to give it a serious look. She said, "I've already seen it. I rejected it." I was not stunned by this, since much good work is rejected every day. But with raised brow I did ask why she wouldn't have jumped on the chance to do that book, at a time when sword and sorcery was on the upswing commercially and had not yet "drecked out" into predictable patterns, and at a moment in time when some of that publisher's best selling titles were heroic fantasies of much less interest.

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I was asked in turn, "Didn't you think the author's writing was just a little rough around the edges?" I said yes, but that's part of the strength. Robert E. Howard, the great master of this sort of tale, did not write polished literary prose; had he done so, the stories would not have been as great. The style was as rugged and naïve as Conan the Barbarian himself. There was a reason why, in that particular decade, it was Conan who outsold the rest. The naïve power of the prose was exactly what Janrae Frank had captured so perfectly, and the Chimquar stories within this context were likewise works of genius.

Yet for both personal and commercial reason, Janrae's chance in the mass-market never got very far, though I'm convinced that public would have embraced this character wholeheartedly. Chimquar's saga is at long last being made available, even if only as a print-on-demand publication that does not require the fullest possible distribution to recoup a serious publishing investment.

This final version of the work is not what existed in the 1970s or 80s, consisting as it does of revisions and reconstructions and new additions, altered by changes in the author's circumstances and attitudes toward life and art. But the essence of it is what I saw decades ago, forthright powerful adventure with an awesome protagonist.

The work should have reached a mass market long ago, but so much of success is mere luck, without regard for worth or talent. At least today a smaller public will be able to find their way to these tales.

In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk
by Janrae Frank

Whoever does find their way to this book, I must assume you stated out with an interest in the boldest sorts of sword and sorcery. And in that case, you will assuredly not be disappointed here.

Jessica Amanda Salmonson
December 2003

INTRODUCTION

Lyn McConchie

In 1979 I picked up an interesting-looking short story collection with both the theme and title of AMAZONS (edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, DAW, 1979). I read the collection at a sitting of one afternoon and loved it. And to my mind, of all the work within, the best story of the lot was one entitled 'Wolves of Nakesht' by someone called Janrae Frank.

I liked the story so much that after that I watched hopefully for more of her work. The author information at the start of the story had said she was working on two novels set in the same fantasy world and I was eager to buy and read them. To my disappointment I never saw any other works by her. I wondered for years what had happened. Had she stopped writing, changed genres, or even died?

In 1991-12 years after I read 'Wolves', I met, in Seattle, the editor of the original two Amazons collections and was reassured that Janrae was at least alive. Hopeful that one day she might recommence writing more of the stories, I continued to watch for them.

My long patience has now been rewarded. Twenty-four years after reading that first story, I have at last been able to read more of her writing set in the Shaurone Amazon Empire. The breadth and depth of the world Janrae has created is incredible. It has color, complexity, and a blazing vivid life,

which draws me in as certainly as that short story did a generation ago.

Her tales of Chimquar the Lion-Hawk, Amazon warrior, exile, parent, and priestess, are gripping, not only because of the strong realization of a world, but also because Chimquar herself is real. A woman who lives her own life, refusing to be confined by custom or the demands of her kin. She is far more than the stereotype Amazon of many fantasies, she has her own voice and life, and I, as a reader and a woman, am heartily glad of that.

It had taken almost a quarter century for me to read more of Janrae's work. I can only swear that it has been worth the wait.

Lyn McConchie.

Author (with Andre Norton) of *The Key of the Keplian*, *Ciara's Song* (Warner Aspect Witch World novels); *Beast Master's Ark*, *Beast Master's Circus*, (Tor).

CONCERNING "CHANGELING SON"

"Changeling Son" is the sixth Chimquar story in terms of when I wrote them. I finished it in 1996. It was never submitted anywhere, as I remember, because the markets for this type of fiction appeared to have dried up. This is the origin story of Chimquar in the sense that this is how she came to be passing as male among the Euzadi. "The Hawk that Hunted Lions", which follows this one tells how she got her name. The Lionhawk described on her ring is a gryphon rampant.

changeling son

A thick film of gray dust and old sweat coated the warrior's face and stole the shine from the long black hair pulled into a tail at the back of her head. The cooler air of the cavern chilled her sticky, sweat dampened shirt and breaches so they clung uncomfortably to her tall, raw-boned, rangy body. She stood just over six feet with around 165 pounds of densely compacted muscle fleshing her bones. Empty water skins draped her shoulder, a longsword hung from a wide leather belt, and she carried a torch in her hand. Her storm gray eyes scanned the cavern cautiously.

A scruffy red-roan wynderjyn mare trailed after her, reins drawing lines on the sandy ground. A hand span of twisted horn poked through its forelock, bespeaking the animal's mixed parentage. An elaborate Lionhawk hilted longsword with the peace-string tied nestled between the sheepskin pad and the saddle's left leather flap, a short horn bow balanced it on the right. A quiver of iron-tipped arrows and more empty waterskins hung from the saddlebow. Saddlebags and a bedroll crossed the roan's hindquarters.

Water pooled silently near the center of the vast orange, gold and pale dun streaked cavern dome. The water rose from a stream running deep beneath the arid steppes, water-starved in the heat of high summer, too deep to nourish the ground save in this one place.

When she first saw the outer walls of the abandoned shrine, cut into the side of a small craggy hill, it had appeared

to her like a miracle. She had been giving most of her remaining water to her mare and limited herself to small infrequent swallows for the past two days. Tomyris had entered hoping for a well and found the artesian spring instead.

The flaring light of her torch glinted off black metal brackets set firmly into the stone walls ringing the cavern walls, their unlit torches still waiting after God alone knew how many years to be lit once more. The hands of myn showed in the absence of stalagmites and stalactites, which must have been cleared away.

"I don't know, Trouble," she said, her voice gravelly and rough. Whooping Cough in early childhood had scarred her vocal chords and throat, giving her a masculine hoarseness. It had killed her two youngest sisters. "Why would anyone abandon a water source in this god-forsaken land?" *Unless there's something wrong with it.*

The mare blew through her nose and shook her head in answer, following her like a big dog.

She circled the spring, lighting one torch after another. Completing her circuit, Tomyris looked again at the center of the now fully illumined cavern. Near the water at the far side, stood an altar with the towering statue of an ibis headed god crowned with the silver orb of the full moon between a pair of horns. Tremendous basalt sphinxes flanked the seated figure's feet. In its left hand it held the ankh and in its right a scroll. It was a shrine to life and knowledge. Again, she wondered why anyone would abandon this place.

Tomyris knelt at the edge of the water, dipped her cupped hand in, and brought up a handful. She let it drip through her fingers, smelling it. It smelled clean. She touched her tongue to it. It tasted pure. She pressed her face almost into the water, drinking handful after handful. The water was pure and good.

She pulled loose the lacings of her black leather vest and shed the torn, dirty rust colored shirt she wore. Old scars marked the lighter brown skin beneath her clothes. The top corner of a wide ugly triangle of twisted pink-white burn scar showed low on her left side, the rest concealed beneath her pants. Around her neck on a long chain hung half of a gold coin that had been split before her birth. On her half was the head and forepart of a horse. A silver unicorn talisman hung beside the half coin on a separate chain. She had worn them so long she scarcely noticed them anymore. The right edge of her wide leather belt, supporting an unadorned longsword, rode up against the bare skin of her side as she knelt by the water. A dirty bandage covered a week-old sword cut on her left arm. Twin leather bands held matching, ivory-hilted stilettos to her forearms. She splashed water over the small mounds of her breasts, over her heavily scarred arms, cleansing her of the accumulated blood, sweat, and grime. It felt wondrous after the dry heat of the summer steppes.

The warrior pulled at the bandage and grimaced—it had crusted painfully to the wound. She cut the bandage with her knife, then soaked it loose and washed the wound. It was not as bad as it had first seemed. Until then she could spare no water to clean it.

The red-roan watcher her, looking longingly at the water. It nudged her and Tomyris rumbled its dense red forelock, scratching around the horn. "It's okay, Trouble," she said. "Go ahead and drink.

Trouble dipped her head into the water. Tomyris stroked her neck; the long-lived animal was the only friend she had been able to bring out of her homeland six years past. They had come a long way through the wastelands with wolves harassing them for a week and a half ... wolves and a strange man-like wolf that ran on two legs and wielded a sword with rare skill: the Nakesht. She had heard their name whispered in the towns along the caravan route, but no one had ever offered to tell her anything about them. Until now the Nakesht had been just a name spoken with fear to her; now she knew them, for they had been skirmishing with her for days.

Her goal was the lands beyond the steppes and plains, the glittering cities of the east where she could lose herself and find—if not peace—then distraction from her memories and nightmares. She hoped that she could find a place where she could simply stop thinking.

"Let's see how defensible this place is." Tomyris pulled her shirt on, tuck it back into the wide band of her pants, and slipped into the vest letting it hang open.

They skirted several smaller chambers previously explored, returning to an entry room littered with broken pottery and the dry brittle skeletons of wooden furniture. Beyond the next door lay the cobble-stoned courtyard spiked with small

scattered patches of tough grass gone dry and brittle in the heat.

A long low howl sliced the night, followed closely by a woman's shrill scream. Tomyris' sword cleared its sheath: someone else had taken refuge in the ruins—with the Nakesht at their heels. Trouble reared, shrilling, and broke for the door. Tomyris paused briefly in Trouble's wake, scanning the courtyard. A high, mortared stonewall enclosed it. In the center stood a twisted arthritic crab of an old man striking intermittently at the circling wolves with a long oak staff. A young woman stood at his back, brandishing a flaming Mesquite branch, and charging the wolves now and again in a desperate attempt to defend both the old man and their exhausted, collapsing pony.

Trouble plunged into the midst of the wolves pouring through the narrow stone archway into the courtyard. Her steel-shod hooves crushed skulls and broke backs. More wolves hesitated beyond the long-shattered gate, unwilling to try the mare.

Tomyris charged in beheading the nearest wolf. A stiletto opened the throat of one trying to bite through the thick leather of her boot and the sword came down across the back of another, breaking its spine and nearly dividing the body. A wolf erupted in front of her, dodging under her guard to rip its teeth across her stomach. Tomyris' knee slammed up, breaking the beast's jaw and driving the bone into its brain as she brought her sword hilt down on its skull. Brains and blood splattered her.

The Sharani loosed a war cry, cutting down two more wolves. A heavy impact struck her between the shoulders, knocking her sprawling. The sword skittered across the cobblestones out of her reach. She twisted instantly. The tearing teeth missed her jugular, grazing her neck and collarbone instead as she threw the wolf off. Her left elbow struck the wolf's head, followed by her fist. The stiletto shifted in her grip and gutted the beast. Warm entrails slide over her hand. She kicked the body away and regained her feet, glancing for her sword. Silence struck her next.

Tomyris turned slowly, taking in the devastation. No living wolves remained within the courtyard. The survivors had withdrawn. Dead wolves shimmered eerily in the bloody light of the girl's burning branch and the frosted silver of the full moon. Their shapes wavered, regaining—in death—the form of the men they had been before the Nakesht enslaved them. Wide golden collars with strange runes adorned their naked bodies.

The old man sank to his knees in exhaustion, breathing deeply to recover himself. His head pressed against the staff he held upright with both hands. Tomyris did not spot the girl again until a gentle hand touched the warrior's arm.

The girl looked up into Tomyris' face. "You're hurt...."

Tomyris snorted. "Forget it."

"No," the girl repeated stubbornly. "You will let me tend it."

The light of the branch, which the girl laid aside, cast a flickering light across her features in the darkness. A dark headscarf wrapped the girl's hair and the shifting patterns of

light and shadow sharpened some of her features and diminished others. Tomyris guessed her to be about seventeen or eighteen. Maybe older? The warrior took in the sharp angles of her narrow face, the heart-shaped triangle of cheekbones and tiny chin. A bit of black hair crossed the girl's forehead, the ends tucked behind her ears when they vanished into the folds of her russet scarf. Full lips, a well-shaped mouth, slightly too large for her delicate face. A long, narrow nose. Tomyris found her gaze resting longest on the girl's large, dark liquid eyes, which reminded her of a young elk doe.

Light sprang up and Tomyris turned to see the old man shoving dead branches into a deep fire pit in the center of the courtyard where flames danced with increasing brightness.

She pulled a bit of cloth from her belt, wiped her sword and stiletto, sheathed them, all the while studying the girl who stood staring determinedly at her with folded arms and spread feet. She was definitely someone the warrior could like—perhaps even a kindred spirit—and the kind of woman Tomyris never expected to find so deep into the Lands of Men. Then a strange, twisted, almost smile engaged the left side of the warrior's mouth. "So be it."

The girl nudged the warrior nearer to the fire. "Sit down there." She reached into a deep pocket concealed in the folds of her dark skirt and came out with a brown pouch. "Take your shirt off."

Tomyris shrugged out of her shirt and sat by the fire in just the band, which snugged her breasts. She made no

sound as Sarana cleaned the wound and started to stitch the long tear closed.

The warrior looked up from the fire. The old man squatted not far from her. She had not heard him come up. He wore a dusty black robe, a broad brimmed hat with a headscarf hanging beneath it covering his neck and shoulders. His beardless face was deeply seamed and beaten to leather by years of exposure to the dry winds and the heat of the sun on the plains and deserts. Arthritis twisted and gnarled his hands almost to claws and hunched his shoulder. Yet power and authority shone in his large, dark brown eyes and profound self-confidence in the easy set of his mouth, the attitude of his head and posture. He stared interestedly at the half coin hanging against her breast a little apart from the talisman, then glanced away, pulling a pipe and a tobacco pouch from his pockets.

"You've seen the other half?" Tomyris asked, noting the way he looked at the half-coin, feeling a quickening of hope. She had not gone looking for her father, but what if she found him by accident? Would that be a bad thing? "One your people has it?"

"Possibly." He tamped down some tobacco into the pipe bowl and lit it with a twig from the fire. "That would have been a very long time ago. I really don't remember right now. Is it important to you?"

"Only a little."

"Ehsaaa!" The old man sighed, looking at the burn scar and nodding at it. "Dragon burn?"

Surprise crossed Tomyris' face and vanished back into a stillness of feature. "The Great War."

"Those wars were hard on my people. Some of our people were hurt then too. Those who summered in the northwest." He extended a gnarled hand to her. "I am Azkani Takara of the Dazalero Euzadi. You are?"

Euzadi. Her stomach did a slow roll. Of course they were Euzadi. What else could they be? The steppes she was crossing and the grasslands belonged to their thirteen tribes. They routinely butchered aberrant women and many—if not most—outsiders. She had found their leavings months before when she started down from the northeast: two Sharani staked out over anthills. Yet these two did not seem to be a threat. Despite all this, the Euzadi were said to be an honorable people. And she had just made a major, probably decisive, act for their survival.

"Tomyris." She gripped the twisted fingers in a brief contact. Yet it was enough to tell her still somewhat sensitive temple-trained instincts that the man was a mage. And now she almost remembered where she had heard his name before. Maybe by morning it would come to her. For now she was too tired to be bothered.

"Have you a last name, Sharani?" the old man asked.
Chimquar tensed at the question. "No."

* * * *

Tomyris wakened in darkness. The edge of her weariness had been blunted and the turning of her thoughts vied with her lessened, but still unsatisfied, need for more sleep. She

shifted to her left side and spied the muted glow of a shielded candle in the corridor just beyond the long-broken door to the chamber she had chosen for its nearness to the main entrance. The scent of sandalwood and roses drifted across her nostrils an instant before she felt a warm, unclothed body brush against her back, sliding between the covers of her bedroll. The nights were chill enough to require the light covering.

"What?"

"Don't ask," Sarana whispered, taking Tomyris' hand and drawing them to her bare breasts.

Tomyris drew a sharp breath. The girl's touch sent a tingling through her body. Tomyris realized with a sudden flooding of desire that six years of celibacy had heightened rather than blunted the hungers of her body. Without thought her hands began to knead Sarana's dark nipples. "Are you...?"

"Don't ask," Sarana repeated, pressing her lips to Tomyris' mouth. Her hand slipped beneath the warrior's shirt stroking her scarred breasts.

As Sarana's gentle fingers brushed her nipples, the warrior moaned softly. "Too long ... it's been too ... long." Tomyris trembled with the intensity of her need. Fumbling slightly, Sarana helping, Tomyris freed herself of the shirt. Then she gently pushed Sarana back and, resting on her elbow, pressed her face between the girl's breasts, kissing them hungrily as their bodies twined together.

* * * *

The scent of Frankincense and Myrrh smoldering in the incense burners of the altar drifted through the hallways as Tomyris emerged from her room the next morning at first light, quiver at her shoulder and bow in hand. She had inventoried her own practically non-existent supplies and those of the newcomers who had little more than she did—most of what they brought with them had been altar supplies—and decided to go foraging at dawn.

She passed through the central chamber and paused for a moment to watch Sarana sweep around the sphinxes. The girl moved with an easy grace that Tomyris found pleasurable to observe. Azkani gave no sign of having noticed her as he spoke to the god there, hands raised on high, intoning words in a language she did not know. Tomyris turned and went on.

All trace of the Nakesht had vanished: Everything from the pile of dead men Tomyris had dragged from the courtyard last night—there wasn't even a drop of dried blood on the ground—to the smallest footprint of master or wolves. The dying, summer-burnt grass lay totally undisturbed, as if last night's attack had been but a figment of nightmare. Her neck skin prickled into goose bumps and a chill spread down her back and arms. "Aroana, My God, just how powerful are these creatures to disappear like this?" she muttered, wondering also whether it was choice or need that had—so far—brought the assaults of the Nakesht only by night.

Tomyris found fresh spoor from a trio pronghorns. She tracked them over a low rise, down into a shadowed gully at the base of a rocky outcropping, and saw them: a tall buck and a pair of does. She waited, a shadow within the shadows

of the rocks, watching them browsing the tips of a cluster of tumble bushes. Tomyris nocked an arrow to the string and released it. The slender shaft flew true. The large male stumbled, tried to rise. It seemed for a second that it would gain its feet. Tomyris released another arrow, striking the animal in the chest. She nocked another to the string as she emerged from the shadows. She never killed does or young. These she let escape: they bounded across the open and disappeared into the distance.

The pronghorn buck floundered, still struggling to rise when she reached it. Tomyris dropped her bow and arrow. She pulled her skinning knife, caught the animal by the horns, bestrode its shoulder, and skillfully drew the blade across its throat. Its big brown eyes met hers briefly with a sad resignation. She chanted softly for a moment, bidding the animal's soul to join the god Tala, She-Who-Challenges-The-Darkness, god of the hunt and moon. Then she cleaned and shouldered the beast, carrying it draped across her neck and shoulders to the shrine. She watched for signs of the Nakesht the entire way back, and found none. She would have preferred to have found some, simply because it would have meant taking some of the mystery out of them.

* * * *

Tomyris sat in the early afternoon shadows of the east wall, her back to the stone, knees drawn up, and her arms draped across them. She watched Sarana building a small pile of scavenged wood, tumble brush, and pronghorn chips in the center of the shrine's courtyard firepit, which had been

cleaned of debris while she hunted. She watched the way the folds of Sarana's full, dark brown skirt swished around the girl's calves, revealing and then concealing the sweet curves. Sarana's hunter green blouse was tucked in and her brown scarf covered most of her hair. Tomyris wanted to strip the scarf away and watch Sarana's dark hair tumble down.

The warrior stripped away branches and leaves from two mesquite boughs with a skinning knife, trimming them down to forked ends to hold a spit for the girl's cooking. Tomyris stood and crossed in quick strides to the little pile. Tomyris brushed against the girl as she shoved the straight ends into holes that had been prepared for them. The girl's perfume filled the warrior's nostrils with sweetness. Tomyris' odd half-smile started at the left side of her face, bloomed, and lingered for a moment. Sarana smiled back, at once shy and knowing. Then the warrior turned away, lifting a spit with a haunch of antelope on it and settling it between the forked arms. Sarana knelt, flicked her skirt out of the way, and pulled flint and steel from one of her many deep pockets. It took only an instant to get the first small flame going.

Tomyris wondered if it would have been better to ignore the girl, uncertain of whether the old man knew what had gone between them and, if he knew, how he would react. When Sarana chanced to brush her fingers across Tomyris' hand or arm, the warrior felt as if a flame ran through her veins. It had been six years since she had had either friend or lover of either gender.

Sarana caught Tomyris' sleeve and poked her finger through the tears. The girl's touch startled the warrior out of her reflections.

"Take it off," Sarana told her. "I'll mend it."

Tomyris shrugged. "It will just get torn again."

"If I don't mend it now, next time will reduce it to tatters," the girl said with gentle insistence. "You do have another shirt, don't you, Tomyris?"

"Yes, but—"

Sarana seized the bottom of Tomyris' shirt and started to pull it up, taking the leather vest with it.

Tomyris caught Sarana's hands, holding them firmly. "Inside. I'll change inside."

As she turned towards the shrine, Tomyris noticed Azkani standing in the doorway watching them with a thoughtful expression in his dark eyes. He stepped aside as Tomyris pushed brusquely past him.

* * * *

Sarana hummed to herself as she stitched the shirt, sitting cross-legged beside the pool. Tomyris gave her a short nod and Sarana beamed at her. A slow, half-smile verged on the left side of the warrior's mouth, then disappeared as she turned to leave the shrine. The girl carried an amazing assortment of objects in the voluminous pockets of her long skirt, including needle and threads, and the warrior was gradually recovering from her amazement at the diversity and quantity of the girl's stash.

The two equines grazed the scattered patches where the grass forced itself in widening areas between the cracks in the ancient paving stones. Azkani sat beside the firepit, the flames casting a shifting light across the man's features, liming the folds of his skin in shades of orange. The westering sun added to the shadows in the courtyard. "Very little surprises Sarana," the old man said, giving the spit a turn before sitting down beside the warrior. "Or more to the point, Sarana's like the Moon's Mare, no matter how rough the terrain, she never misses a stride.

"Hmnm." Tomyris unsheathed her sword as she sat down and ran an oiled cloth lovingly along the blade, thinking about Sarana—rescuing her had been the best thing to happen in a long time. A square cut ruby with a Lionhawk rampant carved into its face glittered on her left hand.

Tomyris noticed the way Azkani surreptitiously glanced from the ring to her face and then back again. It seemed as if, although he tried to look at everything else, the ring irresistibly summoned his eyes. Finally, he pulled out a pipe, filled it from a small pouch at his belt, tamped it down, pulled a burning twig from the fire, and lit it. Azkani drew deeply, and then leaned back against the courtyard wall with the late afternoon shadow cooling him.

Azkani did not look like a shaman in his worn black robes and patched broad-brimmed hat. He did not look like a Euzadi nomad either. But the old man was both. And more. *If he's who he claims*, Tomyris thought wryly. To the thirteen tribes of the Euzadi, Azkani was the shaman of shamans. High Seer

and Mage. His power, political as well as mystical, went largely unquestioned in the grasslands of Murshay'di.

Just as Tomyris glanced back at the entrance to the shrine, wondering when Sarana would come out, the girl appeared. Sarana settled beside them on her haunches, stealing the attention of shaman and warrior from each other. She extended the mended shirt to Tomyris, smiling contentedly. "See, there are things I do well."

Tomyris settled the sword and cloth across her lap and took the shirt, examining the needlework as though it meant something to her. "Well done. Are all Euzadi girls like you?"

"Depends on what you mean by 'like you.'" Sarana tilted her head coquettishly, smiling. "No. I have nothing in common with the others. That is why Azkani's clan gave me a home. Isn't that right, Good Master?"

The old man smiled in spite of himself. "Yes, you're one more piece in my collection of eccentrics, idiots and outcasts." He sighed and amended his comment. "Talented eccentrics, idiots, and outcasts. Most of them very talented. And I wouldn't trade a single one of you."

Sarana laughed. "The collector fits the collection."

Azkani chuckled softly.

Tomyris relaxed a little, responding to Sarana's pleasant attention. "You came all this way alone?"

"When the gods say to make pilgrimage, you do not take an army. You trust them," Sarana said and turned to Azkani. "Is that not right, Good Master?"

"Yes. The gods defend their own."

"Pilgrimage to a dead shrine?"

"It's not dead! It's just sleeping. We're waking it up again." Sarana began indignantly, then spied the twisted almost-smile at the edge of the warrior's mouth; and Tomyris saw the change in Sarana's face that showed the girl realized that she was baiting her just a little.

Tomyris sheathed the sword and put the oilcloth away. "Why a pilgrimage?"

"I was given a vision as we observed the rites of the Spring Equinox," Azkani answered. "The Nakesht have plagued our people for a score of years. They raid our herds, our villages, and shrines. Our hunting parties are not safe. Even our migrations are threatened. Their numbers have increased until I fear war is imminent."

"They're the reason Querismet—this shrine—was abandoned when I was a baby," Sarana interjected.

Azkani nodded and touched her lightly on the arm. Sarana blushed and fell silent. "At the equinox Ma'arath, wife of holy Tothramu appeared to me, saying that I would have the solution to the threat of the Nakesht when this shrine to her husband was restored."

Tomyris felt a sudden tightening in her stomach, catching the hope in Sarana's eyes. "You think I might be your answer. Don't!" She threw the shirt on the ground, rose and stalked off. "I've had enough of war. Enough. Enough!"

* * * *

Sarana cast Azkani a confused, hurt look, picking up the shirt.

The old man simply shook his head.

Sarana's small hands clinched and squeezed each other.
"Azkani ... I don't understand."

Azkani smiled fondly at the girl. "You're thinking of her as barely older than yourself. That's a mistake. The Sharani don't age as we do. She'll live to be well over hundred. Possibly even two hundred. Unless she gets herself killed first. She probably will. That's what she's looking for."

Sarana shook her head. "I don't believe that."

A deeply weary, sad look formed in the old shaman's eyes. "The Sharani are different from other races. It's very, very unusual to see one totally alone. They don't bond in pairs, they're triadic. Usually two women and one man. There is a lot of pain in this one. I can see you're drawn to her. I won't say stay away from her. Only be careful. Tomyris Danae de Dovane may well be the most dangerous person you'll ever meet. She's the Lionhawk of Danae."

"You know a lot about them, Master."

"More than you could ever dream, my child. More than you can dream." The old man sighed. "This one may not be a part of the dream vision of Ma'arath."

The girl's voice caught. "Maybe not yours—but mine." She went after Tomyris and did not see Azkani pull a long chain from beneath his shirt on which hung half a coin.

* * * *

Tomyris sat in the first room she came to, which Sarana had earlier swept clear of debris, working on the rest of her blades. An unexpected ambivalence had caused her to stop there, instead of retreating to her room. She hoped that

Sarana would follow and then hoped the girl would not. The Euzadi drew her strongly, but she did not need another's life complicating her own. The warrior glanced up at Sarana when the girl entered and then ignored her.

"Don't be upset with me. Please?" Sarana's voice trembled and she bit her lower lips. She clutched the mended shirt to her chest.

"Go away," Tomyris said irritably. *Gods, I don't need these feelings. I am not falling in love, I'm just lonely.*

Tears started in Sarana's eyes, but she stood her ground. "If I upset you, then I am sorry. I'm always jumping to conclusions."

"No." Tomyris' voice was rough and low. "You haven't done anything. It's just that..."

"You don't have to explain," Sarana said softly, squatting in front of her. She twisted a loose strand of hair back.

"Maybe I want to. Maybe meeting someone like you in the middle of nowhere is an omen—that I should start thinking about matters again. I don't know. I've spent most of my life playing hero for other people. I'm tired of it. I'm tired to the bottom of my soul."

"But you're not much older than I am."

A slight, rueful twist came on Tomyris' lips. "I'm Sharani. I'm twice as old as you are, at the very least."

The warrior leaned back against the arch of the door, staring out through a narrow window at the mesquite, tumble-bushes, and rocky outcropping dotting the plain around them. The Nakesht were out there, waiting. That went without question.

Sarana followed her eyes, guessing her thoughts as she said, "They haven't gone away."

"I know." Tomyris' voice was soft, detached.

"If we just hold out long enough, we'll be okay," Sarana said excitedly. "There are warriors and the rest of the Majios clan following half a moon behind us."

Tomyris gave Sarana a hard look, her lips tightening into a thin line as her hand dropped to her sword hilt. "Then I'm leaving."

"There are two more weeks without them. They ride with the moon." Azkani's voice startled her and the warrior half turned. Again she had not heard him approach. "Bind down your breasts. I'll tell them you're a man."

"A lie."

"You would have freedom. You could go anywhere largely unmolested. Certainly no more than most men."

Tomyris scowled deeply. "But no honor."

"Honor you say? In deliberately looking for death?"

Tomyris went rigid.

"Isn't your attitude, shoving your reality in their faces, daring them to react and knowing they will—isn't this just another way to commit suicide?"

"No."

"And isn't suicide forbidden in your religion?"

Tomyris drew her breath in sharply, hesitated. "Yes."

"Ehsaa!" The old man sat down, leaned against the wall, relit his pipe, and took a long drag.

Tomyris turned to face him fully, her eyes troubled, her brow deeply furrowed. "I can't ... I cannot live a lie."

"What you can't do," said Azkani, gesturing pointedly with his pipe. "Is fight half a continent and survive. Attempting it is a violation of your vows to Aroana."

The warrior's insides roiled with a confusion of emotions she could neither sort nor name, making it hard to think clearly. "I can't," she repeated stubbornly.

"Consider this, as a man you could pass through these lands largely—as I said before—unmolested. Better than that, you could come with us and learn the ways of my people. Perhaps even find the inner peace I think you sought before you settled on the simplicity of death."

Suddenly she no longer doubted that the old man was who he claimed to be: only a man such as she heard Azkani was could see so deeply into her soul. "It wouldn't work."

"Wouldn't it?"

"No. It wouldn't."

"What are you afraid of? Disappointment? Failure? Yourself?"

"Nothing." Tomyris stood. "Nothing at all!" She stalked farther into the shrine, heading for the little room where she had stashed her things. A soft uncertain noise followed her and she turned to see Sarana in the doorway. She winced under Tomyris' frown.

"Stop following me!"

"Then stop walking off," Sarana retorted. "It's rude."

"The old man is rude. Let him mind his own business. I didn't come here looking for salvation."

For a moment they stood staring angrily at each other. Sarana's eyes dropped away first.

"Don't be angry with us," she said softly. "With me."

"I'm not. I'm leaving in a few days." *Well ahead of your warriors*, Tomyris added silently. "Then you can go on waiting for your answers."

"Please ... please be my answer ... for a few days." Sarana's voice dwindled away as tears started down her cheeks.

A strained, irritated sigh escaped Tomyris. She rubbed a rough hand across her face.

Sarana moved close to her. The girl's nearness, the smell of her perfume, the sheer vulnerable sweetness of her made Tomyris' skin tingle. She shook, fighting for control of a losing battle.

Sarana rose on her tiptoes, her hands went around Tomyris' neck and she pulled the warrior's face down to her own. And the warrior's moment of resistance ended.

"A few days. Nothing more." Tomyris murmured, lifting Sarana into her arms and carrying her to where the bedding lay unrolled on the floor.

"A few days."

* * * *

Azkani snorted. "I have no problem with your reality, nor does Sarana." The old man paused, holding the warrior's eyes for a long searching moment. When he spoke again, his words emerged like an offering of trust, which he hoped, would be returned—if not to him then to his young companion. "Were Sarana's truth known, our people would kill her."

Tomyris glanced at Sarana.

"Sarana prefers women. Yes, I know how she has been spending her nights. Discretion protects her from accusations of aberration," Azkani said gently. "My aegis protects her, at least for the moment, from tribesmen who would have her—by force if necessary. She is an orphan and fair prey."

Sarana's cheeks colored. She fled.

"What the hell!" Tomyris started to rise and go after her, but the old man caught her arm.

"Let her go. Sarana will be all right."

Tomyris rounded on him angrily. "Playing games with my head? You owe me answers and fast, old man."

"Yes. I suppose I do," Azkani said slowly, unmoved by the force of Tomyris' words. "I would rather have handled this with discretion, but Sarana's one failing is an utter lack of patience. She was correct in that we came here to restore the shrine. I was given a vision and left ahead of my clan as I was told to. The Nakesht harassed us all the way. We're not warriors, Sarana and I, but we are not without resources either." Azkani gestured at the ground with his staff. "Sit. This will not be a short tale."

Tomyris sat down and leaned against the wall as she had before.

"We had reached the end of those resources three nights ago. Then you appeared. When I saw you, I thought you merely some wandering mercenary who had taken refuge here. Not entirely uncommon. Good fortune for us. I saw you were Sharani as we knelt in the firelight. Then I saw the half

coin, your ring. I looked into your face. I knew who you were."

Tomyris tensed, she had thought herself safe from recognition this far east. She drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Who I am isn't important. I'm leaving tomorrow."

Azkani nodded. "So be it. At least allow me to finish." He watched her a moment and when she made no reply went on. "There were four great generals in the Western Kingdoms when the Great War with Waejontor broke out nearly two decades ago: Kalestari of Vallimrah, who slew and was slain by the Waejontori Banewitch queen; Colin Bradwin of Beltria, murdered during the celebration of his victory over the Eastern Army of Waejontor; Aejystrys Rowan of the Rowanslea Mar'ajanate of Shaurone, who has vanished; and Tomyris Danae de Dovane, the Lionhawk of Danae, Conqueror of Waejontor, who came home half-mad and was exiled after killing a noble's unarmed daughter in a fit of rage.

"You are driven by pain like a wolf with a mouthful of porcupine quills. No! Let me finish!" Azkani waved aside the beginnings of her reply. "Don't deny it. Let me show you. I can heal those wounds in your soul." As he finished the old shaman reached out suddenly and touched Tomyris in the center of her forehead with a word she did not understand.

Images flooded her mind—images she had struggled to block out for years: Her ma'aram's death in the early years of the war; the massacred villages where the banewitches and sa'necari of the Waejontori had turned the tame village dogs into ravening monsters that ate their masters and families;

the seemingly endless march of slaughter when she led her troops into Waejontor itself, taking the war back where it had been birthed. And the dragon, the smell of burning human flesh as it took out her entire unit. Her own pain as its flames seared her side and leg. She killed it. Drove her sword through its eyes before it knew any of its attackers had survived. A hollow victory. So it seemed, felt. Finally standing there in the halls of the royal palace with her friend's blood on her hands: Tomyris had beaten Shayla to death in a single moment of raging insanity—such as had possessed Tomyris' mind and soul intermittently since the conquest of Waejontor.

For one seemingly endless minute, the warrior felt herself hovering at the edge of the pit of renewed madness. Terror of it—of madness—punched the breath from her body as completely as a fist to the solar plexus. Tomyris' voice was low and strained, edged with pain. "Shut up, old man. Shut up!"

Tomyris seized Azkani by the neck of his robes, dragging him to his feet with her hand drawn back to strike him. Time had healed nothing. IT was all still there. The pain and horror. Her insides burned with it. All that she had eaten that day soured in her stomach. She wanted to hit him ... and hit him ... and hit him.

Then Azkani touched her forehead again. Tomyris' gaze seemed to sink deeply into the warm, gentle depths of Azkani's eyes and abruptly she remembered herself. She felt sick. She released him, reeled drunkenly away. Tomyris leaned against the wall retching and spewing, her arms folded

hard against her stomach, the knuckles of her clenched hands white from straining against themselves.

Azkani touched her shoulder.

"Don't!" She gasped out. "Don't make me remember.... unless you want to die like she did."

"Leave her be!" Sarana's arms slid protectively around Tomyris.

"Get out of the way, Sarana."

"No. Leave her alone, Azkani. You're hurting her."

"She's hurting herself. I can teach her to go beyond this pain. To be truly healed," Azkani murmured. "If you'll just let me."

Sarana scooped up a rock and turned on the old mage. "Go away, or I swear I'll—I'll hit you with this! I swear I will."

"Don't." The warrior straightened weakly and pulled the rock from Sarana's startled unresisting fingers. "You've made your point, old man. Go away."

* * * *

Sarana supported Tomyris, helping the shaken Sharani to her small room in thoughtful silence. She settled Tomyris on the bedroll. The warrior folded her legs and turned away silent. Sarana sat down near the door, hands in her lap, not speaking.

"I'm not staying."

Sarana moved closer and pressed her soft cool hands to the warrior's face. A shiver ran through Tomyris at her touch. "Take me with you."

"I can't."

"I love you."

"You don't know me."

"I don't need to. Love isn't something that develops. It's something that simply happens. I fell in love with you that first night." Sarana rose on her tiptoes, her arms encircling Tomyris as she pressed her lips to the warrior's.

Once more Tomyris yielded to the soft, sweet hunger she had not indulged in since the deaths of Larra Coleth and Ethan Bradwin.

* * * *

That night Sarana stirred, dozing in the circle of Tomyris' arm. Tomyris smiled and kissed her forehead. They lay together beneath a light coverlet on Tomyris' bedding within the shrine's antechamber. Sarana opened her eyes. She ran her fingers around Tomyris' neck, fingering the chain and then the half-coin.

"What is this?" she asked.

"My ma'aram's—mother's promise to my father when he had to return to his own people. He has the other half. If ever they should have needed each other's help, they had only to send the coin to bring the other to their aid."

"They must have loved each other."

"My mother loved him."

"And your father?"

"I don't know. I never knew him."

"And if he should send that half-coin, would you answer in her place?"

Tomyris pulled the half-coin from her hands, rubbing it thoughtfully. "I don't know."

"Would your mother have?"

"Yes."

"I wish you could love me like that."

"Perhaps ... if there were time it would come. There isn't." A chain of feelings struck the wall of Tomyris' self-control like waves against the sea cliffs: unable to move the barrier, yet slowly—unnoticeably—eroding it. The warrior shrugged, her heart armored again, refusing to contemplate such dangerous possibilities as love—or confront the specter of loneliness which haunted the edges of her heart.

"You're leaving and I'm not going with you," Sarana murmured without bitterness.

Tomyris kissed her again. "That's right."

A howling began beyond the courtyard. Tomyris threw off the coverlet, buckled the sword belt at her waist, picked up her bow, and slung the quiver at her shoulder.

Tomyris could hear Trouble shrilling. Trouble was the only mare—actually a wynderjyn—Tomyris had ever known who actually liked a fight. The warrior nocked an arrow to the string on emerging into the courtyard. It blazed with light from the ignited barrier. Azkani calmly added more fuel to the fire. Three dead men lay with their brains splattered by trouble's hooves. The situation seemed under control. Sarana ran into the courtyard with her broom.

A dozen wolves gained the top of the walls, leaping down into the courtyard. Tomyris shot six. Teeth closed hard on her shield arm, biting through the leather. She struck the wolf's

head with her bow and felt the wood crack. Shedding the quiver with a twist, Tomyris kicked the wolf under the chin. Bone snapped. The wolf's dead form shimmered, dissolved, and reformed into a naked man. She dropped the broken bow, drawing her sword as the stiletto slipped into her hand from its forearm sheath. Sarana screamed something unintelligible and brought the broom down with a resounding whack on a wolf charging Tomyris' back.

"Get the Hell out of here!" Tomyris snapped.

Sarana retreated as far as the doorway. Wolves heading her way got the same treatment as the first.

Tomyris gutted one wolf. Beheaded another. Four charged her from different directions. She killed two, and then stumbled as the fourth rammed her legs and the third went for her throat. Three more swarmed after her. Tomyris slashed in a desperate arc, kicking as she fell and twisted, the stiletto catching one in the throat as her sword counted for another.

Sarana, unable to simply stand and watch, charged in again with her broom, buying the warrior time to regain her feet and order the girl out of the fray again. Then abruptly the attack was over. Tomyris circled the courtyard, listening to the utter silence. The fight had ended too quickly. A vague suspicion itched along the edges of her thoughts like a flea she couldn't catch. She could feel the wrongness. The warrior counted twenty-one dead men. If she judged the fight by the numbers, the struggle had been substantial. But it still didn't feel right.

They dragged the bodies over to the side of the courtyard and left them in an untidy pile. Then Tomyris circled the courtyard again.

"Is something wrong?" Sarana asked, following at her elbows.

"I don't know. It's just a feeling."

The Nakesht didn't return again that night.

* * * *

Sarana huddled against the wall of the chamber, watching Tomyris saddle Trouble. The warrior smoothed the sheepskin pad across the hybrid's back, then settled the saddle over it and reached under the animal's belly to capture the straps and pulled them through. Tomyris' silence as she prepared to depart provoked a deepening ache in Sarana.

She watched as long as she could bear, then fled to the courtyard, feeling bereft and abandoned. The depleted pile of firewood greeted her: the barrier at the gate had burned all night against the Nakesht's return. Sarana drew a meaningless squiggle in the dirt with her toe, sighing heavily, despite herself. She reminded herself that her task of cleaning the shrine chambers was far from complete—a lot of accumulated filth remained to be removed—and work would take her mind off Tomyris' departure. But going back in meant passing Tomyris and Sarana simply couldn't handle that yet.

The firewood drew Sarana's attention. She and Azkani had at least one more night before his grandson Roahd and the others arrived. The barrier must be kept burning in the

shrine's doorway instead of the courtyard archway since the wall had proved no barrier to the wolves. Even with only the single fire there was not enough wood left for one more night.

Sarana moved the remaining firewood into the antechamber, and, since it was broad daylight now, she walked beyond the courtyard walls to find more.

A soft, fur-thatched hand closed tightly on Sarana's arm, startling her. She twisted around, looked up into a hairy face with a short muzzle and large fangs, and screamed. The Nakesht Master of Wolves smiled as the girl twisted and turned in his unyielding grasp. Sarana stuck him futilely and when she tried to kick he simply yanked her off her feet. The louder she screamed, the more he smiled.

His loose sand colored robes swirled slightly as he moved. A broad, embroidered baldric supported a slender blade at his shoulders. Wolves began to crowd around them as he thrust Sarana back into the courtyard

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Tomyris settled her bedroll across Trouble's haunches, reaching for the rawhide thongs to tie it in place when Sarana screamed. She straightened, letting the bedroll fall, her hand dropped to the sword at her side.

Azkani emerged from the next chamber with his long staff in hand and a sword, which Tomyris had not seen before, in the other. The warrior gave him a skeptical glance—even if he once knew how to use the blade, she doubted the old man could put enough speed or strength behind it to really count.

"Stay here!" She ordered him, then, "Trouble, watch your chance."

Tomyris stepped out. Wolves filled the courtyard, making a patient, silent circle around the Master of Wolves. He had Sarana's upper arm. Her screams had dissolved into racking sobs, she pressed her face into her right shoulder refusing to look at the creature that held her. A thin trickle of blood ran along the left side of Sarana's face across a swelling, blackening bruise that distorted her features from cheek to chin. Anger corded Tomyris' stomach and sent an almost giddy surge of manic energy racing through her. The warrior walked slowly toward them, hands held away from her sword, wanting to get as close as she could. At a nod from the master, the wolves parted to allow the warrior in.

The Sharani averted her eyes from Sarana—she could not afford to lose her stride, even for an instant.

"You want me." Tomyris stopped within sword's reach of the Master of Wolves. Their eyes met and neither wavered.

"Oh, yessssss," his face split into an evil grin. "Yes, it has been many years since I have tasted Sharani flesh."

"Then let her go. And you can have me instead."

"No. I can have both of you. Oh, I do not intend to eat her. We have other uses for fertile women."

Tomyris' twisted half-smile touched the corner of her face. "I fit that description myself—"

The Nakesht spat. "We know about the curses in your god-mixed blood!"

Tomyris kicked the Master in the side of the head. It would have killed a man. It only staggered the Nakesht. A

descending strike with her forearm broke his hold on Sarana, and then slid into an elbow jab to the Nakesht's face.

"Run, Sarana!"

The warrior kicked him again, drawing her sword as the girl bolted for the shrine chambers. Tomyris knew at that any moment the Master of Wolves would give the command and the beasts would engulf her.

Then Trouble arrived, plunging into the wolves with teeth and hooves, clearing the way for Sarana's escape, and distracting the beasts from Tomyris.

Her sword cleared the sheath as she turned. A wolf rammed the back of Tomyris' legs. Tomyris staggered, slashing the wolf as she recovered her footing. Pain seared through her left breast, steel grating agonizingly against her shoulder blade as the Master's slender sword passed through her at an angle and withdrew again. Strength fled. Her vision grayed. Her knees gave. She was falling.

The Nakesht closed in to be certain he had killed her. From a narrowing window of awareness Tomyris heard Sarana scream and the Master laugh. A core of will stronger than her body shouted, "No! Never!" The inner power that had carried her through the Waejontori War and when she killed the dragon that burned her—ignited. Tomyris lunged upward from her knees, slamming her sword through the Master's stomach. He staggered back, eyes wide and disbelieving as life fled.

The wolves broke, fleeing in total disarray.

As quickly as the power had risen, it faded. Tomyris sagged to her knees, fighting the darkness and pain

threatening to steal her consciousness. She wiped her sword across her lap and tried to sheathe it, her hand shaking so hard with weakness the sword would not go in. It slipped from her grasp. Tomyris' hand went to the wound in her chest, clutching at it. Her eyes closed. "Sarana ... Sarana!"

Warm arms caught the warrior as she collapsed, supporting her. A familiar voice called Tomyris' name, pleading. The Sharani warrior forced one eye half-open. Tears streaked Sarana's face. "Sarana," she whispered, and then fainted in the girl's arms.

Sarana's eyes went to the bloodstain spreading across Tomyris' shirt from the chest wound and let out one long howl of grief. "Nooooo."

Azkani knelt beside the sobbing girl and the rough fingers felt for the pulse in the warrior's throat. After a moment, he rocked back on his heels.

* * * *

They moved Tomyris to a pallet in the shrine. Azkani cut away the warrior's shirt. Blood well from the wound, but it did not gush or spurt. He grasped Tomyris' wrist, extending his awareness through her body as he once had her mind. Then he pressed a bandage tightly onto it to slow the bleeding.

"I won't lie to you, Sarana," Azkani spoke quietly. "It's a dangerous wound. But it missed his heart ... So we have hope." The old shaman pulled a black-handled knife from his belt. "Heat the blade until it glows."

"It's my fault she's hurt," Sarana sobbed brokenly, building up the fire and holding the blade in the flames.

"He." Azkani corrected the girl. "Remember that. The others will arrive tomorrow and if any suspect Tomyris is not a man—" Azkani sighed. "He will die a lot faster from a slit throat than this wound."

"Azkani," Tomyris' gravelly voice, faint and strained with the effort to speak, drew the old shaman's attention.

Sarana started up the sound. "Don't move, girl. Keep that blade in the flames if you love him," Azkani rasped at her.

Azkani knelt beside the warrior's pallet and pressed her back as she stirred, struggling to rise. "Lie still. Move and you'll make the bleeding worse. Besides, you wouldn't make it ten yards. Rest. I'm about to cauterize it."

Tomyris sank back into the layered furs, her transient consciousness graying again. "So be it." Then the warrior started again. "Your ... people..."

"Today you are my son, Tahmerrez the Hawk. They will not trouble you."

That familiar twisted half-smile came to her lips.

Azkani glanced up at Sarana and saw the way the knife blade glowed red. "It's ready. Bring it here, Sarana."

Tomyris watched the heated blade approach. They opened her shirt and threw away the small, wadded bandage. At the last minute Tomyris turned her head away. The pain of the cautery outstripped the wounding itself. Her flesh sizzled beneath the blade. An involuntary cry of agony escaped her and she plunged once more into blackness.

Azkani sat back and pulled the half-coin from his pocket, mate to the half Tomyris wore. "My changeling son."

CONCERNING

"THE HAWK THAT HUNTED LIONS"

'The Hawk that Hunted Lions' was the fifth story of Chimquar written and the last one to be published. It appeared in Pandora #5 in 1980, which was edited by Lois Wickstrom. When I wrote this one, I was striving to figure out how the character was different when she first came to the Great Plains of Murshay'di and what might have led into her becoming the person she appeared as in 'Wolves of Nakesht.' I wanted to show over the course of a number of adventure shorts how the character evolved. That was an extremely ambitious thing for a person in their early twenties to attempt.

By the time the story takes place, Sarana from the first story has died and Chimquar is alone except for Azkani and her new companions among the Euzadi. She is now calling herself 'Breesyari,' which is Sharani for 'stranger'.

THE HAWK THAT HUNTED LIONS

The scar on Tomyris' face stretched from her cheek to her jawbone, showing a startling white against her sun-bronzed, leathery skin. The name-hungry young men now left her alone, for she had slain the boldest of them in an Euzadi-style knife fight and came away with only that scar as the price of her victory. Her year-old role as a man provided her with a measure of peace and, in the wake of that fight, respect. More, Azkani's teachings already began to mellow the embittered edges of her heart and spirit.

Azkani, the high seer, was her father—although she had not known it when she rescued him from the man-wolves of the Nakesht. It was only later that she learned he wore the other half of the split coin that hung around her neck, which her ma'aram had given her in childhood. It was Azkani who created the deception of her manhood. She was his changeling son.

The whacking of sticks against clothes-covered rocks punctuated the voices of the Euzadi women washing in the river. Tomyris watched the women from the cover of a rare patch of trees without being observed by them. She had not yet become accustomed to their shy flirtations with the man they took her for. She was Sharani, a Child of the Tinkerer, whose women married amongst themselves because of the paucity of males and required three parents to produce viable offspring (sire, bloodmother and wombmother). Had they known what she was, they would not have flirted—and had

she dared to let them discover what she was, she would have flirted back.

A blond man appeared unexpectedly. He raised his hand in greeting, holding the reins of a mare, which Tomyris had given him. "Hola, Breesyari," he called to her in a softly accented voice.

Tomyris smiled broadly, grasping his arms. "David! What brings you? Not trouble, I hope."

David fell into step beside the warrior. "Not trouble. My father asks that you come tonight. The spring planting is done. Tonight we celebrate. The whole village would thank you for all you have done for us. You have been very kind to my people."

"That is the way of my people," Tomyris replied quietly. It was the way of the ha'taren, paladins of Aroana—they helped people. She found herself slipping back into the ways of her god (feeling younger and happier because of it), even as she adopted the outward appearance and customs of the Euzadi. "How did you know where to find me?"

"Azkani. Your father told me you had spent the past week along the river—alone."

Tomyris nodded. "I only started back today." She slapped the reins of her sorrel mare against her thigh in an impatient rhythm.

"Something troubles you?" David asked, sensing the remoteness of the warrior's thoughts.

"Uhmnn? No, no. I wanted some time to myself." They mounted along a clear stretch of riverbank and rode out of the river bottom onto the wide expanse of grasslands called

the Great Plains of Murshay'di. David's village nestled in the foothills of a southeastern spur of the Arondar Mountains.

"What do you do alone like that?"

"Think. Pray. Azkani says it's good for the soul. I do a lot of it lately."

"Why?"

Tomyris' mouth tightened, tension and unease spreading through her. She knew that David meant no harm with his questions—her reaction was automatic, conditioned by her life before coming among the Euzadi. "That is between me and my god," she told him sharply. "And none of your affair."

David asked no further questions for the remainder of their ride. His silence relieved Tomyris, allowed the tension to drain from her nerves. To speak of her past, of the dark emotions that lay buried within her and which surfaced sometimes to poison the present—To speak of those things would be to invite death and worse with one slip revealing her womanhood in a land hostile to her amazon race.

David, accustomed to her reticence, held his silence. Breesyari was as good a friend as he could ask.

* * * *

Young women of the village rose from their places, clasping hands in a ring around the central fire. Older vices rose, chanting a song. Drums beat a quickening rhythm as the women danced. Tomyris watched them, sitting beside David's father, the headman.

The young men formed a line encircling the women. Laughter and song filled the air. David and two friends came

after Tomyris. "Come," they told her laughing. "You can't just sit and watch!"

"I'm no dancer," Tomyris protested. David and his friends seized her arms, jerked her to her feet. She resisted with good-humored exaggeration as they propelled her into the dancing lines. Tomyris surrendered with a laugh allowing her high spirits to infect her. The two lines of dancers wove joyously through each other. Young women smiled and flirted with the warrior. Tomyris, playing her role to the hilt, teased back, aware that there was no danger in it because she did not intend to stay.

A scream of sheer terror ended the dance. All eyes fixed upon a shrieking young girl, following the line of her pointing arm. A flying monster was outlined against the full moon. The villagers broke, fleeing to their homes. Several men put out their fires with swift, practiced precision. Tomyris stared after the monster. David grabbed her, pulling her from the open ground.

"The beast returns." Terror hoarsened David's voice.

Tomyris shook free of David. Her eyes followed the creature into the darkness: It flew toward the Euzadi camp. "It isn't halting here." She ran to David's house and snatched the reins of her mare free, mounting. David followed her. "Do you ride with me?" she demanded.

David hesitated: He was a farmer, not a warrior. Still the nomad was his friend. "Yes," he said at last.

"What is that creature?" Tomyris asked, turning her horse toward the Euzadi encampment.

"No one has lived to tell us," David answered bleakly. "If hasn't been seen in several days. Before that it's been six months since it came last. This time it hasn't harmed my people."

"So you decided not to tell me about it." Tomyris was angry and bitter with him, cursing him silently for a fool. *It's been troubling the Euzadi, I'll warrant.*

Tomyris pulled her grandma'aram's talisman from beneath her shirt, rubbing her thumb over the little silver unicorn, uneasily. She could feel the reek of ill magic in the creature's wake—that was how she followed it in the darkness.

* * * *

A long cry of terror spooked the herds grazing the outer perimeters of the Euzadi camp. Tomyris drew her spear lance from its sling, set it at rest, and charged. She arrived too late. A bronze-scaled dragon spread its wings and mounted the gray pre-dawn sky, bearing off a Euzadi warrior and horse. Tomyris shook her lance impotently at the dragon already beyond her reach. Her thoughts cried out for a long bow such as her people favored, for a weapon to bring down the monster. The dragon soon vanished from her sight.

A Euzadi war-band arrived led by Maruic, Chieftain of the Dazalero Euzadi, and his half-breed war-leader, Bakran. They ringed in David and Tomyris, their spears a sharp barrier.

"There is why our patrol did not return!" Bakran, a huge bear of a man, pointed to David. "The villagers murder our people."

"I saw a dragon," Tomyris interrupted Bakran's tirade. "Not a villager, carry off the slain guard." She pointed to the blood on the grass. A ripple of anger ran through the assembled warriors. Tomyris clenched and unclenched her sword hand uneasily as if itching for the blade: Bakran hated her, perceiving her as a threat to his cherished status within the tribe for she had found favor with Azkani and, to some extent, Maruic.

"They bring it upon us!" Bakran viewed with Tomyris for dominance of the tableau. "Their village lies too near the escarpment for mere farms. They traffic with the Diangari."

"No!" David protested. "It has plagued us in past seasons."

"So you make pact with it to devour us instead!" Bakran continued his accusations. "We should drive them from the plains—from our lands! Have an end to this!"

"So let's all blame the villagers for everything we fear," Tomyris sneered her words. Her sarcasm brought an angry rumble from the warriors. She raised her voice to be heard above Bakran's bellowing. "I think you give the villagers too much credit. Were they so dangerous we'd all be dead by now."

"If you value your life, stay out of our affairs, Outlander," Bakran warned her.

Tomyris silently controlled the physical manifestations of her building rage; the tightening in her chest, the tension in her body; it was too easy for her to kill in anger. "Don't push me, Bakran," she warned, turning to the chieftain. "Maruic, the villagers have done nothing to you. I'll prove it by killing the dragon."

Her calmly spoken statement shocked the gathered warriors and sent aftershocks of comment through their ranks. They only fought the demons from the Katal Escarpment when they were forced to and then in large numbers. It was not a task they took so calmly in stride as did the outlander they called Breesyari, which meant 'stranger' in the language of Shaurone.

Tomyris turned her horse and David followed. The awed ranks parted and let them pass.

* * * *

"It will be four days before the dragon returns," Tomyris told Maruic. "That is the pattern of its attacks, David says."

"How do you plan to slay it?" The chieftain sounded skeptical. The Sharani woman's bragging wearied him. He experienced an odd ambivalence toward her; vacillating between admiration and respect for her great skill with weapons, her quick grasp of the Euzadi fighting styles; and irritation, wanting to see her put in her place as a woman—a deed which he could neither commit nor instigate because of a powerful oath Azkani had forced from him nearly a year ago.

"I have fought dragons before," Tomyris explained, no brag intended. "They have certain weaknesses: their under parts and throat." She disliked hunting with Maruic, for he had a penchant for making life among his folk difficult for her.

The roar of hunting lions close by caused Tomyris' horse to shy. The light touch of her hand, the pressure of her knees, and low-spoken words controlled the mare. Then shrill

screams betrayed the nature of the lion's prey. Instantly, Tomyris turned her horse in response to the human cries.

A lion erupted out of the grass before her and attacked. She speared it through the shoulder and out the side, transfixing it. The next instant her mount plunged a foot into a prairie dog hole and fell. Tomyris sprang free of the falling horse, drew her sword, and ran.

Two children, a boy of eight and a girl of five years, pelted the circling lions with rocks. The little girl shrieked hysterically, continuously. Tomyris shouted, drawing the attention of the lions from the children. She caught the first lion, a huge female, full in the chest with her sword as it leaped. Then the black-maned male took her to earth. Its claws dug into her hips as she fell. With no room to maneuver and the jaws of the great beast in her face, she slammed the sword-blade between its teeth and wedged the blade behind its molars. The lion tossed its head, roaring out its pain and rage. Claws raked Tomyris' shoulders. She managed to draw her stiletto from her sleeve and bury the slender blade in the lion's throat, opening the windpipe. Repeatedly her blade tore the throat, opening a wide, frayed gap. Blood spurted in her face, filling her eyes and blinding her. Blood plastered her black hair to her head and face.

Tomyris thrust herself free of the dead beast. She sat up, slumped forward, and panted.

"Gods! You're lucky!" Maruic's voice grated in her ear. He cleaned the blood from her eyes and face with a wet cloth.

"Enough!" Tomyris muttered, snatching the cloth from him as soon as she could see. "I'll be sore and stiff tomorrow." She cleaned her bleeding shoulder.

"I've seen no deed to match this," Maruic said in awe. Their eyes met. Maruic's odd expression made her uncomfortable. "Like a hawk flying in the face of its foes—Nay! Like the Lion-Hawk, the far-flying eagle which feeds its young upon the flesh of lions."

"Maruic," she interrupted him, sarcastic, impatient. "What the Hell are you saying?"

Maruic's habitual somber note returned to his voice. "I can no longer deny you a place among my warriors. You equal Bakran and better the rest. Were I still to deny you, it would be to the shame of my people. You are Chimquar the Lionhawk."

A sudden exhilaration filled her: Bakran could no longer call her outlander. She ignored the final note in Maruic's voice that still denied her his full friendship.

* * * *

Hazier and his sister, Makajia, watched the old seer and Jerono clean the blood and dirt from their new guardian's wounds. Both children shared a wide-eyed astonishment as their savior's womanhood. Azkani had bound their tongues with his spells to prevent their betraying his Sharani "son's" secret.

"I'm uncertain of how these children came here," Azkani said thoughtfully. "They are not Dazalero. They're Shya. And since you rescued them, they are yours."

Tomyris nodded, wondering what she would do with two children hanging about her. "A stray wagon perhaps. Maruic searches the plains for one."

Hazier knelt before Chimquar. "The great beast—" Tears crept into the boy's eyes. His voice broke. He stiffened, biting his lower lip, reliving the past terror. Chimquar took him in her arms. "Go on and cry, Boy. You'll feel better for it."

Hazier's struggled to contain his tears and sorrow with traditional Euzadi stoicism and failed with a strangled sob. Her burrowed against her, weeping. Chimquar rubbed and patted him, murmuring soft Euzadi words in his ear, reassuring him.

Makajia, bug-eyed and frightened, burst into tears also. Azkani settled into his chair and took the little girl upon his lap. Jerono wrapped Chimquar's shoulder, trying to disturb Hazier as little as possible. The seers, called the Majios clan, were a compassionate sub-culture of the Euzadis.

Hazier quieted. "Katal-Marandu," he said and a chill invaded the tent. "Dragon ripped the wagons apart. Swords didn't hurt it. We ran—I don't know how long."

Chimquar's eyes met Azkani's, alarmed by this new knowledge. "Hazier, how many wagons? Where were you going?"

"Three wagons. Going to trade with the Chircauhua."

"That would place them in this area," Jerono said in his quiet, solemn voice. "Chircuahua are always the second tribe to reach these northern hunting grounds. The Shya usually third. They send small trading parties ahead to reconnoiter and establish the main camp for the tribe."

"Three wagons would mean at least six or seven warriors. More probably." Chimquar thought aloud. "That many warriors could not be easily slain—the beast must possess some kind of protection—spells or hereditary enchantments." Her eyes went distant. She had never fought the creatures from the Escarpment. The nomads spoke of them as more terrible than the Waejontori half-demons, which her people had fought in the Great War. She felt this new incarnation of the Great War reaching out to drag her down into Hell again.

Hazier recovered his budding male pride and moved out of her lap. Makajia promptly squirmed from Azkani and stole Hazier's place in Chimquar's arms. The girl heaved a sigh, nestled deeper into the warrior's arms, and fell asleep. Jerono draped a blanket over Hazier as the boy nodded off to sleep also.

"Some believe the ha'taren are the truest priests of Aroana." *Ha'taren like myself.* Chimquar spoke in low tones to mask the uncertainty in her voice, the self-doubt. "I don't know anymore. There is a means to counter such spell-protected beasts, but I doubt I have the power to forge those weapons." *I wasn't trained for this as were the bradae.*

Azkani moved to her side and he placed his arthritis twisted hand on her shoulder. "My disciples, my students, myself, we will help you, Chimquar," he gave her new name, "if you will tell us how."

The old seer's offer, humbly made, startled her: After a year of looking to him for direction she found herself the teacher. "Azkani—my father—I—I"

Azkani shook his grizzled head, smiling at her. "You equal me in your own way, Chimquar. By adding my teachings to your own knowledge you will surpass me as the Gods foresaw when they sent me to your ma'aram."

Knowledge—from a land she could never return to. She could not quell her memories of Anaria, her younger sister. Anaria, who now stood as regent to her daughter, Reynan—if Reynan still lived...? The bitter memory of how often her ma'aram had threatened to disown her over her rebellious, hot-tempered ways rose in her mind. In the end it had not been her ma'aram, but the actions of jealous, scheming peers and petty, ranking nobles who had driven her from Shaurone. Chimquar remembered how Anaria had cried and begged her not to leave, when she told her sister that she intended to keep on riding; not waiting for Anaria to try and sort matters out with the Saer'ajan, ruler of Shaurone.

"Anger casts a spear without gauging the distance," Azkani quoted a proverb, accurately reading Chimquar's face.

"I cast that spear a score of years past." A small corner of Chimquar's mind suggested that part of the blame for her exile lay with her own actions. She thrust the disturbing thoughts far from her mind, for her renewed sense of self-worth was still too fragile to cope with such thoughts.

"Tomorrow, Azkani, we will begin to construct those weapons."

* * * *

Chimquar rode to David's village the next day to enlist aid in gathering the herbs, roots, and bark she needed. The

western forest met the grasslands in the hills near the village. Among the cottonwoods there would not be ash and elder trees, the bark of which Chimquar had need. With luck there would be pollonae vines growing near the stream banks among the trees and holadil, the heaven flower of the sylvans. In the drier areas there would be sweet grass growing and the bulbs of wild onions more potent than garlic.

She found Bakran and his men harassing the villagers. They drove the people through their fields, laughing at the attempts of the men to avoid the kicks and blows of the mounted warriors. Women fled before the Dazalero Euzadis, clutching their skirts high to free their legs. Few of them got far before being dragged off their feet and slung across a saddle. Bakran sat his horse in the center of the fields with David's sister bound before him.

Chimquar galloped straight for Bakran. A shout rose among the farmers recognizing her as she crossed the fields. Bakran's men, caught up in the spirit of their game of harassment did not react immediately—nor did Bakran. Then Chimquar's horse rammed his. She flung herself onto him, carrying them both to the ground with Bakran beneath her. Chimquar drove a knee into his stomach, knocking the breath from him.

Bakran seized her arms and threw her off. Chimquar landed a hard kick to his groin. That slowed him down and she rolled aside as his fist left a deep indentation in the ground where her face had been. She parried Bakran's second punch at her body with her open hand, guiding his blow past her. A palm heel connected with Bakran's Adam's apple. He

choked. Chimquar hooked her fingers up his nose as she ripped his head back and pressed the cold blade of a stiletto against his exposed throat. Bakran froze.

From the edge of her eyes she could see the legs of her audience of farmers and Euzadi. In accordance with custom, none of Bakran's warriors had interfered with their fight. Now many voices muttered angrily around her in Euzadi. Farmers' voices praised the Euzadi warrior that now held Bakran helpless. Chimquar thanked her god that the day before Maruic had accepted her as a warrior of his tribe and an outlander no longer, else Bakran's men would have intervened to aid their leader and Chimquar doubted she would have lived out the morning.

"Begone, you pack of mongrels!" She ordered the Euzadis roughly. "Go! Return and Bakran dies. Obey and I'll return him to you when my business here is done."

The nomads departed. Farmers disarmed Bakran and bound his hands. Chimquar released him then to three sturdy fellows to guard. As she moved away Bakran cursed her. "Bastard! You'll pay for this. You'll pay in blood!"

Chimquar turned, her lips curving into a sneer. "I would not bet on that, Bakran."

Many villagers, grateful for Chimquar's intervention, followed her into the hills to seek the herbs and roots she required. They finished at nightfall. Then Chimquar took her herbs and captive to the Euzadi camp. She restored Bakran, humiliated and angry, to his followers.

* * * *

In the days that followed, Azkani and Jerono led the old seer's entourage in making the weapons that Chimquar had need of. They wrought arrowheads and spear points of silver, seasoning the metal in a sorcerous brew, which Chimquar prepared. They wrapped spells around the weapons as they joined heads and points to the shafts that would bear them. All the while Chimquar could not suppress her doubts about how well she remembered after a score of years away from the temple of Aroana—spell-craft not usually taught the ha'taren, but reserved for the bradae who were called the priests.

* * * *

Chimquar, a group of warriors, and several of Azkani's disciples gathered at the edge of the camp. Maruic and Jerono stayed close to her. She ordered out the others in twos and threes according to their abilities. Each carried the spell-shrouded weapons and a horn to summon the rest of them.

"I expected Bakran." Chimquar turned her horse east to circle the camp accompanied by Maruic and Jerono. "He seizes every opportunity to compete with me."

Jerono hung back rather than become involved in a potentially explosive discussion between his friend and his chieftain.

Maruic snorted. "Bakran and his followers sulk in their tents and wagons."

That disturbed Chimquar. "That's all they'll do?"

"I have his word not to trouble the villagers."

"I don't trust him. Bakran is—"

"No!" Maruic cut her off angrily. "Bakran is Euzadi. My people are not oath-breakers!"

Chimquar moved away from Maruic, refusing to beat herself against the wall of his anger. "Maruic," she asked abruptly, "why do you always choose to accompany me like this? Is it distrust or dislike?" There was no sarcasm in her words.

"Because you are the best of my warriors," he told her simply. "You honor your word." He regarded her a long time, his expression unreadable. "I do what is best for my people. It is a custom, Chimquar, that the best warrior in the tribe rides beside the chieftain that the young may emulate him."

"Yet, you cannot forget that I am a woman," she said without bitterness—surprising herself.

"That is true," Maruic admitted. Mutual honesty dissolved the wall of anger and dislike between them.

So you set me as an example to your people and gave Bakran good reason to view me as a threat.

"Gods all Nine!" She renewed the distance between them. A blaring horn overrode her next thoughts. She turned her horse, digging her heels into its sides.

A man and a horse lay beneath the terrible foreclaws of the gigantic dragon. The dragon's roar set the horses to fighting their riders in vain attempts to bolt and flee. A warrior mastered his horse, readied his lance, and charged. The dragon swatted the lance aside and tore flesh from the horse. The warrior went down with his steed, yet managed to roll clear at the last moment and escape on foot as the dragon ripped the horse apart. Another prepared to charge.

"Stay back all of your!" Chimquar's shouted command halted the fool. "Encircle the creature, but stay out of its reach!"

The Euzadi warriors responded automatically. The dragon lunged, dragging a retreating man from his saddle. Two of his companions started to attempt a rescue.

"Get back! Damn it, get back!" It twisted Chimquar's insides to allow the dragon its latest prey, but to attack in a mindless chaos of individual efforts would be tribal suicide. "Circle it," she ordered, pressing her heels to her mare and setting the example. "Keep moving. Don't give it an easy target." The best military mind in all the realm of Shaurone already saw the means of slaughtering the marauding creature.

The dragon charged the circling ranks. "Move!" Chimquar's warriors zigzagged from the Dragon's path. It caught two, disemboweling men and horses. With a high-pitched roar it spread its wings to fly and carry off its dead prey, tired of playing with its victims.

"Ibon! Moshin! Feather its wings! The undersides!" Chimquar ordered roughly. Then she saw that her weapons did pierce whatever sorcerous protection the dragon possessed.

The dragon's roar changed to a shriek of pain and anger. One wing hung outstretched and broken. Maruic watched and left command entirely to the Sharani woman: She seemed accustomed to command.

The dragon crouched, guarding its tender underside. Its red eyes darted. It waited. Chimquar realized the innate

cunning of the monster would prolong the battle: The dragon would wait, let the horses tire, while its bronze scales remained impenetrable to their arrows and spears. It would have them all by simply waiting. *Waiting!*

"No!" Chimquar pulled her grandma'aram's talisman from her neck, wrapping the silver chain around her hand, and then gripped her spear lance. Whatever the cost, she would make it rear and expose itself to be killed. It would slay men no longer. An invocation to her god Aroana formed on her lips. Then Maruic touched her arm and their eyes met. "When it rears," she told him. "Fill its stomach full of arrows and lances." She picked up her invocation again.

Light flowed around her hand, enveloped it, blazing brighter than the torches. The dragon flinched, blinking, unable to look at the spear. It swatted blindly. Chimquar's mare dodged neatly, regained its stride in two steps. The dragon reared, all of its attention fixed upon Chimquar to the exclusion of the surge of warriors following her. Its eyes narrowed, shutting out most of the light. A huge claw slammed Chimquar and her horse into the dirt. Chimquar scrambled to her feet, a yard from her horse. The dragon roared above her. Then abruptly the roar soured to dismay and then to agony. It fell backwards, twitching in the trampled grass of the plains. Arrows and lances filled its abdomen and chest like porcupine quills. Warriors gathered around her exulting. Their losses were small compared to previous encounters with the Katal-Marandians thanks to the Lionhawk.

* * * *

Maruic did not join his men. He saw a lone warrior watching Chimquar, aloof from the others. A tremor of suspicion caused the chieftain to ride toward the wagons, then out of the warrior's line of vision Turn back and circle behind the lone man

The warrior saw the ranks part a bit around Chimquar. He drew an arrow from his quiver. Bakran had promised Chimquar payment in blood. One of the warriors turned as Bakran's man drew the string to his ear and loosed the shaft. The warrior threw himself in front of Chimquar. She caught the collapsing man, staring incredulously at the arrow sprouting from his back, knowing it had been meant for her.

With a curse Bakran's man turned to mount his horse and found a sword point leveled at his throat.

Controlled rage burned in the chieftain's eyes. "I could not prevent that," Maruic told him with a grimly forced casualness. "I can kill you." Then he told his gathering warriors, "I want Bakran."

Bakran's man laughed crazily. "Bakran left hours ago."

Strong hands whipped the man around. A fist connected with his face, shattering his nose and hurling him to the ground. Chimquar stood over him, a hand on her sword hilt. "Machoste is dead," she snarled, then demanded, "Where is Bakran?"

"Your little villagers should all be food for the ravens by now." He laughed again.

Maruic's sword parted his head from his body with barbaric Euzadi justice.

* * * *

Chimquar walked the burnt fields aimlessly. Azkani's people had long since found the handful of survivors of the massacre. David had not been among them. She kept thinking about the dance the night the villagers finished their spring planting—they had been so happy, so full of good spirits. It did not comfort her to know that Bakran was outlawed and meat for any sword: That would not bring them back. She blamed herself for not realizing how far Bakran's vengeance would extend. These lands were more savage than she had previously realized, so much worse than her civilized homeland, which she could never return to. "Gods! Aroana, god, Compassionate Defender, does everything I touch—everything I love have to die?" She cried her anguish aloud.

An arthritic, twisted old man guided his horse to her. She had been so lost in her thoughts that she did not know he was there, so lost in her thoughts was Chimquar, until his gnarled hand rested lightly upon her shoulder. "Not everything, my child." Azkani's gentile, infinitely compassionate eyes met hers. "Neither of us could have foreseen this. Bakran is evil to the core of his being."

"And because I humiliated him, everything I love is dead."

"Everything?" The old seer's smile suggested knowledge she seemed oblivious to. "Can you not see with your eyes? With your heart?"

Chimquar faced the old man. A slow smile spread over her scarred face, briefly banishing her expression of sorrow. "I see Azkani, my father, and I remember Jerono waits at the

camp," she said softly. "There are two children, newly acquired, that I don't know what to do with."

"Then you see that you are not alone," Azkani pursued his point, determined not to allow her to despair, to prevent her brooding on her loss from returning her to the self-destructive state he had found her in a year past.

"Yes, Azkani. I see I'm not alone."

"Then all will be well." The old seer and his disciple—his changeling son—turned homeward.

CONCERNING "IN THE DARKNESS, HUNTING"

This one is a novella. It is the longest Chimquar story I've ever written. It is also, in some ways, the most ambitious. One of the issues, which I frequently came across in reading about actual women who passed as male, was that at some point they found themselves on the receiving end of dangerous and unwanted romantic attention which might have forced them to reveal themselves. This sits at the core of this story. Because of its length it was harder to sell than the others and found a home at an anthology edited by Kim Mohan at TSR, *Dragontales* in 1980.

The children are older and Hazier is impatient to be considered a man and a warrior at twelve. Chimquar's relationship with the Chieftain Maruic has changed drastically.

IN THE DARKNESS, HUNTING

The lines of the plains, the waving grass and scattered rearing of scrawny bushes, became dark silhouettes against the flame of sunset. The subtle roll of low hills gave way to a creek-worn hollow, lined with cottonwoods. Two Euzadi tribesmyn guided their horses down into the hollow. Spear lances rested in saddle-slings, swords hung at their sides, and the peace-bells that usually adorned their horses were muffled in their saddlebags. They had chanced upon the burned remains of a Euzadi wagon and its defenders, and now the pair traveled the trail of the attackers. The young man who had made their number three had returned to the tribe for more warriors. The nomads ruled the plains of Murshay'di, and those who harmed any of their people were repaid in kind.

The taller of the two riders dismounted, tethering her horse to a cottonwood. She was lean and well muscled, easily the equal of her companion. Her womanhood lay concealed beneath her male raiment, the price of her freedom in those harsh lands. Silence lay between herself and the man, an uneasy barrier acknowledging the tension holding them apart. The source of the tension was personal and without relation to the wagon. For Maruic, Chieftain of the Dazalero Euzadi, the matter had never been resolved to his satisfaction, and, now he found his patience wearing thin.

Maruic tied his horse beside Chimquar's. He was broad through the chest, his face seamed and worn where it showed

above hid dark beard. Maruic watched her build a fire, twirling a thin blade of grass between his fingers. "Chimquar." He spoke her name low, crossed to take her in his arms. She turned away, walking along the creek.

"Chimquar," he repeated, following her. "Have mercy, Chimquar." The plea emerged from his lips insistent, almost demanding. "Have I not suffered long enough for want of you? Five years I have been patient."

Chimquar turned to face him, her expression grim. "You spent the first of those years trying to rid yourself of me without breaking your word to my father, Azkani..." she said, her voice taut, straining at the edge of anger.

"That is a long time past. We are sword-brothers. I would have us be more than that."

"We've discussed this before...." Her voice wavered, almost betraying the pain beneath its surface. "I cannot be both warrior and woman in these lands. Your warriors, Maruic"—her lips twisted in distaste—"They would call me whore and spit in my face. We both know what would come of that."

His face darkened with anger, then was quickly controlled. "You are the heart of me, Chimquar," he said hoarsely.

Her voice softened briefly. "I cannot read your heart." She walked away, halting a spear-length from the chieftain. "That doesn't change the situation. If we made a child, Maruic, I would be revealed. Your own people would give me over to my enemies."

"I would never allow that!"

"How would you prevent it? By reducing me to the status of another of your women? By robbing me of my freedom?"

Her scorn enraged him, reminded him that Chimquar was, after all, only a woman, well skilled in arms, and experienced in war, but still only a woman. And an outland woman at that—bastard-child of their High Seer. By a Sharani. She humiliated him, denying him what no other woman of his tribe had dared to deny, rejecting his awkward attempts at tenderness. Maruic stood still, his eyes fixed upon her in a hard stare. Anger, humiliation, and lust blended to a roar of emotion. "Diangari take you," he growled, lunging for her. His arms came together around her waist and he took her to earth. Astonishment delayed her reaction.

Chimquar loosed a curse as she fell. Maruic's weight crushed the breath out of her. She brought her knees up, ramming them in Maruic's stomach, and threw him off. Outrage turned her coppery face an umber rose, making the scar along her cheek stand out, as she rolled to her feet and moved off, ready for him now. All talk was driven from her and only the barest measure of control kept Chimquar from one of her unreasoning rages, such as had caused her exile from her homeland. Two years of trust, which had begun to be something more than trust, dissolved in that moment.

Maruic gained his feet, circling her warily. Satisfaction touched the corner of Chimquar's lips, for he did not rush into battle with her as he might with any other warrior. She slipped back to avoid his sudden lunge, which came faster than she expected. Maruic caught her above the elbows. She broke his grip, striking up and out with her forearms. He

grappled with her, digging his fingers into the lacings of her open-sided lionskin jerkin and throwing his weight against her. She tried to step back and avoid him, while prying his fingers from the lacings, but lost her balance and fell.

They struck the ground together. Maruic swarmed on top of her, his hands already seeking the flesh beneath her garments. Chimquar twisted, gave a hard, kicking shove, and came free of him. His hands tore at her clothing, coming after her before she could gain her feet. Chimquar struck her in the throat with the side of her hand. Maruic choked, his hands releasing her. Her next blow landing in the kidneys, and an elbow followed to his breastbone, all in the space of seconds. Curses flowed from his mouth. He rose to his knees, striking with his right hand. Chimquar avoided the blow and came up, one foot poised beneath her. Her open hand parried the next low and snaked up to seize him by the hair. She twisted his head back with a quick thrust and her stiletto, which had rested hidden in an arm-sheath, appeared in her hand. The slender blade rested against the hollow of the Euzadi chieftain's throat.

"Aroana damn you, Maruic!" The grating snarl was breathed in his ear. "You think I have no desires that you must take what you wish? Or is this simply the masculine stupidity of your god-forsaken race?"

"Chimquar." Maruic touched her wrist.

"Shut up! Move your damned hand and listen!"

Maruic withdrew his hand from her wrist and was silent.

Words came in a sudden flood, anger, and hurt mingling in her voice. "You think these past months have been easy for

me? I love you, Maruic ... Nay!" She cut off his interruption ... "I do. But I'll still kill you if you try that again. I swear I'll kill you! By Aroana's sword and shield," she gritted out the unbreakable Sharani oath. "I swear I'll kill you." Chimquar released him, pushing him away from her, and sheathed her stiletto.

Maruic sat up, his face bleak, drained of lust and anger. "Forgive me," he said quietly, his tone neither a plea nor an admission of wrong.

Chimquar never answered, though he knew she heard. The awkward silence, which had accompanied their arrival at this place, returned. Maruic thought of the changes in their relationship, how he first could scarcely tolerate this unnatural Sharani woman, the armed truce that had evolved, and then the trust that made them sword-brothers. As a war-leader, Chimquar had been all he could ask of any warrior, and more. His usual somber expression returned, and a sense of loss stole into him, bringing with it doubt, for Maruic knew he had just ruined something, which could not be repaired. Or forgiven. When he woke in the morning, Chimquar was gone.

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Tall grass brushed Chimquar's thighs as she circled, seeking the trail she had lost. All traces eluded her now, even the last signs which she had passed half a league back. She ran her hand through her dusty-black, shoulder-length hair, which her leather headband kept in place despite her tuggings, and she frowned. Her instincts, honed in the Temple of Aroana in her distant homeland of Shaurone, sensed faint

traces of sorcery in the air. The slaughter of the people in the wagon had been more than the work of renegades or a war-band from the city-states. She regretted having parted with Maruic six days ago, for though she was familiar with the Powers of Darkness and had fought them many times since her youth, she never relished facing such an engagement alone.

Alone ... alone is what she had been, in one way or another, for most of her life. Her ability to sense the Powers of Darkness—of the hellgods and their minions—and to oppose those powers with powers of her own had set her apart from the others of Shaurone. Her departure from Shaurone had been abrupt, the result of her undisciplined temper combined with the power of her blows. A young noble, daughter to one of her barons, had angered Chimquar; and the warrior had lashed out unthinkingly, beating the unarmed aristocrat until she died.

The barons wanted vengeance against her, their mar'ajan. The Saer'ajan Zaren Asharan exiled her to Doronar, a neighboring kingdom, while she attempted to mitigate the matter. Instead of waiting as she had been ordered, Chimquar exiled herself by simply riding on, not stopping. Now it was impossible for her to ever return.

Yet she was ha'taren, a paladin of Aroana, her fighting skills carefully and intensely honed in her god's temple. She was quick and strong, and as accomplished with weapons as any man she had met—like all of her race.

One good thing had come of her life on the plains: She had found her father, recognizing Azkani by the half coin she wore

around her neck, for he wore the other half. It had been Azkani, with her permission, who had conceived of her deception as a man and who had also told Maruic after gaining a promise from him to allow it. Now Maruic wanted more from her than she could give. It saddened her once the initial anger passed. She felt more hurt than angry. So she gave them both time to let their heads clear by leaving before he awoke.

"God! Aroana, Compassionate Defender, if I could just go home...." Chimquar murmured. "These lands, these people ... I don't belong here ... among them."

The shriek of hunting ramtras—giant flightless birds—made Chimquar rein her horse sharply. She scanned the plain. The ramtras sounded near, but the dense grass concealed them. The birds favored such areas for their hunting. A woman's terrified scream erupted to the right of Chimquar. She could hear the swish and rustle of grass as the woman and the pursuing birds plunged through it. Chimquar slipped her spear from its sling, settled it in her arm, and swung her horse to face the sounds. There was a flash of red skirt, and the woman was before the warrior. She saw Chimquar and froze.

"Pass me! Hide!" Chimquar shouted roughly.

The woman obeyed. The first ramtra appeared, sighted Chimquar, and charged. The plainsbred mare shuddered, yet remained still in response to Chimquar's calm-voiced commands. Neither steed nor rider moved until the ramtra's charge carried the beast nearly upon them. Chimquar's heels pressed the mare's sides and the horse sprang aside, eluding the bird, then pivoted and came about. The ramtra's curved

beak, sharp and large enough to tear off a man's arm, darted at her. Chimquar dipped in the saddle. Her knees gripped the mare more tightly, and they sprang under the tearing beak. The beak closed on the mare's neck, coming away with a mouthful of skin and mane as Chimquar pressed her horse forward and drove the long spear into the hunting bird's breast. The spear was torn from the warrior's grasp. The ramtra staggered back, jerking and waving its tiny wings.

Its mate arrived before Chimquar could turn away from the first bird. Talons raked the mare's flank. The small horse twisted, kicking. The predator snapped at Chimquar's back and the legs of the mare. Chimquar unsheathed her longsword, turning in the saddle to slash at the striking talons. The bird jumped back, unhurt, then came in to seize Chimquar's sword-arm in its beak. A wordless cry of pain escaped her. The ramtra dragged her halfway from the saddle. The little mare pivoted and crab-stepped in an effort to keep her rider. Chimquar drew her stiletto from its arm sheath as both of her feet came free of the stirrups, striking blindly. She tore the bird's throat open. Blood gushed. The giant predator shuddered and released her. Chimquar dropped to earth, landing on her right hip and elbow. The sudden new pain in her right arm caused her to lose her grip upon her sword when she landed. Chimquar forced herself to move and draw the stiletto's mate from her boot top, expecting another attack. Then she saw that both birds lay dead, that her first stiletto had struck true.

The horse nuzzled her, whinnying in her ear. Chimquar sheathed her dagger and pulled the horse's head down to

caress its nose and cheek while checking the wound. It was not serious. Chimquar sat down to examine her own.

The Euzadi woman stepped around the mare and knelt before the warrior with the water flask from Chimquar's saddle. She exchanged no words with Chimquar, simply tearing the warrior's sleeve open, and then gently washing the wound. She bound it with soft cloth torn from her undershift. Chimquar let her finish, and then cupped the woman's chin to lift her head. Their eyes met.

The woman smiled uncertainly, spoke softly. "I am Scheiharia of the Araza tribe." She touched the crest on Chimquar's headband. "You are Dazalero, warrior."

Chimquar's eyes traced the dark, sharp-boned beauty of the woman's face. "I am Chimquar Takara, War-Leader to Maruic who is Chieftain of the Dazalero. You were with the wagon," Chimquar stated softly, knowing no other place a Euzadi woman could have come from alone and so far from the tents and wagons of her people.

Scheiharia's face clouded with distress. She shook her head, casting back her momentary display of weakness. "I escaped. Or thought I had.... They set the ramtras on me." Scheiharia shuddered.

"Who?" Chimquar stroked her hair in a comforting gesture.

Scheiharia brought her head up, meeting the warrior's eyes. "Bakran and his renegades and—and a servant of Diangar."

Chimquar's stomach did a slow queasy roll. Not long ago she had slain a sa'necari in Tovante, one of the dark necromancers who assumed all the formidable powers and

appetites of the undead while still living. To the Euzadi all such dark ones were Diangari, even those who did not actually serve that particular demon-lord. "A violet-eyed man, no whites? That kind of Diangari?"

Distress returned twofold to Scheiharia's face. She bit her lips as she fought back an uprush of emotion, shaking her head. "Katal-Marandu." Her hoarse whisper betrayed the terror all Euzadi shared of the creatures from beyond the Katal Escarpment that came slipping through the Gate of the Hellgod—though that did not stop them from fighting the creatures and many times the tribes had gathered in strength to hunt them down. "Katal-Marandu."

"Aroana Diona! Defare mei, Victisya," Chimquar murmured in her native tongue. Her days in Aroana's Temple were two score years past, her confident grasp of the Ways of Power dimmed by years of disuse. Still, she was ha'taren, sworn to the God Aroana's service ... so she reminded herself every time chance thrust her into confrontations with the Darkness. Her God hated the minions of the Hellgod, opposed them continually. That never made it any easier for Chimquar to nerve herself for such an encounter; yet she could not turn her back to the threat. The Euzadi were content to drive the evil from their beloved plains; what chanced to happen beyond their grassland realm never troubled them.

It is easier for the Euzadi, Chimquar thought. I've taken on their appearance, their ways, but I don't belong among them.

Chimquar shook herself free of that brooding thought. The Diangari Scheiharia spoke of was not sa'necari, the Waejontori necromancers, whose realm Chimquar and her

people had destroyed during the Great War. The Katal-Marandians were more formidable, less predictable than the Waejontori, coming as they did from a land torn and twisted by an ancient godwar. Fear sent its cold chill over her and only her hatred of the renegade, Bakran, helped her contain that fear. Bakran sealed her decision to go after the Diangari, which her ha'taren upbringing urged.

Her attention returned to Scheiharia. She could not take the woman on her hunt for Bakran, not with his unholy ally lurking. Neither could Chimquar leave Scheiharia unprotected on the plains, nor chance losing the trail of her quarry, leaving him free to strike again. Maruic was the solution, but it did not sit easy with Chimquar, for she did not feel ready to cope with the chieftain yet. Maruic could take Scheiharia to the Dazalero, or send her back with some of the warriors who would soon arrive. That was how it had to be whether Chimquar liked it or not.

At least I've the satisfaction of not allowing Bakran to escape again. "Bakran," she spat, remembering a village near the mountains, which no longer existed.

Chimquar jerked her thoughts free, pulled a talisman from beneath her shirt, and rubbed it. Maruic would be well along her trail by now. Her steady pace should have put several days distance between them.

"What is that?" Scheiharia's lips came together in a quizzical expression.

Chimquar opened her hand to reveal the tiny silver unicorn. "A talisman." She got to her feet to tend her horse's wound.

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The dead birds wore golden collars with strange writing on them, reminding Chimquar of those worn by the man-wolves of the Nakesht. She removed the collars, hung one from her belt, and held the other, rubbing her thumbs over it. Bakran's Diangari ally commanded them. Her temple-bred senses felt the faint stirrings of power, the lingering spells upon the collar, and she knew it was the means by which the Diangari controlled his predatory birds.

Scheiharia started to take the heads of the ramtras, a grisly trophy that Euzadi warriors liked to hang from their wagons. It was a rare warrior who survived an encounter with a single ramtra, much less two. Then Chimquar touched Scheiharia's shoulder and shook her head. "I've no need of them."

Startled, Scheiharia started to protest.

"I've no need of them," Chimquar repeated. "I'm not some young upstart in quest of a reputation."

Scheiharia smiled and dropped her eyes, feeling foolish. "Of course not. You are the Hawk that Hunts Lions." She gave the full meaning of Chimquar's name in the common tongue, released the bird she held and rose after wiping her hands and dagger on the grass.

"Maruic follows. We shall return to him, Scheiharia."

"You will not pursue Bakran?"

"Not with you along."

"I am not afraid of them." She quietly denied her earlier distress, drawing her dagger again. "I fight well with this."

"You're not a warrior."

"I killed a man to escape! I'm not afraid to go back."

"You're still not a warrior." Scheiharia's annoying insistence irritated nerves and emotions still raw from her quarrel with Maruic. "You'll do as I say."

"Because I am a woman...." Scheiharia sobbed, frustrated. "I've as much reason as you to pursue them."

"And the Diangari?"

"I will face that too! I will."

"That little dagger of yours," Chimquar said scornfully. "Against a dozen armed myn? How much aid will it be against a creature of the Darkness?"

A petulant bravado transformed Scheiharia's face. "As much as your sword!" She flung the words with a toss of her head.

"What do you think you are? A Sharani warrior?" Chimquar's annoyance increased.

"What would you know of the Sharani?" Scheiharia snapped.

Her insolence triggered Chimquar's anger. She slapped Scheiharia across the face. "More than you'll ever know!" Chimquar walked off, already regretting the blow. Despite all the teachings of the Euzadi seer, Azkani, anger still came too easily to Chimquar, remaining the bane of her existence. She knew she could have found a less violent way of silencing Scheiharia.

"Chimquar." Scheiharia's voice came softly at her side. "I am sorry, Chimquar."

The warrior halted, gazing at Scheiharia. Their eyes met. "I know the Sharani well," Chimquar broke the brief silence, her voice low, controlled. "I followed the Breesya's banner in the Great War." That was not entirely true, for Chimquar had led as an ally, not as a follower.

"Then it's true, what they say. You're a half-breed?"

"It is true." Chimquar moved to take the reins of her horse. She drew a deep breath, letting her eyes scan the plains. "Scheiharia," she said, without looking at the woman. "You first." Chimquar swung her onto the mare.

That surprised Scheiharia, a Euzadi man never allowed a woman to ride his warhorse. "Where are you from?"

Chimquar led the horse. "A small kingdom near Shaurone."

"What is it called?"

Chimquar did not answer immediately. "I'm in exile. I cannot risk word of me getting out."

"You're an outlaw? The half-breed son of the High Seer is an outlaw?"

"Of sorts." Chimquar grinned, a teasing light coming into her dark eyes as her mood shifted. "Cheated of my estates and forced into hiding."

Scheiharia looked closely at the warrior, uncertain whether Chimquar was jesting or not.

Chimquar gave her a guilty grin, making a lie of her honest words.

Scheiharia turned her head away, haughtily ignoring the warrior. But that did not last.

* * * *

On their third evening, Scheiharia watched Chimquar apply a small whetstone to her stilettos. The Euzadi woman's eyes strayed to the silver unicorn the warrior wore, then to her face. Scheiharia's eyes lingered, taking in each feature of Chimquar's lean face and liking what she saw, even the skin worn to leather by sun and weather. The narrow scar that ran from the warrior's cheek to the jawbone enhanced the image Scheiharia had heard of the warrior before they met. She smiled at the thought that it was Chimquar Takara who had rescued her.

She had overheard the warriors of her tribe saying that Maruic's War-Leader was the strongest on the plains. A man of honor, they said, one who never broke his word. Scheiharia ran down the list of things she had heard about him, realizing that Chimquar had never been known to accept any of the women offered him. Scheiharia felt certain none of them could have been as beautiful as herself. She rose and went to Chimquar, nestling against the warrior and managing to distract her from her work. Scheiharia smiled a languid suggestion as their eyes met.

Chimquar stiffened. "Don't." She sheathed her blades and rose with the whetstone in hand. This had happened before; Euzadi women were attracted to the man they believed her to be. Before, Chimquar had handled those women easily, with chilly disdain—but the distress of Maruic's last actions were still too fresh, the wounds unhealed. Too many emotions were still too near the surface of Chimquar's mind and heart. She studied the sunset, the way its blaze made silhouettes of the

scattered mesquite trees and transformed the familiar images into foreign ones.

The past days with Scheiharia had been pleasant; they had both been talkative. Chimquar now regretted her openness with the woman. Scheiharia had drawn too close to Chimquar. Her exile never hurt until she let herself start thinking about her homeland, her family. She wanted to glance at Scheiharia, but restrained herself, knowing that would only encourage the woman. It had been years since Chimquar had spoken to a woman as she had to Scheiharia, longer still since she had spoken of her homeland to anyone.

Scheiharia sat in silence, all her fantasies scattered by the rejection. "What have I done?" she asked in a small voice.

"Nothing, yet—" Chimquar dropped the whetstone into her saddlebag and rubbed her horse's neck, fondled its ears.

"Then why?" Scheiharia's voice broke on the second word. "You have been so pleasant—so—"

"Don't offer yourself to me." Chimquar's voice grew soft and troubled.

Scheiharia rose and went to her. "Why? Am I not beautiful? How do I offend you?"

Chimquar turned from her horse to face the woman. "Most men would give an arm to possess you." *You would hate me, Scheiharia, if you knew I am not a man. You would feel humiliated.*

"And you would not?" Scheiharia's voice rose, a hoarse, strained edge to it.

"I'm not like other men. You're forbidden to me."

"Why?" Scheiharia screamed.

"Scheiharia!" Chimquar seized her arms, shaking her. "Don't force me! We'll both regret it."

"But, Chimquar," she pleaded, grasping the warriors jerkin.

Resentment of Scheiharia for triggering emotions Chimquar did not wish to feel, for demanding answers to questions she dared not answer, built upon the rankling hurt from her fight with Maruic laying beneath the surface; her emotions overrode the past five years of Azkani's teachings, which had helped her to contain her anger, to control it. Chimquar struck Scheiharia across her face, knocking her into the dirt, then dragged her up, jerking and shaking her. "Keep your god-damned questions to yourself! You're nothing more than a pretty, little bitch. Be glad I haven't raped you as another man would!" Chimquar released Scheiharia with a shove, which sent her sprawling in the dirt.

Scheiharia huddled, weeping. Chimquar stared at her, her eyes savage. Scheiharia's tears and sobs slowly penetrated her anger and Chimquar walked off, cursing herself under breath before reining in the rest of her temper. She told herself that her temper was less vicious than it had been, that Azkani had helped her or she would have beaten Scheiharia—beaten as she had that other woman many years ago. That was the reason Chimquar had been driven from her lands; that streak of violence, which surfaced and harmed even the innocent. It was a legacy of too many years of war and the near madness from what she fought in Waejontor. Chimquar clutched at the fact that she had not harmed Scheiharia as she had the other woman, clung to it as a raft in a river of

self-recrimination and depression, which threatened to drown her once more.

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Maruic started a small fire before the ramtras came. They had paced him for three days. He felt the Darkness creeping around his small camp and again regretted the manner in which he and Chimquar parted, fearing that the creatures might have found her—or worse. A warrior alone had little chance—Maruic gave a grim bark of laughter; he had less chance than she. Chimquar knew more about the Darkness and the Diangari than he, though they had both served the seer, Azkani, for the same amount of time. He comforted himself with that fact.

The birds closed on him. The fire should have deterred them, but it did not. The Euzadi chieftain drew his sword and pulled a burning brand from the fire. He kept his back to the fire, knowing they would not chance the blaze in order to come at his back. The first bird darted in, its beak snapping. Maruic thrust the brand in its face, slashed at a second ramtra, dodged around a third. The nomad kept moving, desperately avoiding the flurry of beaks and talons, striking with both weapons. The need to keep his back to the fire hampered him as much as it helped. He had no direction in which to withdraw, but was confined to a small area around his fire. He might as well have placed his back to a wall or in a corner.

Chimquar. He could not stifle the thoughts of her, for when they fought beside each other it was as if a charm was laid

over them and they were invincible. He again regretted their quarrel.

The air smelled of burning feathers. Shrieks and screams from angry and wounded ramtras racked his ears. Two birds rushed him in a sudden frontal attack. Maruic dodged aside, twisted to avoid the attack of a third beast, and stepped too far from his fire. A blow sent him to his knees. His back burned where the talons had torn his flesh. He managed to twist and force the bird to release its grasp as it moved to finish him. Shrieking, it turned into its fellows, throwing them into confusion, giving Maruic a moment's respite.

A flurry of sound, rising in volume, came from beyond the firelight. Maruic knew he could not hold out for much longer. The birds returned. Maruic lurched to his feet to meet them. He hacked at the first to come near, his ululating Euzadi war cry interspersed with muted oaths as he attacked madly. He plunged into the middle of the birds in a swirl of torch and sword. The predators closed around him. A beak seized his upper arm. He clubbed the bird with the torch. It released him.

A chorus of war cries broke out on Maruic's left. The ramtras drew off, scattered as the Euzadi war-band drove into them. Maruic lowered his sword, tossed his brand back into the fire, and shouted for his warriors to return. They circled Maruic, one coming out from the rest, leading Maruic's horse, which the birds had frightened away.

"Where is Chimquar?" Asked Chaiki, youngest of Maruic's warriors, his boyish face beardless and solemn.

"Ahead somewhere," Maruic answered, masking the unease which mention of his sword-brother engendered. "He was too eager for the chase."

"Then he may have need of us," Chaiki replied.

Maruic recognized his youngest warrior in the light of the torches his companions held. "Aye, Chaiki." Maruic mounted.

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Chimquar did not object to Scheiharia moving near to her as the fourth night deepened. The Euzadi woman feared the night, and Chimquar feared it, too. She fingered her talisman, listening to the sounds of the night. A faint swirl of dark power brushed along the edges of Chimquar's awareness. She rose, moving to stand about the sleeping Scheiharia, drawing her sword.

"What?" Scheiharia awoke.

"Shhh," Chimquar hissed and Scheiharia was silent.

The air, a thick, hot soup, pressed upon Chimquar's arms. The sword in Chimquar's hands grew heavy. The point sank; her limbs grew heavier. Chimquar steadied her arms with an effort; the spell had stolen over her before she was aware of it. She concentrated, forcing her arms up, bringing her sword once more to guard. The spell was meant to hold a plainsman, not a Sharani with their inbred inheritance of the power. Chimquar heard Scheiharia whimper; her bravado of the past morning dissolved. The small noise broke Chimquar's concentration; the weight of the air clamped down upon her again, driving her to her knees.

"Aroana God," Chimquar invoked her patron in a strangled whisper. It was a child's invocation; the only one she remembered easily, the first she had learned. "Raven Woman, Bane of Dragons, Shield of Light and Sword of Brightness, break and hew the spells of Darkness."

The unicorn talisman she wore began to glow with light, kindled, and enhanced by the natural power she possessed, but had rarely tapped. The Diangari could not possibly have encountered another woman of her race before; that element of surprise gave her a small edge. Chimquar continued the invocation, then rose through the energy-thick air to stand erect. She was Sharani, and the Gods favored that race. Chimquar yanked Scheiharia to her feet as the last of the oppressive spell dissipated.

Scheiharia pulled her dagger from beneath her skirts, obviously heartened by Chimquar's small victory, and positioned herself to guard the warrior's back.

In the shadows beyond the firelight, Chimquar could discern the outline of warriors arranged in a circle around her camp. One figure shambled from their ranks, moved into the light. He seemed human, though his body was twisted, one shoulder higher than the other. He was clad in a sardari and aba, as were the folk of the southern cities. Chimquar met his eyes. They were orbs of red, glowing coals, and now she knew why Scheiharia had called him a Diangari, even before she saw the curved horns among his curls.

The Diangari eyed her glowing talisman, then raised his eyes to meet Chimquar's again. Fire leaped from his eyes, lashing out toward Chimquar.

Chimquar reeled back, flinging her arm across her eyes as they watered and burned. She stumbled against Scheiharia. The other woman dropped her dagger, twisting to catch the warrior. Chimquar pulled away from her, trying to focus her vision, which was filled with dancing spots of fire. Tendrils of flame licked through her thoughts, her mind, commanded her to release her weapon. Chimquar arched her back, struggling. She could hear Scheiharia screaming. Her fingers went numb around her sword hilt, letting it loosen in her grasp.

"No. No." Chimquar chanted a futile denial of the power holding her helpless. She staggered backward, went to one knee. Her sword slid from her hand. Chimquar sucked in deep breaths, trying to steady herself. Her left hand clung to the edge of her shirt; her fingers clutched the fabric and climbed to the talisman.

Again came that searing command in her mind, trying to force her hand from its hold on the talisman. Her grip on the talisman weakened, despite her will.

Chimquar stopped trying to control the rest of her body, focusing her mind on her left hand. As she fell, her hand broke free from the command and grasped the talisman strongly. The light from it flowed over her; her eyes cleared and the fire left the inside of her head. She rolled onto her side, panting, and exhausted. His warriors followed the Diangari sorcerer, closing in a circle around the women as the Diangari approached them. Chimquar tore the chain from her neck, and when the Diangari reached her she threw it in his face. The Diangari screamed in pain and staggered away from her, going to his knees a spear-length away. The warriors

retreated in confusion, two pausing to bear their leader farther away.

Chimquar regained her feet and sword before the warriors came again. She realized with a pang of alarm, that Scheiharia was gone. Then she saw several figures struggling in the shadows beyond the fire.

"Scheiharia!" Chimquar shouted.

"Chimquar! Chimquar, help me!"

"Chimquar?" Bakran's lieutenant mimicked, as he led several men into the firelight while the sorcerer issued commands from the darkness.

"Finish quickly. My ally awaits his reward," spoke the sorcerer.

"We will follow soon," Bakran's man answered.

"Tormic." Chimquar named him as she eased her stiletto into her hand and her muscles tensed.

The renegade smiled. "Bakran wants your head ... badly."

Chimquar did not reply, her face set in a grim mask. Bakran's hatred for her was mutual. She listened for sounds behind her, aware of five men encircling her. The sorcerous battle had left her drained. Her skin crawled at the prospect of getting a sword in the back from men she could not see; she had to break the circle.

Chimquar charged Tormic. He raised his weapon, more than ready for her attack. Two men on either side of Tormic tried to close upon Chimquar with him. Chimquar's sword licked out in a low slash, but at the instant before it would have met Tormic's parry, she twisted her body and drove her sword into the midsection of the startled man on Tormic's

right. She pulled her sword free and bolted from the remaining two renegades before they could react. She made out the shape of a horse in the darkness ahead. Chimquar heard hard footsteps behind her, realized the men would overtake her before she could reach the horse. She spun suddenly, before the renegades could slow their pace. The first man to reach her was unable to avoid her sword thrust. She threw her to fell the second man, and that left only two—Tormic, and the one who suddenly struck her from the side. A sword thrust caught her in the thigh. She staggered forward, and her leg gave as her attacker ripped the blade free. Even as she fell, she managed to parry the man's next blow and lash out with her good leg to land her foot in his groin. He doubled over, and her sword point penetrated his throat.

Chimquar's nails dug into the flesh around her wound as she tried to close the gash. Blood spurted through her fingers. Unable to stand, she sat up and ripped her pants leg open with the end of her sword, keeping an eye on Tormic, who had stopped a short distance from her.

"That was well fought, Chimquar," Tormic said. "Bakran will be all the more glad to receive your head."

"Perhaps not," Chimquar snarled, bringing her sword up to a parry position and watching Tormic closely.

He leveled his sword for a thrust, then shifted, testing the reactions of his wounded enemy, teasing, and suggesting with his weapon.

Chimquar began to feel dizzy from the loss of blood. She moved more slowly, barely able to counter Tormic's moves. She concentrated, drawing the dwindling remains of her

strength together, then pulled in her good leg and snatched her stiletto from her boot top as her sword locked against Tormic's blade, stopping it inches from her face. She threw her body to one side, disengaging her sword and plunging her dagger through Tormic's foot, nailing him to the ground. Fighting the pain and dizziness, she pulled herself into a crouch and cut off Tormic's startled curse by plunging her sword into his stomach. Chimquar left her sword there, and Tormic carried it to his death with him. She managed to tie a makeshift tourniquet on her leg before she passed out.

* * * *

Scavenging birds dipped and turned above the scattered bodies of the dead attackers. Three riderless horses were spooked by the arrival of Maruic and his warriors. The chieftain dismounted, grim and tight-lipped, to examine the bodies one by one. A flash of silver caught his eye, drew him to the edge of the trampled grass. Maruic knelt and picked up the little unicorn talisman Chimquar had worn; the chain was broken. Dread swept through Maruic. His eyes searched the grass around him in a brief, desperate quest. He gripped the talisman so tightly that the unicorn's horn pierced his palm. Maruic opened his hand and noticed a tiny drop of blood welling on the skin beside the talisman. He shifted the unicorn to his other hand, wiping his palm on his leg. A movement off to his right caused him to spring to his feet. He heard two of his men dismount to follow him and ignored them. A warrior in a jerkin made from a lion's black-maned pelt lay in the grass, struggling to sit.

"Chimquar!" Maruic knelt to help her, his heart beating furiously. "Powers of Earth be praised!" He turned her, gently cradling her head and shoulders.

"Maruic?" Chimquar frowned, trying to keep her eyes in focus, but already she was losing that battle. "Water...."

"Water! Bring water!" Maruic commanded, and Chaiki dropped from his horse with a waterskin in hand and ran to him.

Maruic raised the skin to her lips and Chimquar clutched it. Water went down her dry throat in a greedy gulp before he could stop her. It felt so good—until ... seconds later, Chimquar shuddered and retched while Maruic supported her head. Then she slumped against him, not attempting to use what little strength she had left. "Bakran," she whispered.

"I recognized Tormic."

Chimquar winced as Chaiki examined her wound and loosened the crude tourniquet. "A Diangari aids him," she breathed.

"Diangari?"

She felt Maruic tense as she said, "Katal-Marandu."

"There's a sliver of steel," Chaiki's young voice said. "I may have to cut to reach it."

"Not yet." Chimquar found the strength to raise her voice. More pain would drive the thoughts from her head before she could speak them. "Not yet! Maruic, I saved a woman.... They took her. She's mine ... Bakran knows it. Rescue her. Maruic ... My Brother, please!"

"If I can, I will."

"Get the steel out."

* * * *

Chimquar missed the battle. For a week her fever did not subside, and for a second week Azkani, the High Seer and healer for the tribe, had allowed none of the other warriors near her, not even Maruic.

Makajia nestled in the security of Chimquar's arms, sitting on the bed in the canvas-covered wagon. The warrior smiled at the nine-year-old; her fosterling was falling asleep. Chimquar kissed the top of Makajia's head. The girl stirred, blinking sleep-heavy eyes. Chimquar laid her back on the bed and murmured, "Go to sleep."

Makajia smiled, nestling deeper into the furs and pillows.

As with many aspects of her life, Chimquar was pleased and sad at the same time about Makajia and her brother Hazier, orphans who had been made her fosterlings. Azkani had bound their lips so that they could not speak the fact that they knew her to be a woman. It never influenced the way they thought of her. They saw her as a great warrior, one whom they would do well to emulate. Chimquar hoped that they drew inner strength, the sort food cannot provide, from their association with her—just as she drew strength from their being part of her life.

Makajia and Hazier, even at their young ages, were the only two people in Chimquar's life with whom she felt openly and trustingly affectionate. She needed them for that, even though she could not always be with them to put her feelings into actions.

"Chimquar." It was Maruic's voice, from outside the door-flap of the wagon.

Chimquar glanced and saw Maruic poke his head in.

"Maruic?" Makajia started to sit up, her eyes excited despite her sleepiness.

Chimquar pressed her back down. "Go to sleep." The little girl sighed and lay back. Chimquar blew out the candle and joined Maruic outside.

"She sleeps? And her brother? Where is Hazier?"

"With Azkani." Chimquar squatted before her campfire. "Hazier isn't an apt pupil, but Azkani keeps trying." She purposely kept the inflections of friendliness from her voice. She had not created the need for distance between them: Maruic had. Therefore, she would not be the one to end it. "Have you come to tell me about your battle?"

He nodded, joining her by the fire. The moon rose above them. His face was grim, his voice somber. "It was costly."

"And my woman?" Chimquar asked, but she held no hopes: Scheiharia would have come to her already, had Maruic's warband rescued her.

"She lives."

"Then where is she?" Chimquar demanded, suddenly eager.

"With Bakran. The battle was costly," Maruic repeated. "It might have been otherwise had you been with us."

Chimquar rose and moved away, standing with her back to Maruic.

Maruic stood, feeling the emptiness yawn between them like an uncrossable chasm. "Bakran and his demon lost many

men and ramtras—we slew a score of the devil-birds—but we lost more warriors than they did. Bakran and the Diangari escaped taking your woman with them."

"Where are they now?" Chimquar asked, without turning to face him.

"Marique, the City of Sorcery," he said, a stiff tension in his voice. He turned to leave, pausing at the path, which led through the assembled wagons of his people and looked back at her. "I saw your woman. She would grace a sultan's harem."

Chimquar did not miss the chill, which came to his voice. "Maruic, Scheiharia is not my—"

"Make no excuses if that is your choice!" He snapped. His voice quickly lowered to a rough growl. "I have heard of the ways of your people ... women preferring women."

"You misunderstand—" Chimquar turned to face him. "My people are not—"

"It is you who misunderstands, Chimquar." The chieftain turned on his heel and left.

Chimquar returned to her fire, troubled, doubting the fairness of her actions in holding her distance. Yet, how could she trust him again, him or any man of those lands? It was their nature to be as Maruic had been that night. That thought did not make her decision any easier; she, on the other hand, blamed herself for her misjudgment in trying to see Sharani virtues in a Euzadi. The loyalty, which Maruic's kind gave to their sword-brothers, could never be truly hers. She believed that, if anything, Maruic had made a mockery of that oath by taking it with a woman.

Hazier came out of the shadows and stood beside her.

"The chieftain is angry with you?" The twelve-year old asked.

Chimquar was mildly surprised to see him. "Angry? No, not angry." Was it loathing, or jealousy, she had detected in Maruic's voice? All had gone awry since they quarreled.

"You should not let it trouble you. Maruic is of many moods."

Chimquar smiled at the extreme seriousness of his attempt to reassure her. Her strong hands closed on his narrow shoulders. "Did you understand what we spoke of?"

"You would rescue your woman, and Maruic is not happy with that."

"I am a woman," Chimquar said so softly the boy barely heard her.

"What is the point?" Hazier frowned. "You must act the man."

"You're too innocent for your years. I must be raising you wrong," Chimquar said, without seriousness, and hugged him. "Now, into the wagon with your sister."

Chimquar stood outside, her eyes scanning the patterns of the stars. She felt that she owed Scheiharia something more than abandonment. She felt responsible for her, since the woman had been under her protection when Bakran recaptured her; more, Scheiharia awakened a warmth and gentleness in Chimquar, emotions not entirely rooted in sexual desires. In the center of that complex tapestry of emotions lay shame—shame for the violence she had shown Scheiharia. None of that would be understandable to Maruic.

She knew that fact should not matter to her, but it did anyway.

* * * *

"Are you going away again?" Makajia whined.

"Yes." She laid her saddlebags on the bed and picked up Makajia, who promptly flung her arms around Chimquar's neck.

"Take me with you!" Makajia's enormous dark eyes fixed upon the warrior's.

"I can't little one," Chimquar told her and sat on the edge of the bed with Makajia on her lap. "Azkani will send a woman to care for you until I return."

"Both of us?" Hazier stood on the step, looking in.

"My horse is saddled?" Chimquar set Makajia aside. The boy stepped down to let her pass.

"Yes," he answered, then repeated his question. "Both of us remain?"

"Yes. Someone has to keep an eye on your sister."

"One of Azkani's women will be with her," he protested.

"Makajia is more than one woman can handle."

"I am twelve years old! All the other boys ride with their fathers!" Hazier frowned petulantly.

"I told you, stay behind!"

Makajia snickered from the door. Hazier favored her with a hateful glare. "You can't keep leaving me! They laugh!"

"Who laughs?"

"He doesn't want you fighting his battles." Maruic said, halting near Chimquar. "You couldn't anyway."

The warrior turned to face the chieftain.

"Azkani says you are leaving." Maruic changed the subject before she could address his previous statement.

Hazier chose that moment to flee, darting between the wagons, followed by his sister.

"I am."

"Marique is a dangerous city," Maruic continued, his voice quiet and guarded.

"I've been in worse places."

"Bakran will be expecting you."

"I know that."

"You should not go alone. One sword against a city...."

Chimquar shrugged. "There is no one to ride with me."

The chieftain's eyes dropped from hers to gaze over his shoulder. He did not speak again for several minutes.

Chimquar waited. "Do you love this woman?" He asked at last.

"She is as forbidden to me as you are." Her eyes were ice and her mouth a tight line.

"That is not what I asked." Maruic searched her eyes.

Discomfited by his gaze, she turned away and leaned against the wagon. "Do I love her? I haven't considered that. I don't want to." She ended the conversation by entering her wagon. She got her saddlebags and returned to her horse. Maruic had not moved. He extended his open hand. She settled her saddlebags on her horse, then glanced at what he held: her unicorn talisman.

"You found it!" She almost smiled, but caught herself.

* * * *

Maruic sensed that a door had been almost opened, then slammed in his face. He caught her hand as she took the talisman from him. "We are sword-brothers," he said. "We took a blood oath to stand together. My honor would be stained if you rode alone."

"Two swords are scarcely better than one." Chimquar's slight, wry smile crossed her lips. "It is best I go alone."

"The losses Bakran inflicted upon our people had hurt us," Maruic said. Then his voice rose, insistent. "But we are not crippled! A handful of warrior could accomplish what an army could not. Five would be enough. Five men to cut Bakran's throat."

"And Scheiharia?"

"We could have her safe before Bakran knew we were there."

His driving enthusiasm encouraged Chimquar to follow his line of thought. "Tribesmen sometimes take furs and ivory to trade there."

"And horses. The Mariquei like horses."

"Yes, that could get us through the gates."

"And Chaiki knows the city," Maruic added, smiling now.

"Better and better," Chimquar smiled in return.

"The plains will be rid of Bakran!" Then Maruic halted in his speech, noticing an abrupt change in Chimquar's expression. "We are still brothers, Chimquar," he ventured.

Chimquar did not answer.

"I cannot let you go alone." Maruic lost his spirited tone, becoming somber again.

Chimquar yielded him that small inch, making it clear where she stood despite giving him that much. "We will need another night to plan before we set out."

"Tonight at my wagon," Maruic said, then departed before she could refuse him.

Chimquar watched him go. She missed the way they once spoke together as true friends, freely sharing plans and plots when they harried the caravans from the city-states, fought the skirmishes of minor tribal wars, and hunted both the lion and the buffalo. Those days were gone.

* * * *

Three days ride from the Dazalero Euzadi camp, five nondescript Araza tribesmen camped near a small spring. Scar-faced Ibon turned a spit, cooking an antelope that Moshin, his sword-brother, had killed. Ibon grinned as Chaiki started a dance around the fire. Moshin picked up the words of the chanted rhythm, clapping and stamping, then joined Chaiki's dance. Ibon shook his head, laughing softly.

Chimquar walked past Maruic, who stood near the horses. The chieftain had chosen to take the first watch. "You should join them," he said.

"My mood isn't suited to such things." Chimquar stopped and turned partially toward him.

"They have wondered at that. You have not joined us in anything."

"Except this quest."

"And when you have your woman?"

"I've been thinking of going south. There's another whole continent down there ... across the sea."

"Hazier and Makajia would be happiest staying among their own kind," Maruic said, grasping her arms. "They would be lost without you should you leave them; and much trouble to you in strange lands if you took them. Stay among us, Chimquar."

"I don't belong among you anymore." She backed away from Maruic and his hands fell to his sides.

Maruic became downcast, uneasy. "I am only a man Chimquar. A man has desires ... strong desires, which as a woman, you cannot understand."

"I understand, Maruic." Sternness entered her voice. "I simply don't accept them." She left him.

Maruic noticed that the singing and noise around the campfire had ceased. He turned and saw Chaiki approaching. A habitual boyish seriousness underscored Chaiki's manner.

"All is not well between yourself and Chimquar," Chaiki observed.

"Not well," Maruic agreed. He began to walk around the camp with Chaiki beside him.

"That is why Chimquar holds himself apart from us." The young man gnawed his lower lip thoughtfully. "The trouble surely must be something grave indeed for it to come between sword-brothers."

Maruic stopped short, facing the young warrior. Chaiki had as much as guessed already. "I broke faith with him." Maruic expected disapprobation, for the Euzadi chieftains were not permitted the flaws of the common man, much less so grave

a breach of honor as the he admitted to. But he had needed to say it aloud to someone, to seek comfort or advice from outside himself.

Chaiki displayed no sign of disapproval or censure, only compassion more suited to a seer of the Majios Clan than a warrior of the Dazalero. "Chimquar's ways are not always ours, nor ours his," Chaiki told him. "But sword-brothers are sword-brothers. A wise man once said that pride must sometimes be sold to buy honor."

Maruic looked deeply into the eyes of the young man, thinking for a moment that he beheld a far older soul. Chaiki broke than contact and returned to his companions without waiting for a reply.

* * * *

Chimquar crouched in the tall grass, ignoring the late evening breezes making the green blades tickle across her face. She heard soft voices and the swish of grass around a horse's legs. Her suspicion that they were being followed was about to be confirmed.

One horse and two small people approached the firelight of the camp. Then Chimquar lunged, surprising the one on foot, throwing her arms around him to pin his arms at his sides. He yelped and kicked backwards as she lifted him off the ground. The rider let out a shrill scream and swung the horse into her, while swatting at Chimquar with a stick. "Chimquar! Maruic Help, help, help!" she screamed.

The boy escaped as Chimquar released him and faced her from a short distance, still unaware of whom she was. Then

Chimquar caught the stick that was still swatting ineffectually at her and wrested it from Makajia's grasp.

"Be still, Makajia!" She barked.

The girl fell abruptly silent. Now both children knew who had surprised them.

Chimquar pulled out her tinderbox and lit the end of the stick to see them by. Makajia wore a pair of Hazier's outgrown pants and an over-large shirt, belted with cord. A twisted scarf served as a headband, holding back her long hair.

"What happens here?" Maruic demanded as he stepped into view with his sword drawn and a torch in his other hands. Ibon and Moshin appeared on the other side of the small group. Chimquar extinguished the stick she held and dropped it, saying nothing.

"Oh ho!" Ibon exclaimed, laughing. "Two spies." He sheathed his weapon and lifted Hazier by one arm. "Ho, Moshin. See what I have caught. A Hazier-rabbit."

"And its sister," Moshin rejoined.

Chimquar handed the reins of Makajia's horse to Ibon. "Tomorrow you go back," she told Hazier.

"We have come too far to send them back," Maruic said.

"Two children alone?" Moshin also questioned Chimquar's quick decision. "One of us would have to go back with them."

"And none of us can be spared for that," Maruic said.

Chimquar stood silent. Maruic was right. "The danger ahead of us—" she broke off, taking Hazier from Ibon by his other arm. Her tight grip told the boy she was angry with him.

"Other boys have seen as much danger and more," Moshin told Chimquar. "It is time for Hazier."

Chimquar did not reply to that; instead, she led Hazier away without another word. The boy winced and held back. Chimquar gave him a pull to keep him moving. In the four years the children had been with her, she had never struck them out of simple anger. Striking Scheiharia still made her feel ashamed. "Do you know what you've done?" she asked him.

"Yes." Hazier tilted his head at a defiant angle, glaring at her. "I'm twelve years old! The others ride with their fathers while I am left with the women—they laugh at me!" Hazier exploded, then fell silent expecting her sharp rebuke.

Hazier had grown resentful, displaying a sullen and unfamiliar side of his nature. Chimquar had seen very little of him during the past several months. Her dark emotions melted before the distress she perceived in the boy—the pain laying beneath his defiance, pain she had unwittingly caused him. "You should not have brought your sister."

Her quiet tone disarmed him. His head lowered until his chin rested on his chest. "She threatened to tell on me if I left her behind."

Chimquar smiled; Makajia always made good on her threats. She could picture the girl screaming through the camp that Hazier was running away—what a furor she could cause! "I understand," she told him softly. "I will never leave you behind again. But you must heed my teachings! I should never have been able to surprise you as I did."

"I will be ready next time!"

"You'd better be," she growled with mock displeasure. She would teach him more about warrior skills if they stayed together—if ... Chimquar leaned her head back, feeling depressed. The children would have little chance to survive in foreign lands. Slavers liked to steal children, and she would not always be able to keep her eyes upon them. The children needed to be among their own kind. Yet for Chimquar to be without them, to give up the only love she could safely accept in these lands ... Chimquar did not want to think about that.

* * * *

Marique-of-the-Many-Towers commanded the narrow inlet to the Bay of Gaudeloo. There the plains met the low fingers of the Malacian Mountains and the sea. Chimquar and her companions could see Marique from the crest of a tree-dotted hill where they stopped along the brick-paved highroad. A merchant caravan rolled past them, its mercenary escort eyeing the small band suspiciously. The Euzadi were not infrequent visitors to Marique, though Bakran's renegades were more commonly seen than honest tribesmen.

Chimquar trotted her horse down the hill ahead of her companions, Makajia riding pillion behind her. If anything, the children's presence would lend credence to their being simply tribesmen come to trade. Chaiki followed, leading a string of fine horses. Hazier rode beside him. Ibon and Moshin came next, leading pack animals laden with pelts, skins, and hors, as well as uncarved ivory, which was tucked out of sight. Maruic came last, riding rear guard.

The guards at the gate ran an appreciative eye over the horses as Chaiki passed them

"Come to the marketplace," Chaiki called to them. "Look them over when you can."

"I just might," replied a guard.

* * * *

The Euzadis reached the marketplace, set up a wooden frame with a hide roof for a sun-shelter, and then put out their wares. The tax collectors would start appearing in the late afternoon to claim the city's rent on the space. Makajia slipped past Ibon into the square with Hazier. She looked like a boy in Hazier's outgrown clothing, as wild as any little gutter-rat Marique could produce, a small belt knife at her side and two coins jingling in her pocket. Hazier overtook her at the cloth merchant's stall, as Makajia was fingering his silk.

"Hey! Get your dirty hands off that!" the merchant hollered. Makajia jerked her hand back as if it had been burned. Her eyes got large, her lips trembled. Hazier pulled her around a corner.

"Dirty Euzadi bastards," the merchant grumbled.

Makajia opened her mouth to curse the man. Hazier clamped his hands over her mouth before she could get the words out, and she bit his hand. Hazier swallowed sharply and cuffed her. "Shhhh!" She continued to glare, but he ignored her, instead listening to the merchant around the corner in conversation with another customer.

"You really believe that Dazalero war-leader will come after his woman?"

"Yeah, bringing the thirteen tribes with him."

Hazier leaned around the corner to see to whom the man was speaking with the merchant. He was the guardsman who had spoken to Chaiki on their way in.

"Euzadis come in all the time," the guardsman said. "Bunch of Arazas came in today. Those were their kids you chased off."

"As long as they weren't Dazalero," the merchant barked, then laughed.

"All of Harkese's bloody nomads ought to be driven out," the guardsman spat. "Filthy barbarians ruined everything."

A tall man, board-chested, muscled to the point of grotesquerie, suddenly appeared out of the crowd. The merchant froze at the sight of Bakran. The guardsman turned in alarm, his hand to his sword.

Hazier hid farther around the corner, taking Makajia with him, his heart in his throat and his legs trembling. The one other time he had seen Bakran had been enough to etch the renegade's image in his mind forever, though he had only been Makajia's age at the time. A group of warriors surprised Hazier while he was hunting frogs along a creek bank. Bakran had spoken to him, and then abruptly ordered his men to seize and kill him. But Hazier had run away quickly, losing his pursuers in the woods. Perhaps Bakran had only meant to scare the boy; certainly, his men did not chase Hazier with as much resolve as if he had been an adult warrior. But if scaring Hazier was Bakran's intent, the renegade had done that well. The terror he felt in that encounter was still vivid in Hazier's memory

"So, Raymon," Bakran showed his teeth, smiling darkly. "You do not like my people. You do not have to live with them. You do not have to live at all."

"Neither do you," the guardsman replied. He was pale-faced, yet his voice was steady.

"You will fight?" Bakran sounded surprised. "I had not thought your kind possessed so much nerve." Bakran drew his sword, and the people nearby quickly backed away. Bakran let the guardsman move to attack before he moved. Even so, the fight ended almost immediately. Hazier glimpsed the guardsman fall to the ground as he and Makajia fled into an alley.

* * * *

"That is what I saw." Hazier finished his story, out of breath.

Chimquar clasped his shoulder. "You did well, Hazier. Very well."

Chaiki pressed thru thumb end of his fist against his teeth. "We should speak with that merchant."

Chimquar nodded. "My own thought. It might open an easier path to Bakran."

"I'll go with you," Maruic said. "Ibon and the others can pack up."

"No. This is for me alone."

"We are sword-brothers." Maruic's protest was quiet, taut.

"No," Chimquar repeated.

"If you will not take Maruic," Chaiki said, pausing to run his eyes across his companions' faces. "Then take me. I know this city."

"Take Chaiki or one of us," Moshin said. "This city is death. I can taste it. Do not go alone, war-leader."

Chimquar saw the same devotion and determination in each of their faces. Ibon and Moshin had been with her since her first plains battle. Chaiki grew up awed by her deeds against the dread creatures that descended the Katal Escarpment to prey upon his people. Chimquar avoided Maruic's eyes, feeling herself unable to cope with what she expected to find there. Her eyes returned to Chaiki, and his concern decided the matter for her.

"Chaiki and I will go," she said. But suddenly, the plan was made worthless.

"Bakran is coming!" Makajia said, racing into their midst. Chimquar and Maruic quickly backed into the late afternoon shadows between their stall and the adjacent one. Ibon moved near enough to hear them, but not enough to draw attention to them.

"How many with him, Ibon?" Chimquar hissed.

"Less than a dozen ... and a woman. A very beautiful woman," Ibon added.

Chimquar leaned forward for a look at the woman, risking discovery to see what she had hoped to see—Scheiharia.

Bakran held Scheiharia above the elbow, propelling her toward the Euzadi stall, fully aware that these men were (so far as he knew) Arazas, of the same tribe as the woman.

"Look, Scheiharia! I can give you whatever you want," the renegade said.

Scheiharia stared stonily ahead, refusing to look at the soft hides and furs. Bakran liked to taunt her by taking her to the Araza stalls each time some of her tribe came to the city to trade, which was becoming less frequent. "I want nothing, Bakran," she said, as she always had.

"You will look," Bakran snarled, forcing her face down into Ibon's furs.

"Diangar take you!" She screamed in futile rage when he let her up a little.

Bakran jerked her head back, casting her into the street. His men circled Scheiharia, laughing at her. She lay on the ground, glaring up at the renegade leader. "Chimquar will kill you," she spat out.

Bakran laughed. "So you wish."

"She does not have to wish any longer, Bakran." Chimquar could stand to watch no more. She stepped from between the stalls, her sword drawn. Her companions drew their blades and waited, giving Bakran's men the chance to make the first move. For a moment all eyes were on the Dazalero war-leader, and at that moment Scheiharia seized her long-awaited opportunity: She sprang to her feet, darting between two of Bakran's men. They made a vain attempt to grab her, but she was already past them, and running to Chimquar's side.

"Chimquar!" she exulted.

"You are safe now," said Chimquar. "Stay back and be protected." Chimquar directed her toward Ibon with a thrust

of her chin. "This warrior will watch over you while I make your wish come true."

People began to scatter as the battle joined. Merchants hurriedly gathered their wares and escaped. Two ranks of guardsmen halted at the far end of the marketplace, refusing to intervene. A large band of Bakran's warrior arrived, drawn by the sounds of the citizenry's flight. They started to join their comrades, but the guardsmen gestured warningly, halting them.

Chaiki's serious mien gave way to bright, eager laughter as if he were playing a game with his opponents. He backed into Ibon's narrow tables, pretended to stumble, and as his foes rushed in he hurled a handful of furs in their faces. His sword claimed two victims before the attackers could disentangle themselves.

Ibon fared worse, giving ground before the assailing warriors as he tried to shield Scheiharia and the children. Hazier snatched the reins of two horses, shoving one set at Scheiharia.

"Ride!" he screamed.

Scheiharia obeyed the boy, taking Makajia up onto her horse. She saw Ibon drop his sword, as he lurched into the sun-shelter. A warrior raised his blade above Ibon for a killing blow, but Scheiharia kicked her horse and rode into the attacker, toppling him and gaining Ibon a chance to regain his feet and his sword.

"Now get out of here!" Ibon shouted.

Hazier dug his heels into his mount with a shout for Scheiharia to follow, and then both horses raced off. Bakran's

men moved to block their escape from the area, but guardsmen intercepted the renegades and suppressed tempers flared. In the confusion Hazier, Makajia, and Scheiharia escaped, riding hard for the city gates.

Maruic saw the guardsmen and other renegades spill into the square. He withdrew his sword from his last vanquished opponent; no more remained nearby to fight, but the tide of the large battle rolled toward him. A few yards away, Chimquar traded sword strokes with Bakran, neither gaining an advantage over the other. The larger battle would soon reach them.

"Ibon! Moshin! Chaiki, mount and ride!" Maruic ordered.

"But yourself and Chimquar—" Chaiki protested.

"Ride!" The chieftain repeated his command. His warriors obeyed. Ibon cast a regretful look at the remaining goods lying on the table he was abandoning, then clapped his heels to his horse and dashed after his fellows.

Maruic moved to aid Chimquar. For all her ability, Bakran badly overmatched her in size and strength, and seemed to equal her in sword skill. He stole the offensive from her, driving her across the square. She could only prevent the slashes and thrusts from reaching her, but could not mount an offensive of her own. Bakran was faster than his size suggested.

Chimquar disengaged from him, retreating out of his reach. She jumped over a sprawled body. Bakran pursued her, laughing, confident that Chimquar no longer wished to fight. Maruic paused at the edge of a stall a short distance away; Chimquar always fought with her head as well as her

weapons, and Maruic recognized a ploy, though he did not understand her plan. Chimquar dropped her sword and seized the edge of Ibon's table. Bakran came toward her quickly. She hurled the lightweight structure at him, and he stepped back as the furs and hides settled over and around him. The hide top of the table impaled itself on his sword with a sudden jerk, which took the weapon from his hand. As Bakran reached down to recover his weapon, Chimquar brought the sun-shelter down on him. The sharp edge of the wooden frame cracked him hard on the head, staggering him.

Chimquar snatched up her sword and attacked while Bakran was entangled in the shelter. He tried to back up, stumbled into the tables of the next stalls, and crashed to earth. Chimquar brought her sword to rest lightly against the hollow of his throat. Bakran froze.

"What do you say before you die?" Chimquar asked him.

"Kill him and be done with it," Maruic growled, coming up with the horses. "We have little time."

"You have no time at all," said a chill voice. Maruic turned, lifting his sword once more. The Diangari, Bakran's ally, wore nothing to conceal the curling horns on his otherwise human-looking head. "Release my servant," he ordered Chimquar, ignoring the presence of Maruic.

A sudden wash of searing power staggered Chimquar. She reeled away from Bakran, almost losing her sword, and stumbled in Maruic's direction.

"Chimquar!" Maruic touched her shoulder, tried to steady her. She shoved him away.

"Get out of here," she gasped, struggling to pull herself together.

"Neither of you will leave," said the sorcerer.

Chimquar grasped her silver unicorn talisman, drawing strength from it. She stepped in front of Maruic. "Stay back. You can't fight him—I can."

"Neither of you can." The sorcerer sounded extremely confident. His hand swirled, and a fiery pattern of whorls sprang from it. Intense heat struck Chimquar, filling the air around her. The coil of fire grew, expanding toward her. Chimquar closed her eyes against the searing glare, reeling before this onslaught of sorcery.

Maruic staggered away, his arm thrown over his eyes. He drew himself up, forced himself to turn and look. Chimquar and the Diangari had become shadow-images within a fire-wrapped tunnel of solid light. It hurt his eyes, made his head throb violently to watch the tunnel, to strain to make out the form of his sword-brother, Chimquar. The tremendous power of the Diangari seemed to have sealed her fate, a fact that cut through the heart of the Euzadi chieftain. Sick with regret and anguish, Maruic went to his knees, appealing to all his savage gods and those that Chimquar worshipped, in the hope that at least one deity would heed his plea for her.

Around Maruic the sounds of battle cease, all fighting ended. Renegades and guardsmen alike stood silent, as though helpless while the tunnel of fire made night into day within the market square. Lesser sorcerers, those who had ruled Marique before the coming of the Diangari, and their disciples joined the soldiers and warriors in the Square,

watching with spell-protected eyes the battle between the demon-sorcerer and the Euzadi war-leader. No mere mortal should have been able to last this long, and they marveled at it.

* * * *

Sweat ran down Chimquar's face, soaked her shirt and jerkin until the garments hung limp, clinging to her skin and the bindings beneath which flattened her breasts against her body. Chimquar could feel the heat of the ground, rising through the soles of her boots. The Diangari's attack had lessened in severity, yet she still felt weakened and drained. Each time she opened her eyes the glare seemed to enter her brain through them, filling her head with fire. She searched her fading memory as her hand went out to the talisman and grasped it. "Aroana God," she whispered. Her baked lips cracked and stung as she spoke those words, struggling to call the smallest invocation to her mind.

The sorcerer's power lashed out more strongly again, punishing her from all sides. Chimquar lost her balance and fell to her knees.

"Sweet my god, aid me!" Chimquar screamed. A sudden rush of emotion broke the barrier between her heart and mind; the invocation both beseeching and demanding. "Aroana! Aid me, My God!"

Again, the Diangari's powers seared mind and body. A soundless scream escaped her throat as she collapsed on the floor, no longer able to remain conscious.

In Chimquar's hand the talisman pulsed with energy, sending waves of coolness swirling around her fingers. Its power had been kindled by the strength of her emotions. Voices she had not heard in many years spoke in Chimquar's head, repeating words from long ago.

"All magic is a focusing of power!" a woman's voice cried in exasperation, adding, "Tomyris Danae, you'll never understand the Ways of Power. It's a blessing you are to be ha'taren and not a priest."

"Remember, Tomyris," whispered another voice. "The ha'taren may be the true priests of our god, and not the bradae, who are merely given the title. Remember that, Tomyris."

Tomyris Danae. Tomyris Danae de Dovane. Tomyris! Tomyris. Her Sharani name sang, sighed, and screamed through her floating unfocused awareness. The Euzadi warrior, Chimquar, no longer moved, but inside her body Tomyris was alive....

Tomyris Danae of Shaurone had set out a few days before to flush out the remnants of a Waejontori stronghold. The Waejontori army had been devastated, its surviving members scattered by Kalestari's army at Sharatier. But the worst of the war was over, and the Sharani Saer'ajan and the Capitol had been saved.

Tomyris realized with a start that she was under attack from a source of Dark Power. She guessed that she must have passed out during the first of the assault, and had only just now regained her senses.

The Ways of Power were still fresh in her mind, her days in the Temple little more than six years in the past. She pulled the strands of her strength together, felt her grandma'aram's talisman pulsing in her hand, soothing. She focused on it, opening her eyes to stare at the tiny unicorn.

"Cool. Cool." She breathed the word, willing it over her. And in a few moments, the spreading coolness had ended the fiery pain.

Tomyris' sweat-dampened clothing chilled her, and she shivered. She got to her feet and raised her sword. The world was still a painful glare, but the glare was no longer blinding.

The demon approached her from the far end of the fire-tunnel, a slow-moving shadow outlined by the glare. She discerned his features as he neared, and she was startled to see he was not Waejontori. Only his curling horns betrayed as a demon. His eyes were black, not the amaranthine violet of the sa'necari. Tomyris decided that his form was a deception; an image conjured or altered by magic. She had faced too many of the minions of Darkness in the past years to feel fear: Her store of that emotion had been exhausted months ago.

The sorcerer Harkese eyed her warily, sensing that a change had come over Tomyris in her brief minutes of unconsciousness. He realized his foolish error in spending those minutes gloating to himself. The warrior he faced was more familiar with the Ways of Power than Harkese first believed. In fact, he now sensed a swelling of the Power in his enemy.

"What are you?" he asked her.

Tomyris frowned at the odd question. "I am what you see." She smiled; the priests would be surprised at how much of their teachings she had absorbed—how well she could use what she had learned. She closed her eyes, feeling the Power rise in response to her will. In her mind she beheld the image of Harkese, focused on it and peeled it back to see what lay beneath.

A long shriek cascaded down the tunnel. She opened her eyes to look in horror at a shambling man-thing. The sorcerer had a boar's tusked head—with horns—on a twisted human body.

"God!" Tomyris uttered the short oath as she backed away. She had expected to find a sa'necari beneath the illusion. Nothing she had experienced had prepared her for the sight of such a monstrous travesty of humanity. Its cruel aura became tangible to her, and a new wave of uncertainty made her retreat again. She could not think how to deal with it.

The Diangari laughed at her. "You dislike what you see?"
"What are you?"

"What you see," he returned, mocking her. He wove a quick spell. Heat roared down the tunnel as if a wind from the sun, throwing Tomyris Danae backwards. She landed on her back, still holding her sword and the talisman.

"God Defender!" she growled, rolling onto her side and getting to her feet. She stood while the searing wind tried to drive her back down and marshaled her strength to take a step into the wind. The heat-forced roared and resisted her. She bent forward, moving one step and then halting to draw herself together for the next step. The heat ate at her shield

of coldness, and her skin once again grew warm. The demon stood his ground, calling up more and more power, but the warrior continued to advance.

Harkese sensed a weakening in the fabric of his tunnel. The savage, wild wind was disrupting the structure. If he unleashed his full power there, he would bring the enclosure down around both of them; if he dismissed the tunnel back through the portals from which he summoned it in order to use all his powers to attack, that would give her time to reach him with her sword. Harkese withdrew to the far end of his tunnel, giving himself time to think.

Tomyris' talisman shield wavered in the onslaught of the wind. "Focus." She made a curse of the whispered word, forcing her strength and will into a narrow stream. The tunnel floor shuddered, and then heaved up beneath her feet. Tomyris staggered, fighting for balance.

Her concentration broken, her shield of will gave way. Heat enveloped her, swiftly draining what remained of her talisman-given protection.

"God. God. God," she framed a fragile chant. One foot in front of the other, she told herself. Don't think, just move. The wind never lessened. The tunnel seemed caught in an earthquake. Tomyris tried to detach her mind, to free herself of her awareness of the heat or ignore it. Her steps became shorter. She faltered, and then forced herself on.

Harkese pressed against the side of his tunnel. "What are you?" He demanded, apprehensive for the first time. No mortal should have lasted this long. He felt certain the warrior could not be Euzadi, for he knew that race too well. Even

their seers and shamans did not have such stamina or command of the Power. "God of demons! What are you?"

The glare increased until Tomyris felt as if she stared at the sun.

Harkese's power seemed to intensify, as he grew more fearful; he knew, though Tomyris did not, that his power would not last much longer.

Tomyris' eyes watered and hurt; spots seemed to dance before her, and her vision blurred. She could barely see Harkese, but the intensity in his voice convinced her that he actually did not know what she was. So she told him. "I'm Sharani." She stumbled as the tunnel gave a tremendous convulsion. "The gods sowed their seed among us," Tomyris halted, riding out another wave of hear-wind before moving close to the sorcerer and finishing her sentence, "so we could stand before the Waejontori and strike them down."

She halted again, at last standing before the Diangari with her sword raised to strike. "By the reckoning of many, our race is no longer human."

Harkese screamed, expending the last of his power as her sword struck. The tunnel convulsed and began to disintegrate, coming apart in hot, semi-liquid chunks.

She dodged aside, avoiding the scalding drips of ceiling, and slashed at the side of the tunnel, tearing the soft, mushy substance apart. Remnants of the substance clung to her sword. Tomyris plunged through the opening she had made in the melting tunnel into the darkness outside. She glanced over her shoulder at the tunnel. It lay upon the ground,

oozing and spreading across the square. Fire still danced across parts of its surface.

"Water!" Tomyris shouted. She could make out the forms of men in the darkness. "Throw water on it!"

Three sorcerers who watched from nearby conjured responses to her request. Clouds gathered overhead, darkened, and released rain. Water sizzled upon the strange material, and most of the water at first evaporated. The rain persisted, and in a few moments the fabric of the tunnel cooled, hardening. People came to feel the strange substance, which had become as smooth as glass.

The guardsmen drew in around the Euzadi chieftain Maruic and his war-leader. The renegade warriors faded into the streets, no longer having the heart to fight after seeing both of their leaders defeated. Maruic stood behind Chimquar, waiting for her to notice him.

Tomyris Danae turned at last and saw Maruic. At first she stared at him, puzzled. He seemed familiar. She stepped toward him, tried to form a question, and then fell abruptly to her knees, her face in her hands.

* * * *

"Chimquar," Maruic said as he dropped to one knee beside her. "Are you hurt?"

Chimquar raised her head, a wry, weary smile on her face. "No and yes. For a short time, I was someone I haven't be in more in nearly a score of years."

"I do not understand—" Maruic rested his hand on her shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Chimquar replied. She stood slowly, holding onto Maruic for support. "I need a drink—and not just water."

"What are you?" a nearby sorcerer asked.

"More than what you see and less than what you fear."

"And that stuff?" Maruic nodded toward the cooling substance.

"I'd say he learned to warp the Gates—the Portals of the World..." Chimquar inhaled deeply, then finished. "To summon what he had need of."

A guardsman brought hers and Maruic's horses, and they mounted.

"Lord," the guardsman addressed her, interrupting them. "Where did you learn such things?"

"You would never go there." Chimquar kicked her horse into a canter, people moving from her path. Beyond the gates Scheiharia and the others waited.

* * * *

Not until a cool night, many days from Marique, did Scheiharia break the silence, which had lain between herself and Chimquar since the night of her rescue. Chimquar stood near an outcropping of stone, staring at the stars and full moon.

"Chimquar," Scheiharia called her name, soft as a whisper. Chimquar shifted slightly, catching sight of the woman without turning. "You should be sleeping."

"I do not want to sleep alone."

"We have spoken of that before."

"A long time ago. It is different now."

"It isn't different." Chimquar faced Scheiharia. "There can never be any lasting bond between us." Scheiharia was beautiful; her two terrible months with Bakran had not changed that. Chimquar felt a sharp ache inside her chest, her throat tightening. She did love Scheiharia, after all, in a way she had not thought possible.

"You came for me...." Scheiharia's voice broke. "You knew the risks and came anyway...." Scheiharia choked—she had feared Chimquar would react this way. Scheiharia again fully sensed the unbreachable space lying between them, despite the war-leader's actions in freeing her. "How can you say this?"

You would hate me more to know the truth. "I cannot take any woman, Scheiharia."

"But you are Chimquar." Her words emerged bitter.

"Take your freedom and go."

"In disgrace to my tribe? To a brothel in some foreign city?" Scheiharia turned her back to Chimquar, her shoulders shaking with the sobs she struggled vainly to suppress.

"You could go west, Scheiharia. I have a friend who would write you a letter of introduction to the Mar'ajan of Rowanslea." Chimquar spoke evenly, holding back her urge to touch Scheiharia, to hold and comfort her.

"West?" Scheiharia gave a strangled laugh, a blend of incredulity and contempt. "What would I do there?" She turned again. Chimquar could see her tears glistening in the moonlight.

"You could be a great lady at that court. You're very beautiful."

"Beautiful? What use is it? Can it give me what I want?"

"Scheiharia...." Chimquar could not find her next words.

"Do these people in Rowanslea know you?" Scheiharia asked, making a valiant attempt to smile through her tears.

"Yes. But not by the same name as you."

"By what name?"

"I cannot tell you."

"I feared not." Scheiharia sniffed, tried again to smile.

"That is why my friend must write that letter. Tomyris Danae is better known and accepted than I."

"Tomyris? A woman?" Scheiharia shrieked. "Is she the reason you cannot have me?"

Chimquar shook her head. "A comrade in arms, nothing more."

"A Sharani?"

Chimquar nodded.

"If I go ... will you ever go ... will you—"

"Go west again? It's possible."

"Tell her to write that letter. I've nowhere else to go." Then she fled.

Maruic watched Scheiharia's departure, and then stepped from his place of concealment nearby. He had heard most of the womens' conversation. "She will be all right."

Chimquar pressed her hands across the back of her neck, stretching. She relaxed with a sigh, dropping her hands. "Can anything ... anyone be all right any more?"

"Tomyris is the name you had among your own people?"

"You heard that? How long have you been there?"

"Scheiharia was loud. I came soon after hearing her."

Chimquar nodded, moving away from the outcropping.

"Tomyris Danae, Mar'ajan of Dovane or Danae. It depends on the dialect."

"You still plan to leave us?" An edge entered his voice.

"I don't know," Chimquar replied with an emotionless honesty, turning toward him. "My heart and soul are tired, Maruic. I can't be both warrior and woman in these lands. In the end I'm nothing, neither a male-warrior nor a woman."

"Don't leave us, Chimquar." Maruic's words stumbled haltingly from his lips, strained by the severe blow it was to his pride to apologize and make an admission of wrong. "I was wrong to force myself upon you ... wrong to try to make an Euzadi woman of you ... I was wrong."

Surprised, Chimquar came closer, her eyes searching his face in the bright moonlight. "Maruic, it has never been easy for me, either, to be what I am and be satisfied with that."

"I broke faith with you. That will never happen again." Maruic vowed, adding. "Perhaps you can go home someday, Chimquar. I could speak to your Queen."

Chimquar shook her head sadly. "There are more than the Saer'ajan Zaren Asharen to be persuaded. They would never all listen."

"Will you stay with us?"

Chimquar grasped his arms. "I've nowhere else to go."

CONCERNING "LAST NIGHT OF THE TROLL"

This one was written between The Hawk that Hunted Lions and Wolves of Nakesht. It was published in Pandora #5 in 1980. Hazier is sixteen and they have just ridden up to a farmhouse. He has discovered girls and that puts both Hazier and Chimquar into an interesting position.

the last night of the troll

The farmstead spread its small distance of fenced garden and cornfields along the south edge of the dusty road. Two large dogs rushed out to challenge the two plainsmen leading their horses past the farm. The nomads ignored the dogs and their lack of fear daunted the beasts so that they slunk away, no longer eager to attack. A small well stood in the yard near a pleasant-looking white house. A dipper and bucket sat upon the edge of the well. The elder nomad turned aside to the well, disregarding the men watching from the fields.

Chimquar Takara of the Dazalero Euzadi let down the bucket into the water and brought it up full, setting it on the edge of the well. Her lips were dry and cracked, her throat full of dust. She raised the dipper to her lips and drank it all without pausing. She wiped her lips on the back of one scarred hand, then raked her sleeve across her sweaty grime-streaked forehead, brushing the edge of a newly healed scar. She was tall and leanly muscular, her skin was burned to a dark bronze by the sun and worn to leather by the winds of the Great Plains. She concealed her womanhood in men's raiment, her breasts bound flat against her lean body. Half a score of years past she had learned the necessity of concealing her amazon nature, paying for the lesson in blood while escaping with her life. The Lands of Men bore her race only hatred and suspicion, unwarranted and unyielding.

The tribes of the Euzadi were gathering for war with a major city-state, which lay, on the southern seacoast.

Chimquar and Hazier had been pushing their horses hard to rejoin their tribe, the Dazalero, for the southward march. That day they had pushed the beasts too hard, now they could not push them further without killing them.

"Chimquar," Hazier her young ward, indicated the stout farmer approaching from the fields with a hoe in hand. A woman emerged from the house as her man passed the windows. She dried her hands upon her apron, regarding the plainsmen silently. A younger face peered over her shoulder, edging around for a better view.

"Hola, Euzadi!" The farmer greeted them pleasantly. He halted, leaning on his hoe. "Passing through?"

"Yes," Chimquar said, curt and aloof. The Euzadi generously ignored these lands and their farmers in exchange for a portion of their crops each fall.

"You're welcome to all the water you need," the farmer said.

Hazier took him at his word and refilled the dipper several times, splashing some on his face.

Chimquar patted her horse's neck. "They'll not go much farther tonight."

The farmwife smiled at Hazier and then at Chimquar. "We have plenty of room, Jonathan. And so few travelers pass here anymore." She sighed. "I wonder what happens in the world."

"That would be a fortnight in the telling," Hazier grinned.

"There'll be no moon tonight, Papa," said a soft, feminine voice. The girl finally succeeded in edging past her stout mother. Hazier's eyes swept appreciatively over her. She

wasn't tall; her breasts were small, yet ample, pushing the front of her scoop-necked blouse out. Her face was full with a tiny chin, her lips generous, pouting, and her eyes shone like bright amber beads.

"It's expensive to take in travelers," Jonathan said. "Even for just one night. And with Damian visiting we might have to put them in the loft in the barn," he directed his words to his wife, yet spoke to Chimquar.

"There'll be no moon tonight," the girl pleaded, and then winced at her father's frown.

"We can pay for food and lodging for tonight," Chimquar said, placing her hand on the bulging pouch at her side.

The farmer's eyes narrowed shrewdly and Chimquar almost laughed at the unveiled greed, she could almost hear him counting coins. In the same thought, she disregarded the girl's emphasis upon the moonless night. It was a common superstition that bad things came out on moonless nights.

"You're welcome to our food and our loft," the farmer said, closing his hand as if he could already feel the coins in it. "I'm Jonathan Corngold. This is my wife, Martha. Daughter's Shawna." Then he indicated two of the three young men coming from the fields to join them. "My sons, Jeremy and Mark."

Jeremy was tall, blond with skin burned gold by the sun. He was older than Hazier. Mark was a boy of about thirteen, Chimquar guessed, though the boy was nearly as tall as his grown brother. The third young man was Jeremy's age, dark-haired and light-skinned.

"This is Damian," Jonathan said.

Damian saw Chimquar's eyes stray back to Shawna and stepped to the girl's side, his eyes meeting Chimquar's in a clear warning.

Chimquar's lips drew back from her teeth, grinning contempt. "Chimquar Takara doesn't steal young girls," she told him, caressing the intricate, lion-shaped hilt of her longsword, a weapon no other plainsman carried.

The farmers looked startled, an indecipherable mix of emotions rushing across their faces. Jonathan closed his gapping mouth, his eyes taking her in more carefully and saw there could be no disputing her identity. From the lion's black-maned pelt, which made her open-sided jerkin to the bronze shade of her dark skin and her misty shade of black hair, she fit the descriptions given Chimquar. Some said she was a half-breed, others that she had come from the kingdoms to the west.

"The devil's own," Shawna remarked, her eyes glinting with seductive mischief.

"I've been called that," Chimquar admitted, dryly.

Hazier laughed. "I appreciate what my mentor does not."

Damien scowled, focusing on the less challenging nomad.

Jonathan gave a wave and led everyone into his house.

The men settled into chairs in the cozy front room. The women returned to their efforts in the kitchen. Chimquar's eyes followed them, a quiet disappointment with a wisp of half-remembered faces passed through her. It had been too many years since she had spoke with her own sex as equals, met any that could be called such.

"Are you really Chimquar?" the boy, Mark, sat at her feet, looking at her with unconcealed hero-worship.

Chimquar was pulled from her musings and taken unawares by the boy. Her name was well known on the plains and in the cities of the coast, but it had never brought so flattering a reaction. "Yes, I am," she said and smiled at the boy.

Hazier laughed. "Noble warrior and adoring worshipper."

Chimquar scowled at him, but said nothing. Hazier was in a rare mood, one she much preferred to his usual touchiness and introverted quiet. Sometimes he reminded her of her sister, Anaria—Chimquar pushed those thoughts away. Anaria was Regent of Danae on behalf of Chimquar's daughter, since Chimquar had been forced into exile. Anaria had begged Chimquar to go only as far as the next kingdom, while she tried to resolve matters between her sister and the Saer'ajan; Chimquar had kept riding instead.

"Heard that war 'tween Tovante and Dakeshe's still going strong," Jonathan said to the warrior.

Chimquar nodded. "It will be over soon. The tribes have allied with Tovante."

Jonathan paled. "That puts us in the middle of things—tribes won't be coming through here, will they?"

"There's no fear of that," Hazier put in and drew the conversation away from his preoccupied mentor.

Chimquar did not listen to them; she knew everything that Hazier spoke of. She watched the girl, Shawna, edge out of the kitchen and move to Hazier. For a few minutes Shawna stood behind his chair, then settled on the floor beside him,

curling her legs under her. Hazier's eyes darted intermittently to Shawna, while pretending to ignore her as befitted a Euzadi man toward a woman.

Damien glared at Shawna, motioning her to join him. She shook her head and never moved.

Hazier was a fine-looking youth and the scene was not unfamiliar to Chimquar. Damien's unconcealed jealousy offered trouble, but nothing Hazier could not handle, for Chimquar knew she had trained her ward well. Everyone else seemed friendly, none disapproving of Shawna's actions. Still, Chimquar felt uneasy. Damien provoked wariness in her. She felt that there was something familiar about him, something that disturbed her and struck a chord of memory older than the young man himself.

"Shawna," Martha stood in the doorway. "I'll have some help, girl."

Shawna looked to her father, pleading with her eyes.

"Let girl be, Martha," Jonathan said. "She not hurting anything."

Damien's scowl deepened.

Martha marched into the room. "I'll have some help," she repeated and dragged Shawna to her feet. The girl started to argue and resist, but her mother pulled her along to the kitchen anyway. The men laughed and the conversation turned to women.

Chimquar caught snatches of it as she became increasingly drawn to Damian, trying to place the vague something about him, which disturbed her. Chimquar did not react to the derogatory remarks the men made about the women they

had known, the subject was too dangerous, too easy to draw unnecessary suspicion toward herself. Still such talk never ceased to rankle.

"There's a wench works in the old Falcon Tavern in Devontown where I sell my grain," Jonathan sketched an hourglass in the air.

"Shawna's not a bad piece," Hazier observed, letting his gaze go to the kitchen door.

"Don't speak of Shawna," Damien growled. No one heeded him, save Chimquar.

"Perhaps we should move on when our horses have rested," Chimquar said.

"Oh, but you can't!" Shawn appeared in the doorway, a long-handled spoon in her hand. "The troll comes out on moonless nights. It eats all the folks it catches on the road—" her voice faltered under her father's glare. "It don't bother the farmsteads," she added in a small voice.

"That's enough," Jonathan said severely, and Shawna retreated into the kitchen.

"A troll?" Chimquar asked. That seemed impossible. The trolls were creatures of the cool mountains, needing concealment from the light and heat of the sun. They were unable to withstand great amounts of heat and hence leery of fire. The plains were very hot in the summers, too hot for such a creature to survive and totally lacking in caves and shelter from the sun.

"That's what some says," Jonathan said crossly, clearly reticent. "Don't believe it myself."

"Perhaps we should move on," Chimquar repeated.

"No reason for that!" Martha exclaimed from the doorway. "Dinner's ready, and no one's suggested you leave, have they?"

"Of course not!" Jonathan exclaimed.

Chimquar feigned a smile. Her Sharani-born instincts were itching, saying sorcery, and her eyes followed Damian to the dining table.

Long after dinner was done and conversation had been exhausted, Hazier stood up and asked, "If someone would show me that loft?"

"I will," Shawna volunteered, taking up a candle. She led him out.

Chimquar saw hostility flare in Damien's eyes as Hazier and Shawna left. "You've some claim on the girl?"

"I've offered bride-price for her," Damien snapped.

"And I've not accepted your offer—yet," Jonathan pointed out. Damien shot him a hot glance, and Jonathan ignored it. "My Shawna's a pretty thing, isn't she, Euzadi?"

"Are you asking me to bid on her?" Chimquar's words carried a sharp, sarcastic edge.

"Might be," Jonathan conceded. "Your Hazier seems mighty interested."

"You'd sell Shawna to this nomad?" Damien burst out, incensed. "She'd be just another pretty in his harem."

"I don't have a harem," Chimquar's lips peeled back from her teeth. "And you'd best not start something you can't finish, farmer."

"I'm not afraid of you!" Damien spat. "Filth! You should never have come into these lands!" Color mounted in

Damien's cheeks as he spoke and his eyes gained an amaranthine cast, a color Chimquar remembered in nightmares.

"You'll all be sorry!" Damien cried and the sudden color in his eyes leaped out at the warrior more strongly.

Chimquar turned away, her head whirling, certain that she had seen wrong. Amaranthine violet, it chilled her even to recall the color of sa'necari eyes. Demon eyes. The Waejontori necromancers with all the powers and appetites of the undead added to tremendous magical abilities and their cohorts of banewitch warriors. No whites, irises, or pupils. The memories seared through her. They had nearly overrun her homeland in the first months of the Great War with their soldiers and conjured monsters. The terror of trying to hold them back with the tattered remnants of her cavalry units, struggling to control her own terror and that of her soldiers. Chimquar shuddered, momentarily lost in those images and Damien broke for the door. Chimquar sprang to her feet, drew her sword, and went after him. The gods had given her homeland the final victory, but some of the half-demons had escaped to spread their evil.

Angry shouts came from the barn as Chimquar stepped into the yard. The bright light in the barn illuminated the open space. Concern for Hazier roared in her head, mingling with hatred and loathing for the Waejontori, Damien. Chimquar held herself to a rapid walk; hard-learned Euzadi caution telling her not to bolt into the barn, for a rash move on her part could cost the lives of Hazier and herself. Her hand went around her neck, seeking and finding a slender chain to bring

a small talisman from beneath her shirt. The little, silver unicorn, the image of the God Aroana's sacred animal, had been blessed by a High Priest of the God—a woman of true power—generations back in Chimquar's family. The nearness of dark magic provoked an angry glow from the talisman. Then Shawna screamed and Chimquar broke into a run.

Light pulsed in glaring patterns of bright colors, attacking Chimquar's eyes. She halted a yard inside the barn, her eyes hurting, her head throbbing. Chimquar's eyes narrowed as she resisted the screaming urge to cover her eyes against the disorienting assault. With an effort, she made out three forms in the barn. Damien stood in the center of the lights, laughing at Hazier who crouched on his knees before him with his arms pressed against his eyes. Shawna huddled in the straw behind Hazier, clutching her dress to her naked body and screaming.

"Damien," Chimquar called his name.

The Waejontori noticed her and his eyes went to the talisman she wore. "An odd trinket for a Euzadi warrior." His eyes had completely given over to the demonic violet. "It wasn't wrought for the likes of you." Damien lifted his hands and the lights intensified.

Chimquar shrank into a crouch, drawing her sword-arm into her body until the pommel rested against her stomach.

"I thought to conclude my dealings here in peace and join my people in Tovante. Jonathan's greed has forced my hand. That's of no matter. Shawna is mine, even if I must rip her mind to shreds taking her. You cannot stop me." He paused, waiting for an answer which Chimquar did not give, then stepped back and jerked Shawna roughly to her feet. "You

will learn to enjoy being mate to a sa'necari," he hissed in Shawna's ear. Her screams broke off and she twisted frantically, struggling against him. Damien struck her hard across the face and she was still. Her brothers and father burst into the barn with torches and fell prey to the lights.

Fragments of half-remembered invocations overheard in Aroana's temple rose to Chimquar's lips, emerging in her native tongue. "Aroana Diona, widare me wye quatarl." The talisman grew brighter.

Damien stood over Hazer and drew a death-runed dagger from his belt. "You've sampled fruit from a forbidden tree."

"Aroana Defender!" Chimquar cried, "God, by your sword and shield!" The talisman flared, scorching away the shifting lights Damien had conjured.

The sa'necari staggered back, incredulous, taken completely unawares. "Half-breed," he gasped. "A bloody half-breed—"

Chimquar stalked after him. "Not half-breed," she said, scornful of his assumption. "My name is known to your kind."

Damien threw Shawna against the wall. She struck hard and crumpled to the ground unmoving. Her older brother, Jeremy, started for her.

"Stay back!" Chimquar ordered and Jonathan caught his son by the arm, drawing him away. Chimquar and Damian no longer spoke the common tongue as they circled in the barn; she spoke Sharani and he answered in Waejontori.

Hazier stirred, straightened and drew his sword, but made no move toward Damien. It was no longer his fight, and until

Chimquar had need of him he would not interfere; so had Chimquar taught him.

"My father fought your kind more than a score of years past. He taught me this," Damien went on conversationally, raising his arms high. His shape shimmered, began to shift. Chimquar charged him, trying to reach him before the change was complete. Damien eluded her, laughing. He grew and expanded, his skin turned a gray-green, tough and leathery. The troll Shawna had spoken of faced Chimquar, his eyes still the amaranthine violet of Damien's. The horse whinnied in terror, crowding back in their stalls. Damien came after Chimquar, his huge fists striking like hammers about her as she dodged and got in a heavy, two-handed blow to his right arm with her longsword. Damien roared in anger at the shallow scratch the sword left. His hands closed on a sturdy piece of wood forming the outer edge of a stall-frame and broke it off. Chimquar came in the moment before the frame broke, driving her sword at the troll's vitals with all of her strength and weight. Damien brought the broken length of wood back in an awkward swat, too close to his body for power and caught her before her blow landed. The makeshift club struck her short and sent her down in the straw. Damien stepped back for a clear swing. Chimquar rolled over, got her feet beneath her and lunged headlong between Damien's legs. She twisted around and got a blow to his buttocks, but her awkward position deprived her blow of its force. Damien came about quicker than she expected and she had no time to do more than interpose her sword as Damien lifted his club to strike.

Hazier's ululating war cry sounded behind the troll. He struck Damien in the side, throwing all of his weight and the momentum of his charge into the thrusting blow. Hazier brought blood. He kicked the troll to free his sword and ducked the swing of Damien's club as the troll came shrieking after him.

Jeremy and Mark ran along the edge of the barn and reached their sister. He handed his torch to Mark and lifted Shawna in his arms, thinking to escape before Damien saw them. He got halfway and the troll lumbered in his direction. Jeremy tried to run, lost his footing on a tiny rock and fell. Mark stood over his siblings, his torch held as a weapon. Chimquar swung around Damien and managed to reach them ahead of him. She sheathed her sword and grabbed Mark's torch. The boy resisted and Chimquar shouted, "Let go, you fool!"

Mark released the torch and ran, Jeremy gained his feet and ran with Shawna. Hazier charged Damien's back and Chimquar shouted in the nomad's language, "Get the horses!" Hazier wavered, then obeyed.

Damien neither wavered nor halted, as a true troll would have done. Chimquar wanted to laugh as she ducked to avoid a blow from Damien's club. The Waejontori was more foolish and inexperienced than she had guessed; he must have been born on the plains where only his troll form was needed to intimidate people who had never encountered trolls. He had put on the form without the knowledge and instincts that made trolls dangerous. Chimquar avoided a second blow and jabbed Damien's face with the torch. The troll stepped

backward and the warrior put the torch to the straw at his feet. The dry stuff bloomed with flame. Damien moved back, slapping at the flames with one hand, panicking as the heat assailed him. Chimquar ducked under the club and fired the remnant of clothing on Damien's troll form. He shrieked and dropped his club, slapping at himself. Chimquar put the torch to more straw. Hazier went past her with the horses. Damien whipped around, still shrieking and Jonathan appeared, torching everything around the troll. He had chosen between the cost of his barn and the danger to his family.

Chimquar backed off and gestured at Jonathan to run. The farmer readily obeyed. Chimquar lingered, watching the flames consume Damien. His troll form dwindled, giving way to his human form. He staggered toward her. She stepped aside and he fell. The roaring flames illumined his blacked face, his amaranthine eyes still terribly alive, but dying with his charred body. "Tovante will be the death of you," he hissed and died.

* * * *

Chimquar watched the flames consume the barn, standing beside the farmer and his family. They were grim, resigned to the loss. Chimquar played with end of the reins, thinking about Tovante where her tribe was journeying to aid in a war. That would be a dangerous journey, especially when she arrived. She looked from the barn to Jonathan. The farmer had been fair with her; fair to the man he took her for. She led her horse up and joined Jonathan. Their eyes met and an awkward silence reigned.

"It will be hard without a barn," Chimquar said.

"Yes," Jonathan agreed, turning his eyes back to the barn.
"But it was needful."

"The Euzadi do not pay for wares already tasted," Chimquar said, indicating Shawna with her chin. "I agreed to pay for lodging and I destroyed it," her words were soft, thoughtful. "In the land of my birth, I would be called to account for it." She reached into her pouch and brought out a handful of gemstones, extending her open palm to Jonathan. "Take three of them."

Jonathan looked incredulous, filled with doubt as to her earnestness. Chimquar smiled. "Go on. I owe for a barn."

Greed restored the color to Jonathan's face and he quickly chose the three largest stones—more wealth than he could earn in a lifetime. Chimquar returned the others to her pouch, mounted and started to ride away, then paused, "If this dalliance of my son's proves fruitful, you will send them to me?"

Shawna flushed.

"Yes," Jonathan answered. "I will do just that."

Then she rode away with Hazier following.

Concerning A String of Werewolves Teeth

This one was written in 1999 and, like Changeling Son, never submitted anywhere because I was still unaware of markets to submit to and wrote it because I wanted to. This is the opening to the final sequence that will lead Chimquar full circle and bring her eventually (in *Wolves of Nakesht*) back to her sister.

A STRING OF WEREWOLVES TEETH

"Euzadi."

The word rippled through the crowded caravansary like a hushed premonition of danger. All eyes turned toward the door. The fierce brightness of the grasslands sun framed the tall, raw-boned figure, throwing her features into shadow as she stood a moment, surveying the room. Chimquar the Lionhawk passed easily for male, clad in soft leather, fringed breeches, a knee length black caftan, and a black-maned lion-skin jerkin. A longsword rode at her hip and another at her left shoulder. A pair of stilettos rested in forearm sheaths and another pair waited for her touch in sides of her boots.

It was late summer: The Euzadi had come early to the Jeswan Coast. Normally, the nomads brought their herds south in late autumn. Although they had come each year, almost without exception, for years beyond counting, the citizenry of the city-states of the southern coast still greeted their first appearance of the season with apprehension. The Euzadi were the finest light cavalry on the Merezian continent. Roving bands of young bucks in their *wanderyars* sometimes raided and generally played hell with the caravan routes before settling into adult life, which in turn led to the Euzadis' largely undeserved reputation as troublemakers.

The Lionhawk's gaze swept the smoky, densely crowded common room of the largest caravansary in the seaport city of Tovante. She took the measure of the sweaty, dirt streaked caravan guards in wide-legged trousers tied at the ankles and

stuffed into scuffed boots. Servants, drivers, and bearers lounged on the long smoke stained benches.

"Chimquar," said a caravan guard, recognizing the rangy figure even in the shadows with the bright sunlight at the warrior's back. All eyes turned away rather than attract the notice of the unpredictable nomad war-leader as she stepped farther into the smoky interior.

The merchants and others of high rank, the moneyed aristocracy of the trade routes in silken robes, also turned from their business to glance at the newcomer, then turned away without drawing her gaze in return. "Chimquar...." Several of them murmured. They settled more deeply into their soft, highly cushioned sofas and chairs around their tables on the high, mahogany banistered balcony above the rabble.

Chimquar the Lionhawk, the half-breed Sharani bastard of the Dazalero Euzadi's high shaman, had risen to war-leader of that Euzadi tribe in the less than seven years since her arrival among her father's people. Her face held no softness; it was gaunt with a muted aquiline nose, squarish jaw, and a blunt chin. At six foot three, average height for a Sharani, she stood six inches taller than the average Euzadi. She was dark-skinned and black-haired, like the Euzadi she lived among, with piercing gray eyes that seemed ready to shred a man's soul if he held them too long uninvited. A long scar from a knife fight more than five years earlier crossed her cheek.

It was Chimquar's influence that brought the nomads early with their herds to their southern ranges. She had word that

the Nakesht, the only race powerful enough to challenge the Euzadi for domination of the Great Plains, were on the move. Better to move early and reach the southern grazing, than chance being blocked from reaching them with winter setting in.

The sprawling caravansary had changed little in the two years since she had last visited it. She settled down at one of the small rectangular tables along the west wall reserved for people of middle rank. No one would have dared to question her even had she taken a seat among the merchants.

* * * *

Jon Dawn, the proprietor, had owned the caravansary for less than six months, having inherited it from a distant relative whom he had never met. He knew very little about the wealthy city-states of the Jeswan Coast. A dark, very small man, barely five feet tall with an nervously eager and obsequious manner, he moved among his wealthier customers with almost excessive concern for their needs. When all attention turned to the door, Jon's gaze naturally followed. He had never seen a Euzadi before, but he had heard much and, from the tales, would not have been surprised if the nomad had insisted on the best seat in the house. He sensed from the crowds' reaction that Chimquar was more than the usual nomad, someone very important. He went quickly down the curling stairs to her table.

"What can I.... "He stopped, staring hard into Chimquar's face, his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "Tomy—
"

Chimquar's glare stopped him, "I don't know what you're doing here, Jon Dawn," she growled low; her voice, hoarsened in childhood by whooping cough, sounded harsh and raspy. "My name is Chimquar. Means Lionhawk. I'm the son of the High Shaman of the Majios Clan."

Jon Dawn wiped his hands nervously on his apron. "Own the place. Inherited it." He stared at her, obviously wondering briefly what game she was playing, passing herself off as male.

Chimquar recognized the question in his eyes, cursing softly as she slid into an obscure Sharani dialect. "Use your eyes," she growled. "What life is there for women in these lands? To be different is to die meaninglessly ... there is no honor in such a death."

Jon Dawn swallowed nervously, nodding. "I know."

Chimquar said nothing, merely eyed him closely, wondering what in Haven's name could make an assassin guild's local chieftain so shaken. She considered it more likely that he had inherited the place through a change in command rather than a relative.

"Look, I need to talk to you, Lionhawk," he said wiping his hands again, practically wringing the apron. "Everything's on the house. Just stay right here while I get things settled in the kitchen. Then I'll show you to one of our private conference rooms."

"I'm not sure...." Chimquar's sharp eyes traveled over him appraisingly.

"Please, please, for old times sakes, I'm beggin' you, Chimquar. I'm in bad trouble."

"Okay, Jon," Chimquar shrugged, "I'll stay."

* * * *

Chimquar followed Jon upstairs. He reserved the top floor for his own uses. His family lived there. His most private offices, from which his operatives frequently entered and left through a trap door in the roof, were at the north end, opposite his living quarters. Jon's family would be guild also, Chimquar suspected. The Old Man of the Mountain discouraged marrying outside the guild for operatives like Jon, working so far from Creeya. She settled into a chair at the table.

Jon slid his diminutive frame into a chair across from her, rising slightly to lean on his elbows and look more closely into her eyes. "We're a long way from home, Chimquar," he said.

"I'm not here to talk about home," Chimquar answered with scathing bitterness, "I'm in exile, remember?"

Jon sighed and nodded sadly, "That was one hell of a mess. You know Reynan's of age now. She's the *Mar'ajan* of Dovane now."

Chimquar tensed at her daughter's name, looking away from him, letting silence yawn between them like an impassable chasm. The lines of her sun battered face tightened. She felt as if rocks were gathering in her stomach and throat. Her daughter had been an infant when Chimquar rode into exile. At least the *Saer'ajan*, the Sharani Queen, Zaren Asharen had kept her word in that much: Reynan had been allowed to inherit. She just stared at him for a while, and then asked tersely. "What is it you want of me?"

Jon winced from the fierce gaze she turned on him. She had changed a lot in nearly fifteen years of exile. Uncertainty crept into his voice as he forced the words out. "It's my daughter ... I need you to rescue her."

"Send some of your own people. I'm no longer *ha'taren* to go racing to the rescue," Chimquar said savagely. "The paladins of Aroana have no place in their ranks for such as me." A memory flashed through her of the high priest, Sonden, his ankle-length black hair caught in silver clips, shattering her Aroanan rune sword with a word, and then tossing the pieces at her feet. At first she had felt sickened by the humiliation. Then her anger rose and she spit in his face before stalking out of the courtyard. Several *bradae*, the warrior priests, male and female, wanted to see her beaten for it. But Sonden forbade them: Chimquar knew he understood her actions, even if he could not condone them. Defiant to the last, Chimquar carried her dead mother's Aroanan rune sword at her shoulder although she had never drawn it save to care for it.

"That's just it, I can't," Jon gestured helplessly. "I made a mistake."

Chimquar was silent a long time, staring into Jon's eyes. She saw the desperation there, mixed with grief and helplessness. It was so unlike the Jon Dawn she had known during the Great War. Slowly her edges softened. She had lost five of her six sisters and her *ma'aram*, bloodmother, in the Great War with Waejontor. Then her armies tore Waejontor to shreds, took the war back to them with a vengeance bordering on madness. When she brought that

madness of anger home, it forced the Sharani ruler to banish her in the hopes it would bring her back to her senses. She had killed an unarmed woman during a moment of anger.

Seeing him now, as desperate as she had been so many years ago, brought back memories. A tiny, long repressed core of compassion flickered to life. She had tried so hard to stop feeling anything at all, good or bad. Her fingers tightened into fists.

Jon drew a large oval locket from beneath his shirt, gold with a filigree pattern, and slid it across the table. Chimquar thumbed the catch. The locket opened to reveal an exquisite, artfully painted miniature. The girl in the portrait stared up at Chimquar with large gray eyes so like her daughter's that it lanced her heart to look at it. Her expression tightened again as she tried to swallow back her feelings, grimly resisting the approach of tears that had gone unshed for too many years.

Jon shrank into his chair, hope fading from his face.

A weary sigh slipped from her. "Tell me what happened," Chimquar said at last and Jon's shoulders lifted a bit, his head came up. He saw the softening in her eyes, saw hope there for him.

"I thought it was just routine. A call was put out for a red raven. So I sent one of my best. Next day I get a box—with his head in it. And a note. Says this guy wants to meet with me, just me ... and that he'd taken Eloria as insurance. We searched everywhere. She's only six, Chimquar. So small. When we couldn't find her, I kept the meeting." Jon's voice had begun to shake. "So there he was ... big as life. Waejontori ... *necari*."

Chimquar's mouth tightened and her eyes went hard. "You're certain?" She remembered the necari from the War, the slain ones, and death knights of Bellocar Lord of Demons, the shock troops of the Waejontori army that nearly overran her homeland. A soul-deep chill enveloped her and a shiver ran from her shoulders to her feet. Then a flame of hatred and anger answered the chill, rising from the core of her being to burn it away. For a moment she stood again in the smoking ruins of northern cities, staring into the mass graves of Sharani innocents slain by the Waejontori. She knew then that she could not refuse Jon's request. She could not let the necari take another victim, especially the child of a friend.

"I seen enough of them when we marched into Waejontor," Jon said, his voice going as hard as the warrior's. "Even if I dared, I got no one who could take that one out."

"What does he want?"

"A string of werewolves teeth. These aren't your ordinary weres. They don't turn human when you kill them and they aren't lycans either. Their natural form—it's something between..."

"Man-wolves. Nakesht. You're caught between two evils, old friend," she said, a soft, sad familiarity entering her voice. "But surely you could take the Nakesht out."

"No. I send in a cadre and this necari will know beyond doubt that I'm the Assassin's Guild chieftain for this region. He'll have me—and the guild—under his thumb. Then the guild will decide I'm expendable. If the necari don't get me, the guild will."

Chimquar went silent again for a time. She remembered Jon Dawn and his small squad of Coronaries mercenaries who had appeared out of nowhere to outflank the main force of the Waejontori holding Chimquar's advance guard pinned down in a narrow ravine. But they had not been mercenaries: it turned out later that the Old Man of the Mountain, the paladin king of the Assassin's Guild, had taken a hand in the war also, fearing the Waejontori would turn east in his direction if Shaurone fell. That fact was known to only a handful of Sharani nobles, among them Chimquar.

"Please, for old time's sake...."

Chimquar put her large hands over his small ones. "For old time's sake. My god willing, I'll bring her safely back to you."

* * * *

The Lionhawk walked the tiled rooftops of Tovante by night with the ease of a cat. *Necari, necari, necari*. The word echoed like drumbeats in her mind. The war with Waejontor had taught her to hate with a soul deep ferocity so intense that it terrified her when she let herself feel it. Years ago it could overwhelm her; drive her into berserk bloody rages. The force of her hatred and anger never went away. She just put a bit in its mouth and pulled it in by its head as she would a savage stallion. Now she had it, rather than *it* having her—at least most of the time.

Having learned to hate with such savagery, adding the Nakesht into the bloody whirlpool at the bottom of her soul had been simple. The Nakesht, the man-wolves, preyed upon the Euzadi tribes and had nearly driven them from their

beloved plains a decade ago before Chimquar's arrival. In just four years the Lionhawk's military brilliance, which had conquered Waejontor, had forced the Nakesht into defensive positions. But it was a tenuous thing still. Especially if they were trying to subvert the cities of the coast and bring them into the struggle. It could turn ugly for those tribes who had brought their herds down to the southern ranges already on her insistence. This was not just about helping an old friend: it was keeping faith with those who depended on her.

She carried a large empty leather sack slung about her shoulders like a cloak. War paint turned her face into a demoniac mask; she had stripped down to her caftan, leaving her lion-skin jerkin with Jon Dawn. The Nakesht did not need to know which Euzadi broke in on them. She planned to take the Nakesht's heads to the caravansary; a safer location to remove the teeth. She knew never to underestimate a necari's power: he would sense whether she carried the teeth or not.

According to Jon Dawn, there would be only five Nakesht in the townhouse; the rest would be human servants who probably did not suspect the true nature of their employers.

She slid around the chimney on the west side, secured a rope to it, then went over the edge and quietly rappelled down the thick walled, stone building. Her toes found small crevices in the stonework to control her descent. A moss-covered iron trellis fanned out beside and beneath her. The moss was browning in the late summer heat, but would revive with each rain that swept in off the ocean. She heard voices rising as she stepped onto the trellis and climbed down

toward a brightly lit window. The lace curtains fluttered in the slight night breeze.

The necari stood in the middle of the room. A soul-crystal, hung from his neck. Soul-crystals were not worn for adornment. They were objects of power containing the soul or souls of the necari's victims, used in turn to create objects of great and deadly power such as the Waejontori bane-blades which could kill with a scratch and whose victims always rose as the necari's undead slaves. She would have to be very careful of that.

The necari stood nearly Chimquar's height, perhaps an inch shorter, long black hair oiled and caught at his neck in a multitude of slender braids. His eyes were amaranth and without whites, iris or pupil, like his living counterparts the *sa'necari*. The necari stood near the window, holding court with six shaggy muzzled Nakesht as his courtiers.

By his expression, Chimquar could see that he savored each word as he spoke it. A chill shivered over her as she listened to him explaining his plans to trap Jon Dawn and use his guild's resources to force the city-states into an alliance against the Euzadi.

Shorter than the necari by the span of a hand and a half, the Nakesht occupied two delicately carved claw-legged chairs. They could shift from man to wolf at will, but their true form lay in between. They clearly did not fear discovery, for they wore their natural forms. Their claws, thick facial and body hair, and narrow dog-like muzzles caused many to mistake them for *wiros*, weres. But they were not. The Nakesht were a holdover, a remnant of a race that had

destroyed nearly all life on that world of Davera. More than seven millennia past, when the Elder Gods reclaimed Davera, they pushed the surviving Nakesht into the Katal and raised a sheer escarpment to hold them in. But eventually some found a way out.

Anger pulsed through her veins, beginning its inexorable rise to rage. Chimquar struggled to think clearly. Now she wondered if it had been a mistake to offer Jon her help: The madness she mistakenly thought she could control was swirling in the pit of her stomach, flashing with the memories of friends and family slain by the necari and their cohorts, overlaid by those she had loved and lost since coming among the Euzadi. Worse, she had brought her new people into danger when she thought she was taking them from its reach. Chimquar drew a deep breath and held it, then let it out slowly. She could not let the necari take another victim. She could not let the Nakesht threaten their winter grazing. The pounding in her temples lessened. She repeated the breathing exercise and the swirling slowed. She had to control herself, she had to plan, to consider.

Then she saw the small motionless form of a child laying on a sofa on the far side of the room, looking so much like she imagined Reynan at that age that withheld tears again threatened the edges of her eyes.

Reynan, Reynan, Reynan. What do you look like now? Did you need me when I was no longer there for you? Dear My God, what did my actions cost her in shame and loss? I could, at least, have written ... could have heard from her ... a thousand ways to say 'forgive me, I love you, child.'

One small tear escaped to blur her vision and through its glistening veil she saw, with an inner eye she had believed closed forever, a thin, blood red line running from the necari's crystal to the child's heart. Suddenly she understood: the crystal held the girl's soul. The child's her life essences were draining into the crystal. Chimquar could tell by the paleness of the child's face that Jon's daughter was swiftly running out of time and life. The Lionhawk had no armor against the horror of seeing butchered children during the war. She ached with grief at the fate of the children; the terrible images of spitted infants and tortured children left in the wake of the Waejontori invasion of her homeland swept through her, awakened by the sight of the necari and the imminent fate of Jon's child. Emotions too hot and strong to be controlled, rising too swiftly to be caught, in a vicious crescendo: In a span of seconds grief became anger became blind rage became madness. The madness swept through her, stormed the bastions of her self-control, and took her consciousness by siege and her ability to think rationally died.

Chimquar gave a wordless growl as she caught the edge of the window frame and swung through the window. Her feet struck the necari full in the chest. He fell hard with Chimquar atop him. She drew her sword as she wrenched the crystal from his neck. With the tremendous strength of the undead, he threw her off before she could strike.

She drew the sword at her hip, slashing one across the neck and chest. Nearby another was getting to his feet when she took him in the throat. A sharp pain in her side told her had been cut, but so fierce was the grip of blind rage that she

noticed it little more than she would a scratch. She spun, saw two blades descending on her. Chimquar somersaulted onto the low table behind her, knocking an ornate blue frosted glass oil lamp onto the floor. The lamp shattered, splashing oil and fire onto the two charging her. They screamed, dropped their swords, and staggered back beating at the flames running up their clothes. The last pair fled the room, screaming for servants.

Now only the necari remained. But there would soon be others. The undead witch-warrior took two steps back, regarding her thoughtfully. "I don't know how that little bastard managed to enlist a Euzadi. It is of little consequence. You die now."

The rage drained from her before his calm gaze. "No. You die."

He cocked his head slightly at some turn of her accent, and then drew his longsword, a black blade covered in blood red runes and with his other hand he began to sketch a spell.

Chimquar whispered a plea of forgiveness to her God, Aroana, She of the Keen Blade, and pulled her mother's sword with her left hand. The Aroanan rune on the blade blazed as it only did in the hands of a ha'taren faced with darkest evil.

"Burning Hells! Sharani!" He retreated a handful of steps.

"I've killed many of your kind, butcher!"

"As I yours!" He snarled, lunging at her with his blade while a small orange globe appeared in his spell hand.

Chimquar, moving faster than seemed humanly possible, caught his blade between her own, forced his hand up, and

kicked him hard in the solar plexus. He struck the wall and slid down. The globe of power in his spell hand disappeared. She leaped onto him, dropping her longsword to grab the crystal and, with a snap, broke the slender chain. Chimquar dropped it down the front of her under tunic and retrieved her sword. Then she faced him again with two blades.

"Nooooo!" The necari shrieked, his left hand going to his chest where the crystal had rested. "My God damn you!" He reached into a pocket of his robes, bringing out a vial of brownish liquid.

"You're mad!" Chimquar screamed, recognizing the substance as Iradrim Fire, a dwarven mixed explosive.

"No, but you're dead."

He threw the vial at the Lionhawk's feet, but she was already moving. She raced across the room and threw herself atop Eloria. The room exploded in flames and flying shards of wood, brick, and glass. Shrapnel cut her back and the backs of her arms and legs to ribbons. She rolled onto her side, fighting the pain. Chimquar snatched up her swords, sheathing them. Then she jerked down a tapestry and wrapped Eloria in it. They went out the window.

* * * *

Chimquar staggered from the burning mansion with the child draped over her shoulder. Twice she fell to her knees, forced herself up, and moved on. Eloria never stirred or reacted to the bumps and screams.

As she reached the alley, Jon Dawn and four of his operatives appeared. "Eloria!" Jon cried as he took his

unmoving child from Chimquar. "What is wrong with her?" It was clear the child was alive, but totally unresponsive.

Chimquar pulled the crystal from her pouch, pressing it into Jon's hands. "Soul crystal, get a priest." She stepped away, felt the darkness surging up at her inexorably. She did not realize she was falling until her face struck the cobblestones. Instantly one of Jon's operatives dropped to her side. As he lifted and turned her, a muted curse hissed from his lips, "Hell's dungeons! What's not cut is burnt. I think he's dying!"

Jon gave Eloria over to Arusha and knelt beside his wounded friend. "Lionhawk...."

"Tell Reynan...."

"Tell her yourself!" Jon cut her off sharply. "You don't die on me, you hear? You got hurt worse in the war!"

Chimquar did not hear him; she had slipped down into the darkness.

* * * *

Twenty-odd Euzadi dominated the common room of Jon's caravansary, mostly young warriors with a sprinkling of healing mages and shaman. The gathering of tribesmyn had started out as two who arrived looking from their war-leader a couple of days after Jon got her back to her rooms. They greeted the news of her injuries with veiled threats to burn down the city, but had quieted after seeing her and being shown the necklace of teeth hanging from the bedpost.

It would be weeks before she would be up and about much. By rights she should probably have died. As she sat in

In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk
by Janrae Frank

bed writing letters to Reynan, carefully editing her adventures so that her daughter could not find her by them but filling them with the warmth and love and caring she would never be able to give her, Chimquar felt very glad to be alive. Especially when Eloria came and sat beside her, asking for a story.

CONCERNING "THE RUINED TOWER"

'The Ruined Tower' was written when I was 23. It appeared as a chapbook from Atalanta Press, which was created by Jessica Amanda Salmonson. I gave the story away taking payment in copies. That was partly because her zine was the only entry under fantasy in the Writer's Digest. I had not yet learned about Locus and other sources of market gossip. It was the first one 'sold' and the third one to come out. As with "A String of Werewolves' Teeth", you can clearly see that Tomyris Danae de Dovane has finally become the character called "Chimquar the Lionhawk" and matured into the person most people who remember my work think of when they ask me "where's the rest of the stories."

The ruined tower

It was the season for following the herds and trading with the cities along the eastern part of the continent of Merezia. The long, hot summer days when the semi-nomadic Euzadi tribes spread out from their hidden cities near the Katal-escarpment (where the Hellgod was imprisoned) to herd, hunt, trade, and raid. Chimquar drew rein on a hill overlooking the city-state of Marleone. Her young wards had ridden ahead to trade. Hazier was seventeen and his young sister almost a woman—that made Chimquar feel the length of her years acutely. She had been among the nomads, concealing her sex in men's raiment, passing for a warrior of those dark-skinned tribesmyn. The violent temper, which had sent her far from her Sharani homeland, had begun to mellow, and increasingly her thoughts turned to her distant homeland and no longer to the open plains.

Her restive stallion reared, protesting her restraining hand. Chimquar brought him down automatically; too intent on the city and the people passing through its rune-adorned gates to be distracted by her mounts antics. She considered the mix of people in the long, fractured line of travelers wending their way across the rolling landscape to those gates; she judged the city's mood by their numbers, for the volatile followers of Badonth, god of aggressive war and vengeance, made her uneasy.

She cantered down the line of travelers, merchants, and pilgrims, enjoying the wide path they gave her. All of them

moved quickly away from her; some continued their flight to put a great distance between themselves and the Euzadi warrior. Chimquar swept into the city, drawing only passing interest from the gate-guards on the battlements, who had seen too many kinds of folk pass that day.

Chimquar found Hazier and Makajia's horses waiting in the Red Lion's stable and told the inn's stable boy to place her mount beside those of her young wards. The boy's eyes traveled from the black mane of her lionskin-jerkin to the silvery-hilted length of Sharani longsword at her side. The sword was consecrated steel with the runes of her god, Aroana, upon the hilt and blade: it was good no one this far from her homeland could read them. It was her mother's sword. Her own had been broken by the high-priest Sonden after she beat an unarmed woman to death in a fit of rage.

The boy had heard many tales of the Euzadi every day, working in the stables. They rarely entered the Cities of the Eastern Coast, preferring to do most of their trading to the south—especially not warriors. Chimquar laughed at him and he winced.

All manner of myn filled the Red Lion's smoky, ill-lit common room. She scanned the faces from the doorway, seeking the young pair. Eyes turned to discern her nature, but those that knew the Euzadi tribesmyn did not stare. She glided through the crowded room, making for a table in the farthest corner where she could have the wall to her back. Two fae stood behind a Casrain merchant while he argued with a Marleonan buyer, their pale, pale skin shimmered faintly in the lamplight. Their almond eyes narrowed to slits,

following Chimquar as she passed. The blond braids and beards of the Ocealayan Sea Hawks, kandoyarin from the City of the Five Captains, stood out conspicuously. They roared a bawdy chantey, grabbing at the serving wenches. Scattered Marleonian soldiers betrayed their disquiet in that den of foreigners by their intense in their hands and tankards. Their discomfiture amused Chimquar; they were too good at discomfiting others.

Two gray-clad Sisters of Novra, a minor deity, took their supper never the table Chimquar had chosen. A little farther from the warrior's table, a gypsy kept company with a Creeyan eagle-rider. The gypsy's gaze followed Chimquar, studying her boldly. Chimquar ignored the gypsy; the woman clearly sought male company with a fuller pouch than that of the Eagle-rider.

Chimquar drank slowly, watching the patrons come and go. Merchants completed their business, the Marleone soldiers departed to their evening duties, and some men got drunk enough to go home. Finally only Chimquar, the gypsy, and the Eagle-Rider remained of those who had seen Chimquar's arrival. It began to trouble her that Hazier and Makajia had not yet come. Even had Makajia dragged her doting brother on another round of the marketplace—with the Euzadi philosophy of early arrivals, it could not have kept them so long; and the Euzadi were seldom troubled because they could not be easily taken by the more civilized city soldiers. The Sharani impulse for immediate action took her halfway from her chair before the Euzadi teachings caught her and she decided to wait; it was better that she not run blindly into

something that might be waiting for her. Chimquar had many enemies since she came to the plains and found her sire, Azkani the High Seer.

A serving wench, smelling loudly of cheap perfume, brought another tankard of beer. Chimquar tossed her a coin. Then Chimquar allowed her gaze to be drawn to the gypsy. A scarf held back her shiny black hair; her shawl and skirt were of an uncommon shade of mandarin red. The brightness of her garb continued to draw Chimquar's gaze despite her efforts to the contrary. The last time Chimquar's eyes returned, she encountered the gypsy's umber eyes. The woman's full lips framed a silent question that melted into a smile such as aroused myn, and Chimquar scowled. The woman was trouble. The Eagle-Rider intercepted the glances, half-rising from his chair. The gypsy pulled him back with soft words, and they laughed.

Chimquar downed the tankard, gesturing at the taverner for more of the weak brew. He caught a girl by the arm, sending her scurrying. The speed of her arrival with a fresh tankard did little to take the edge off Chimquar's irritation at having almost invited trouble she did not need. She could do no good in jail for brawling, nor risk the discovery of her true nature; for many lands bore an intense enmity for her amazon race, an unreasoning hatred of what they failed to understand.

Then her irritation changed, replaced by a growing restlessness and disquiet. Being ha'taren, paladin of Aroana, she felt the icy-wind of a searching presence swirl into the room. Her left hand caressed the hilt of her sword as she tried

to discern its nature, fighting the growing urge to bolt, which went against both her pride and the Euzadi teachings.

Around her, the voices never wavered; their noises continued loud in ignorance. Tales of Waejontori adepts—the sa'necari necromancers who had learned to take on the powers and appetites of the undead while still living—that had escaped Shaurone's Great War nearly fifteen years ago pricked the edges of her mind. But sa'necari in a Badonthian city seemed unlikely. She glanced at the ceiling beams, pushing from her table. The servant of some god, Chimquar decided abruptly, had her wards! She knew she was right, and that only added to the sudden knotting of her insides, for she had fought the servants of many different divines—minions of the hellgods. The slight movement of the other chair startled her and a slender dagger appeared in her hand.

"Euzadi." The gypsy seated herself. "You are the one the young girl and her brother were waiting for?"

"Perhaps," Chimquar answered cautiously, glancing around for the Eagle-Rider. She still felt the presence and that made her uneasy. "Why?"

"They are not in Marleone. I can take you to them." She brushed a wisp of hair from her finely sculpted face.

"Hazier would never trust a Rom—a gypsy," Chimquar said unpleasantly. Her words formed clumsily for she seldom used the common speech, living among the tribes for the past years. "The Euzadi know better."

"He could do naught else." The gypsy let her words trail off.

"What are you trying for, gypsy?" Chimquar bent over the table. "Have your folk got them? Or do you want me to follow you out where half-a-dozen can relieve me of my purse?"

The gypsy's lips drew tight; her eyes flashed with the angry hauteur of one ill-accustomed to insults. "I am trying to help you. If I meant otherwise, I would name that Sharani crest on your finger. Yes, I have seen it before. On a noble's hand. She is looking for you, Tomyris Danae. You look much like her, save that your sister favors one leg."

Chimquar stiffened. This woman would not know that unless she had actually met her sister. "Anaria," she said softly, before she thought. For a moment the past came down around her like a great smothering cloak blown over her head. None of the final quarrel had been Anaria's doing. The Saer'ajan banished Chimquar with an admonition to wait in Doronar, the neighboring kingdom, while she sorted matters out. In a moment of rage Chimquar had slain an unarmed woman—a noble, one of her barons. Anaria had been made regent for Chimquar's six-month-old daughter, Reynan. *She's grown now ... if she's not dead. The Saer'ajan told me to wait. You begged me to wait ... to be patient. But I didn't.*

She sat back, forcing the questions, doubts, and grief aside. "Tomyris Danae is best forgotten. Chimquar of the Dazalero Euzadi no longer remembers her." She picked up the dagger from the table, fingering it suggestively. "You could do more harm alive than dead."

"You have no intentions," replied the gypsy saucily. "You know that would be a fool's move."

The swirling presence, stinking of dark powers, gathered itself, descending suddenly. The weight of it was like a fallen ceiling. Chimquar gripped the edge of the table, pressing against it with every muscle twisted taut. If any noticed they might have said the pair were drunk or sick. The gypsy closed her eyes, her lips moving in soundless words. The color drained from her olive face. She formed the last word and the presence vanished.

"That has them?" Chimquar's words came out sharp and brittle.

The gypsy nodded faintly, her breath coming easier. "Sa'necari. And he is aware of us. We must hurry."

Sa'necari! Chimquar had torn through their lands like an autumn gale after turning back their invasion of Shaurone. Two-thirds of Waejontor fell to her before a truce was declared. *Sa'necari!* She no longer felt that chill, numbing wall around her; that deadening of feelings in which only rage broke through at the mention of them. Her anger was ice and calculating clarity.

"Hold." Chimquar caught her arm, rising with her. "I will not walk blindly into something. Give me your name and our direction."

"Anna," she said, jerking free. "We go to the Lightning Struck Tower, three miles outside the walls."

"I know the place." Chimquar still fingered her stiletto. "How are we to get there? The gates are closed."

"I know ways," she answered laconically, then whirled away from the warrior and swept out the doors.

Chimquar returned the stiletto to its arm sheath and followed. In the courtyard she passed Anna and turned into the stable. She bridled the stallion, mounting bareback.

The sweet and salt scents of meadow and sea blended in the slight mist that lay over the torch-lit streets. The moon, rising over the tall, stone houses, added to the light illuminating the labyrinth of narrow streets they traveled. The stars shone, coming out to pierce the light mist; it seemed to Chimquar that it was not the mist, but the aura of the city that dimmed them of the bright freedom they seemed to proclaim over the open plains, something she had once known in Shaurone—and lost. She looked about as she rode. To the eyes Marleone was a rich city—with a dirty meanness to it, like so many cities along this coast. Towers rose with the spires of gaudy cathedrals to touch the sky, proclaiming the chill hauteur of the builders.

Marleone was not Shaurone, not the least of her cities. But Shaurone seemed much further than a continent away. More and more of late her thoughts had turned homeward; increasing to an intense preoccupation, as she had crossed the plains to join the young pair. Anaria had put aside her pride to seek Chimquar. That meant she could go home if she wished—go home to Shaurone, to Maya's Land as it was called.

Shaurone—she could still see her white stone and marble cities, her pillared temples to Aroana, the royal palaces, and the colors of her festivals. It never dimmed in her memory. When she had her young wards safe, she could take them to Shaurone. Whatever kind of sa'necari—and there were many

subtle variations among them and secret orders—he would not have them long, Chimquar vowed.

"Anna, what kind of sa'necari has them? Priest, divinator, or Bellokin?" Chimquar asked calmly.

Anna shook her head. "It is not safe to speak."

Each time Chimquar questioned her, the gypsy shook her head with a finger to her lips. The Sharani accepted that for a space. When she began to lose patience, six soldiers came around the corner and halted them to ask their business. Chimquar tensed, but kept her hand from her sword-hilt. Anna quickly pulled the leader aside. Laughter interspersed the conversation. The captain's hand ran down the gypsy's side and he slapped her bottom sharply, then signaled his myn to follow and went on. She had never become accustomed to their insulting behavior—for in Shaurone, the women were the sexual predators, not the males. She dragged the gypsy up before her.

"My patience astounds me," Chimquar growled in Anna's ear. "What has become of my wards?"

"You would not rather ask of Anaria?" The gypsy's brows arched in feigned surprise.

"Hiiii!" Chimquar cried in acute irritation. "I have told you not to speak of Anaria! Answer my question!"

"A priest has the girl," she said with studied indifference, noting Chimquar's reaction, playing with her as casually as a cat with a mouse. "Her brother went after them."

"That I knew." Chimquar matched Anna's tone. All sa'necari could be said to be priests of the Hellgod, Bellocar; or the term could be applied more generally and include any

of Bellocar's surviving wives who had been imprisoned with him. "What kind? Which hellgod does he serve? The Great One?"

"You should guess," came the sarcastic reply. "Shaurone burnt the banewitch realm to the ground. You drove them into isolated mountains and sit before them like a lion waiting at a mouse hole.... "Anna paused, her lips curved slyly. "But they still come slipping through your fingers into the outer lands."

"Hadjys' Nine Hells, you say!" Her words came out in Euzadi, taut and hoarse. She had encountered several sa'necari and their ilk over the nearly sixteen years she had been living on the plains—but this far east? She halted abruptly, then finished in Engla, the common tongue. "Sa'necari in a Badonthian City?"

Even as she asked, she knew. Chimquar had seen the signs of rot in the east. Matters were far worse than she imagined and many things that she had wondered at over the years made sense. The hellgods must be very hungry for sacrifices with Waejontor—for all practical purposes—destroyed and blocked. The knowledge struck her like a blow. A small prayer to the patron god of her race rose in her thoughts and broke off in a strangled surge of anger. Chimquar's hand closed tightly upon Anna's arm. "How did you find me? You serve this demon?"

Anna laughed, tossing her dark head. "I serve no man! I read the girl's palm. You do not disdain our foretelling as you do our company. She spoke of meeting you at the Red Lion; Chimquar's name is legend. The lordling and his myn took her

in the market place. The youth pursued them on foot. There is your answer." Anna ran a hand through her hair. "Do you know how much gold Anaria is offering for word of you?"

"Damn it!" Chimquar twisted her arm, receiving a hot glance. "I said Anaria is no concern of yours!"

For once Anna did not answer.

* * * *

They left the road where the great stone bridge crossed the Marleone River whose mouth formed the City's port. The high bank sloped to the water's edge with boulders and scattered rocks cropping up among the tall grasses. Anna sprang down suddenly, eluding Chimquar's hands to disappear into a pool of darkness. Chimquar cursed, flinging herself from the stallion, scrambling over the rocks in search of the woman. The stiletto reappeared in her hand. If this was some treachery.... She began to link the haughty gypsy and the Waejontori in her mind, for the gods knew the servants of Shaurone's ancient foe were many; and Chimquar, herself, had friends among the Cities of the Coast.

Anna reappeared as suddenly as she had vanished. Chimquar's grip on the stiletto shifted from hilt to blade. The gypsy seemed to sense her move, for she turned slightly, studying Chimquar in the moonlight. "You do not need that," Anna said. "If I were as you suspect, I would have protection. If this were a trap, it would still be the only way to reach them."

Chimquar hesitated, and then sheathed the dagger, whistling the stallion to her. She joined Anna at the slanting,

nearly invisible entrance to a cave. It was large enough to allow the horse; but the beast laid his ears back, resisting attempts to lead him.

"Do you know naught of horses?" Anna snapped, whipping the scarf from her hair to cover the beast's eyes, fixing it to the cheek straps. Then she withdrew to a safe distance from the warrior.

Chimquar felt her anger rise, hot and barely controllable at Anna's continued insolence. "You would do well to hold your tongue," Chimquar warned evenly.

"It would do you no good to cross me," Anna stated calmly, kneeling in the shadows. A torch flared.

"If you insist on provoking me...."

Anna raised an eyebrow skeptically. "A fool's move. Is all your race so rash? Or did you learn it from the Euzadi? Content yourself, Sharani, we are allies."

"What are you?" Chimquar demanded in a whisper.

"That is none of your concern." Anna set off at a rapid pace, effectively ending the conversation.

It surprised Chimquar to find that caverns honeycombed the hills beneath Marleone, twisting, and turning into narrow tunnels, which opened into vaulted grottoes, their floors covered with shallow water. Blind, colorless salamanders wriggled to escape her booted feet. Jagged rocks and boulder-sized chunks of fallen ceiling littered the ground in a narrow stretch along the edge of the grottoes. Anna kept to the rocks as though fearing the open ground. Chimquar walked through the water covering the floor, seeing no reason or Anna's keeping to the more rugged ground.

Abruptly, she decided to join Anna: Anna seemed like one who did nothing without a reason.

Anna's swift, nimble pace over the rocks bespoke long familiarity. Chimquar stumbled along, hard-pressed to keep the gypsy in sight and contend with the blindfolded stallion. Several times she lost sight of Anna and shouted for the gypsy to return. Each time Anna seemed more angered and desperate as though she beheld an hourglass with the grains nearly spent. "Be quiet!" Anna commanded. "Be quiet and hurry."

Chimquar said nothing. She now feared that time was more against them than she had dared to believe. But to keep her footing and retain her hold on the stallion's reins demanded the full measure of her attention, leaving her no time to let Anna's desperation take too great a hold on her. Part of her rebelled against all fears, striving to maintain a clear mind.

A sighing rose in the caverns. Chimquar called it the wind. She could hear the sea now and the water seemed deeper in the last grotto; that concerned her more than the wind, for the sea could rise and fill the cavern. She halted to look about and gauge the distance, which Anna's pace had opened between them. Chimquar could see Anna's torch beyond the mouth of a low passageway. The torch revealed the terrain ahead, and the sharp swing of rock wall. The band of rocks narrowed and a black chasm yawned beside it. Chimquar clambered over the rocks toward the passageway. The stallion hung back, picking his way along at the insistent pull of the reins. Chimquar halted again a yard from the mouth of

the passageway, and stood beside the stallion, rubbing his nose and stroking his neck reassuringly.

"It might be better, my lad," Chimquar said, laying a hand to the scarf, "if you saw where you were going." *I should have tried this sooner.* She pulled the scarf away, tucking it in her belt. The stallion shuddered, looking doubtfully at his surroundings. Chimquar spoke soothingly to him. The love of horses, common to both the cavalry-oriented Sharani and the nomadic Euzadi, rang clearly in her voice. The stallion steadied and allowed her to mount. They traveled quicker then, moving deep into the passageway. She continued to speak encouragingly to the stallion—Euzadi mounts were not the fearless destriers, nor the wondrous wynderjyn (unicorn-horse hybrids who chose the paladins of Aroana as children) Chimquar had ridden in her youth. She listened to the waves lapping at the walls of the chasm until another sound caught her ear. The sound that Chimquar had called the wind had become the sighing of a low, wistful voice.

"Anna. Anna. Anna, I'm hungry. I'm hungry, Anna!" The voice repeated itself without pausing, making a broken chant of the gypsy's name. Chimquar drew her sword and passed into the cavern beyond the passageway.

"It should still be asleep. We took too long getting here." Anna's frightened voice carried back to Chimquar, but the gypsy was nowhere to be seen. Her torch blazed, wedge carefully between two rocks. Anna had hidden herself.

"What is it?" Chimquar shouted, glancing warily about.

"Give it the stallion," Anna cried. "Give it the stallion."

"God damn you, Anna! I do not feed monsters!"

"Anna?" The voice came louder, more plaintive, repeating the pattern of its words. "I'm hungry, Anna."

A scrabbling of rocks made Chimquar turn. She was between Anna and the creature. On reflex, Chimquar's hand dropped near her left knee where a spear-lance should have rested in its sling, but she had not taken time to saddle the stallion. She had not expected to need her lance.

A creature stood on its hind legs, dripping water on the rocks of the passageway, its form vaguely human. Huge, saucer eyes in a frog-face gazed at Chimquar unblinkingly. A spiny ridge circled the lower part of its head like a downturned collar. Its high dorsal fin reminded Chimquar of a sail.

"Anna?" It twisted its head until the quivering ridge of spines and thinly stretched skin touched its shoulder. Its splayed fingers displayed long talons. Its mouth held several rows of sharp teeth.

"Aroana Defender!" Chimquar exclaimed low. "What kind of creature?"

Other warriors might have turned and fled, but Chimquar had ridden into the banewitch realm itself with her soldiers and ha'taren—paladins of Aroana—scorching it to cinders after having turned back its invasion of her lands. And nothing this side of Hell itself was enough to make her flinch. She turned the trembling, shaken stallion and backed away from the creature while she took its measure. It shambled forward, hindered by the rocks, repeating its cries. Then it halted, seeing the person was not Anna. Its nostrils flared. "Food? Food, Anna?" It dropped to all fours and sprang half the distance separating it from Chimquar.

"Let it have the horse!" Anna shouted from her hiding place, as the stallion reared in terror, ears back, and eyes wide. "It will go to sleep again."

Chimquar took up the slack in the reins, pulling the stallion's head in and down. "Easy. Easy, my fine one," she murmured, controlling the well-trained animal with her voice and knees as much as with the reins. Chimquar brought him down, swinging the horse across the shelf to turn her sword hand to the creature.

The water-creature gathered itself to spring. Chimquar raised her sword, feeling the consecrated runes warm beneath her fingers, expecting the attack. It watched her, wary of the length of shining steel. Then it sprang, coming within a yard of Chimquar. The stallion shrilled, rising on his hind legs again. Chimquar gripped the stallion tightly with her knees. The creature lunged to attack the horse and Chimquar slashed it. The stallion, beginning to panic, swung away suddenly, causing Chimquar's next stroke to fall awry. One hoof slipped and Chimquar was thrown hard into the wall. Her sword, jolted from her hand, lay out of reach. The stallion was between Chimquar and the creature for a moment. The creature's claws raked the animal's flank and the horse rose and fled down the narrow shelf the way Anna had gone. Chimquar had no time to recover her sword, snatching instead the slender mate to her stiletto from her boot. She rose in a shallow crouch, crossing her twin blades briefly, then brought them back with a careful upward flip, completing, without thought, the full salute of the Euzadi that singled readiness. "Go find someone else to eat," she warned.

Its tongue flicked in and out. The seeming lack of fear in the warrior puzzled it. It moved from side to side, unable to circle its opponent.

Chimquar waited unmoving like a coiled snake, for she had no room to move in her usual fighting style. Her stomach knotted, her heart beat and breathing quickened with the tension. The creature halted beyond reach.

"Go eat someone else, damn you!" Chimquar shouted.

The creature's hand raked the air inches from Chimquar's stomach. Its reach was longer than hers. Her stilettos flashed, opening thin slashes in its arms as she stepped back. The creature shrieked, and one clawed hand closed on her upper arm, dragging her forward. Chimquar was Sharani, her strength more than equal to any male her size, yet the creature was stronger. She braced her feet against the rocks, throwing her weight back, momentarily halting its pull. She smelled the stench of its breath. It ceased to pull and Chimquar lost her balance, coming loose from the bracing rocks. Immediately the creature jerked her up, bringing her within reach of its mouth. The daggers shifted in her hands.

"Aroana!" The Sharani war cry echoed in the cavern. Her twin blows fell as one, one stiletto driving deep into its shoulder while the other found its throat. It released her, staggered back, clawing at the blade in its throat. Blood ran from its cut neck. It collapsed on the rocks. Chimquar drew in a deep breath, staring at what she had slain. Her sleeves were torn at the shoulders and spotted with blood where long nails had dug into her skin. She glanced at the cuts, then disregarded them, retrieving her daggers.

"You needn't have killed it!" Anna cried angrily. She stood at the far end of the cavern, the stallion's reins in her right hand and the torch in her left.

"Would you rather it had eaten me?" Chimquar asked sourly.

"You could have given it the horse," Anna snapped.

"Why? Was it your pet?"

"I found it here. I fed it. I understood it."

"You feared it," Chimquar added.

"Perhaps." Anna let Chimquar reach her, then handed the warrior the reins of the horse, and turned, leading the way to the last narrow passageway. It angled steeply upward. The rocks gave way to a worn smoothness, and Chimquar could smell fresher air. A breeze tickled the cavern. Three spear-lengths further they emerged into the moonlit open outside the city. Relief flooded Chimquar. She could hear the crash of waves and taste the tang of salt air, the sea overpowering the scents of the grasslands wound the low hills that had risen into cliffs falling away into the sea. A light shone in the old tower rising out of the ruins of Castle Maristile on the bluff.

"There," Anna pointed. "They are there now. None live in the tower any longer. The sa'necari uses it." Her voice dropped as she added with malevolent pleasure, "He will be surprised."

Chimquar caught the slight smile, passing quickly across the gypsy's face. "You are well familiar with the tower and the sa'necari," she said conversationally. "As with your monster."

"I have eyes and ears!" Anna flared angrily, her white teeth flashing in the torchlight like the fangs of a mantichore.

Chimquar recoiled. She realized then that nothing short of breaking Anna's neck seemed capable of affecting the woman—and that, Chimquar told herself would be a fool's move indeed. The Sharani's questions had become many, but she knew she would get no answers. She remounted as the gypsy put out the torch. Chimquar helped Anna to the stallion's back and they rode along together.

Voices whispered in the wind off the plains. Chimquar gazed about, seeking landmarks other than the ruined castle. She found none. The hill behind her hid the city of Marleone. Her eyes rested upon the rolling plain stretching beyond the eastern horizon. She listened to the voices of the wind as it bent the tall grasses. Chimquar tried to catch sight of the cherub sprites that sang in the wind, watching from the corners of her eyes. Anna tilted her head to listen. Chimquar ignored the gypsy, for she caught a rare glimpse of the pale, glowing sprites. A tension grew in the air as both the Sharani and the gypsy tried to understand them. And the wind shifted.

A high wail rose off the sea. A Wind-Rider—the true, ephemeral form of the vargeis, which only a massive death rite could make undead flesh and bone—swept in, driving off the gentler sprites. Then the gaunt spectre on its skeletal steed rode full across Chimquar's path. The stallion veered off at a gallop. Anna cried out in dismay, barely keeping her seat. Chimquar hauled on the reins, fighting the stallion, and finally halting it. She knew the Wind-Rider's only weapon was fear. They served as eyes for greater powers. In the Great War of Chimquar's youth, the Sharani called them the "Eyes of

Waejontor." What troubled her, glancing at the tower, was the stirring of power she felt in the air and saw in the presence of the Wind-Rider. She turned the edgy stallion, heading for the tower. The sa'necari knew they were coming. There was no longer any need for stealth.

The wrath of the gods had destroyed the castle centuries past during the godwars with strokes of lightning, leaving jagged, blackened edges of the broken walls and topless rings of half-fallen towers. Chunks of brick and stones were scattered about. It was a desolate, haunting place. The lone tower stood unscathed and unblemished, an enigmatic survivor. Chimquar had explored the ruins one long ago summer day rather than accompany Hazier into Marleone, and failed to find an entrance. "Diangar's Tower," Hazier named it, calling it after a minor demon-lord that haunted the plains of Murshay'di. It glowed, vying with the light from the windows. Swirling currents of power gathered around it, making Chimquar's skin crawl. She made a small sign against evil, which did nothing to reassure her. Only Makajia could have gotten Hazier there that night: she understood his past reluctance, now. The ruins by night bore little resemblances to what she had seen by day.

Chimquar left Anna with the horse, skirting the edges of the ruins. She found where the sa'necari had entered, for they left a trail across the fire-baked earth. The hairs on her neck pricked as she went deeper into the ruins. A spear-length from her, a small object reflected the moonlight. She passed it, regarding it warily; then, as her eyes discerned it clearer, she swept it up with a sharp word. It was the small

unicorn talisman she had given Makajia but four months ago, when the girl turned fourteen—a coming of age present. Anna had spoken true.

The silver chain was broken. The sa'necari and his servants had not dared touch the talisman itself, for its power came from a blessing by a high priest to Aroana, patron God of Shaurone. It had been in Chimquar's family for generations. Chimquar had worn it into Waejontor when the legions of Shaurone overran the banewitch realm. It had been her luck. It had brought none to Makajia.

Makajia! Chimquar cast about for the direction in which the trail continued. It ended abruptly. She dropped the talisman inside her jerkin away from sight, before starting back after Anna and the horse.

Soft footfalls made her turn in time to see the swordsmen spring out of the shadows. She pivoted, ducking to catch him by the sword wrist, and threw him. She came down on his arm with her knees to force the weapon from his grasp.

"Powers of Earth!" The Euzadi oath came out sharply.

"Hazier, you blind chekaya!" Chimquar shoved herself off the youth, thrusting roughly aside. "I taught you better! I had more sense at nine winters!"

"Chimquar," the youth said softly, as though to speak louder would betray the strained edge of his voice. "I did not think."

"That was a good way to get yourself killed!" Chimquar almost shouted, then lowered her voice with an effort. "I could have cut you in half before I knew."

"Chimquar," he asked softer still. "How is it you are here?"

Chimquar halted, swallowing words and the brittle edge of her anger. "Hazier? Hazier, what is wrong with you?" What did she hear in his voice? The Euzadi did not weep. But she had raised him—was he less than Euzadi?

"Makajia..." He choked on his sister's name. "I am no warrior—I could not—" His voice broke.

"No more than you are a grown mon. Not all are Torrundarsdottir or our chieftain Maruic."

The moon reached its zenith, revealing the anguish robbing his narrow Euzadi face of the maturity he strove for. To see that in her wild, young Hazier smote Chimquar a sore blow. By Sharani standards he had been adult for two years, but by Euzadi he still had a year to go. Her hands hesitated in reaching for him, for she could never predict his reactions. She sat back, looking at him wordlessly. How could she forget his age so easily and expect him to be Anaria? Anaria had been her right hand before their ma'aram died. Anaria. The more she looked at the youth she had raised on the plains, the more he seemed like Anaria. She had never seen it before, only expected it. But it was Anaria on the wold, Chimquar remembered, weeping, yet cursing, and begging her not to run off like a rash idiot.

"Hazier." She grasped his shoulders, expecting him to recoil, surprised when he did not. "Hazier, you need not fear." *I have let only one person down in my life. Which is probably why my god never abandoned me, even after the High Priest broke my sword.* "The gypsy brought me. Hazier, listen, together we can rescue Makajia." Chimquar glanced over her shoulder. "Anna," she called.

The gypsy did not answer. Chimquar rose and re-traced her steps. She found the stallion cropping grass, but no sign of Anna. Chimquar cast about for the woman, but Anna could have concealed herself in a thousand shadowed crevices among the fallen stone; and she had taken care to leave no traces of her passing. It had not been the hurried flight of a frightened woman, and that added to the warrior's disquiet.

Hazier joined her. "She is gone, Chimquar?"

Chimquar nodded grimly, "Back to her bloody master."

Hazier sheathed his sword. "Makajia is in the tower, and there is no door," he said calmly, having regained his composure.

"They did not fly. There is a way in."

"I have searched since before the sun set."

"And I have searched once before. But I know the ways of those half-demons," she said with more confidence than she felt. "They all have their secret doors."

The Sharani approached the tower, watching for Anna. The high windows were lit, and she stared up at them, wishing for a good Sharani longbow and a length of rope. Or a grappling hook. Instead, she ran her hands over the seamless ivory, seeking the smallest crack that would open a hidden door. Finally, she sat back with a curse.

Hazier shook his head. "I searched many more hours."

"Well, it exists, damn it!" She leaped up and hurled a rock against the tower. "Perhaps she can hear us." Chimquar moved nearer the windows. "Makajia! Makajia!"

A small whimper answered her.

"Makajia!" She shouted again, hope rising. "Come to the window. We are here for you."

"Chimquar!" Hazier shouted. She caught the alarm in his voice, whirling, sword in hand. Bright light streamed from an opening in the ground, silhouetting eight seven foot shapes. The stench of decaying flesh hung upon those eaters of carrion, warriors of Diangar; and she knew them by it.

"Kargrens! Spawn of demons and satyr women, they hated the bright sun of the plains, haunting the shadowed woodlands. It took great power to summon them from the north.

Hazier retreated to her side. "What manner of creatures?"

"Kargrens," she repeated, using the Sharani word. The Euzadi had no name for them. "Spawn of Diangar," she explained tautly.

"Can they be slain?"

The first one rushed forward too eagerly, brandishing its curved sword. She sprang under its guard, blade-edge slicing deeply below its ribs. That answered Hazier's question. Chimquar did not stand to meet the rest; they were too large and strong to exchange blows with. She sprang over the stubby, tumbled remains of a wall, dodging blows that could behead an ox. Two Kargrens halted at the edge of the heavily littered ground. Chimquar climbed the broken ring of a tower.

"Come! Come and catch me, maggot eaters!" She shouted in the common speech. In the heart of the scattered ruins their size would hamper them like lions in a badger's den.

"Come! Sa'necari, are your servants craven?"

The creatures gathered at the edge, save for two contending with the nomad youth. Those two came together, blocking her view of Hazier. A crunch of burnt sticks drew her gaze back to the creatures below her, clambering over the remnant of wall. She climbed to the highest point of the ring, trying to see Hazier, yet not allow the creatures to reach her too soon.

"Fly-catchers! Dung-dwellers!" She continued to shout taunts.

The Kargrens climbed onto the fragment of stairs on the shattered hollow tube that had been a tower. The stairs did not reach to where Chimquar stood, upon the wall of the ring. The one highest swept its curved sword at her, as if to brush her off, but overextended itself, losing the force of its blow. She parried easily, dropping astraddle of the wall, then slashed down. The Kargren's hand parted from its arm. It shrieked, whirled into the creature behind it, lost its footing, and crashed down into the hollow where the stairs fell away. Chimquar swung her leg over, pushing off with enough force to send her onto the high, wide wall-base from which battlement once rose. She raced along it, shouting at the Kargrens, keeping them at her heels. They howled and tried to reach her from the ground. A deep, wide break in the wall opened unexpectedly, and the abruptness of her halt almost sent her tumbling into it. She judged the distance and backed up to make a run for it.

"Chimquar!" Hazier charged recklessly across the open, drawing Chimquar's eyes.

"Hazier, hold!"

The Kargrens followed her gaze, and saw the young Euzadi. Two abandoned their pursuit of the warrior, the youth being easier to reach.

A wail rose from beyond the cliffs. Chimquar's head came up sharply. The sound seemed almost human, yet more piercing than the cry of a hunting bird. The Wind-Riders returned in force, riding the night wind up from the sea. They ignored Chimquar, remembering she had shown no fear of them earlier—unusual for a Euzadi. The Wind-Riders had no gift for seeing the true nature of a person. The Wind-Riders circled Hazier, cackling and wailing. He stared in disbelief, for the plains held no such horrors, and held his ground for a few trembling seconds. Then he fled, trying to avoid the Kargrens and the specters, heading deeper into the ruins.

The distance to the ground was too great for Chimquar to jump down onto the dangerously crumbling pile of rubble. Beyond the break, the wall had shattered in descending layers. There she could get down.

Hazier plunged into the crumbling stones, scrambling over them in blind haste. He lost his footing and fell. The Kargren farthest from Chimquar lumbered after the youth. It was not beyond her throw with a rock, but a stiletto is not a stone. Hazier was already scrambling to his feet as the slender blade left her hand with a faint invocation to Aroana. The Kargren plucked at the blade in its throat and crumpled.

"Thanks be! Hazier!" she shouted. The Wind-Riders circled nearer, closing in on her young ward. "Hazier, they have no substance! They cannot harm you! Throw a rock through them."

He raised a brick and hesitated. Chimquar shouted again, and her voice echoed through the ruins. "Throw it!"

She did not wait to see if he acted, but jumped the break and raced for the descending layers, leaping down them. The last piece gave beneath her, and she fell at the surprised feet of a Kargren, slashing its legs as she landed. The creature sprang back with a wide swing of its sword. She rolled forward, driving her longsword up as she rose on one leg. It collapsed across her. She pushed up against the weight of the dead creature without success, then tried again and lay still, clutching her sword, pinned but not helpless. Frustration and anger at her situation made her grip her sword still tighter.

Hazier advanced on the last Kargren, casting frequent glances at the Wind-Riders. Uneasy still, yet determined, he stayed out of the creature's reach, out-maneuvering it among the hindering stones until an opening in the Kargren's guard let him send his sword home. Chimquar smiled grimly; she could take him to Shaurone. Anaria would approve of him. Hazier got the carcass off her, adding his strength to here.

"Aroana Diona, victi mergair," Chimquar murmured in Sharani to her god as she retrieved her stiletto. They walked to the edge of the opening through which the Kargrens had emerged, and stared down into the torch lit room. A ladder rested against the side. She stepped onto the first rung and paused. "Hazier, you are a warrior. Let none say otherwise."

Torches rested in brackets along the gray, stonewalls. The air smelled dry and dead; the tang of the sea gone sour. She felt the power stirring stronger, rising and falling like the beat of a huge heart. Hazier walked at her shield-hand, his eyes

darting warily down the hallways that branched off in labyrinthine confusion. The way to the tower should have been straight, mere spear-lengths from where they entered.

Chimquar saw a flash of red skirt disappearing down a side way. *Anna heading for her master. I cannot let her reach him. I must catch her!* Chimquar raced after her. Anna glanced back and quickened her pace, traveling the twisting passages faster than Chimquar expected possible for a city woman. The warrior barely kept her in sight. Now and again Anna laughed—a strange note, which defied interpretation. The endless halls and distances began to alarm Chimquar. She knew she had gone too far. Then the presence from the inn brushed lightly against the edges of Chimquar's awareness and she veered abruptly, crashing into the wall.

Hazier rounded a corner. "What has happened?" He glanced about as though expecting the ceiling to disgorge a monster.

"Nothing." She took his offered hand and rose. The presence had vanished with the gypsy. "I have taken these passages at a fool's pace. I could not overtake her."

"Her?" Hazier sounded puzzled.

"The gypsy."

"I saw no one, Chimquar."

"She read Makajia's palm," Chimquar said impatiently.

Hazier frowned, his narrow brows coming together. "No Rom spoke to Makajia. I saw no one. You pursued a wraith. This labyrinth..." He made an open-handed gesture. "Had we traveled slower I could have marked our path, chipping at the stone."

"That would have done little good. The place reeks of sa'necari demon-craft." Chimquar turned twice. "So many halls."

"And no time! Surely there is some craft of your people..."

"The ha'taren are warriors, paladins of Aroana. Not sorcerers," Chimquar said sharply, then admitted, "But I have given you cause to think that."

She took the talisman out, letting the silver unicorn dangle from the chain. She had seen a novitiate set the talisman to glowing and spinning like a compass needle. Closing her eyes, she strove to hold the image of the talisman in her mind's eyes, steady against the chaotic flow of thoughts and images. A person thinks in words with constant movement and eddying currents; and it was hard for her impatient, untrained mind to hold that single object and watch it flow brighter without turning it about as if examining a figurine. She denied each thought that rose, leaving it unformed, and the talisman steadied, becoming a bright sun. Chimquar wanted to shout, but dared not. Instead, she threw against the image another shape: Makajia's narrow, sharp-boned face, eyes shining like a wildcat's

"Lord of Thunder!" Hazier exclaimed softly.

Chimquar opened her eyes. The torches had gone out, but the glow of the talisman lit the narrow passageway. The branching hallways were gone, save for one. She turned about, watching the unicorn's head point the direction they had come. They followed the passage to its end. The door had to be there. Hazier searched the wall for a spring that would open it. Chimquar returned the talisman to her jerkin.

The torches burned once more and the hallways returned. Chimquar dug her fingers into her hair, throwing back her head. The futile search began again. Then her gaze fell upon a crack near the ceiling, where the head of a mage's staff could be pressed. She drew her sword, thrusting the point against the crack. A grating of stone replied and the wall slid open enough that she could squeeze through. A narrow stair spiraled behind the panel. Hazier's head and shoulders pushed through, his foot resting on the first step.

"Wait," she said. "Do not follow closely." The currents of power grew as the stairs rose. At the first landing the ceiling bore the same crevice: That was the way out.

She drew her sword and continued. The stairs ended before a heavy oaken door with a carved dragon's head. She pushed with the sword point, opening it a few inches. It refused to yield further.

"Makajia," she whispered, and a whimper answered. "Makajia."

The Sharani put her shoulder to the door, forcing it. She started to enter when a man's arm fell across the threshold. She swallowed a startled curse and stepped into the chaos beyond. Two mangled bodies in barely recognizable Marleone livery lay by the door amidst shards of pottery and glass. The arm by the door lay free of the body. Chimquar knew the claw-marked remains of a lion's kill before she saw the bloody paw-print of the pony-sized beast. It had gone, she guessed, to sleep off its feast.

A broken marble statue lay like a third body beneath the window, its limbs scattered. Pieces of figurines, torn curtains,

the round bottom of a broken urn, the bronzed head of a horned demon leered malevolently from the floor.... Only a small rectangular table near a second flight of stairs still stood. A small whimper drew the warrior's attention to a quivering pile of silk and animal pelts surmounted by a faintly glowing shawl that was an uncommon shade of mandarin red. Anna's shawl, carefully draped over the fur pile, glowed. A lock of black hair slipped out.

"Makajia?" Chimquar called gently. "Makajia?"

The pile shook harder. A hand crept out and found a piece of the statue's arm.

"Makajia, it's Chimquar," she soothed. "You are safe."

Her head appeared, large eyes regarding Chimquar like a small, trapped fawn. The warrior approached slowly, reassuring her with each step. Makajia's lips quivered, her grip on the statue's arm tightening.

"You don't need that," Chimquar said. Then she had her, loosening her grip on the arm while the girl sobbed against her shoulder. Chimquar ached with each sob; and a cold, controlled rage formed inside her as she stroked the terrified girl's black hair, murmuring soft, meaningless noises.

A Euzadi word and the crunch of crumble pottery told her that Hazier had arrived. Chimquar gave Makajia to her brother. She saw then that the girl's clothes were torn, and there claw marks and bruises on her arms. Chimquar picked up Anna's shawl, throwing it across the room. Anna was a banewitch! The warrior headed for the second flight of stairs. The presence returned, questing, barely felt. Makajia screamed.

A tall, formidably built man stood on the last step, sleeves brushing in the floor in the fashion of Waejontori nobles. His close-cut, black hair glistened like a seal's wet fur, and his beard was braided. A golden Waejontori dragon hung from his neck. The sa'necari's amaranthine eyes—without iris, pupil, or white—gazed scornfully at the warrior and regarded the plains-made black-maned pelt "he" wore; the Waejontori recognized the Euzadi in Chimquar, not the Sharani.

Chimquar had never forgotten those strange demon eyes; and the sa'necari became suddenly real to her emotions, not just her mind. Hatred, anger, and fear filled her. She trembled. In one swirling moment, the Great War returned to her with memories of burning Sharani villages blending and melting into the image of Makajia. Chimquar tried to raise her sword, but that one moment had been too long. Spells held her fast. The air thickened like mud, and a weight pressed down on her as the floor dissolved. She struggled to will her hand free, to move it toward the talisman, as she sank into the murky bog sucking her like quicksand.

"Aroana God, Compassionate Defender." The name broke from her lips, more plea than invocation. "Raven-maiden; Dragon's Bane." It was a small child's song, yet she felt the spell's hold loosen. The Sharani spell-song on a Euzadi's lips startled the sa'necari, who still did not suspect the true nature of his opponent. Chimquar's hand reached the talisman. The unicorn emerged from her jerking like the sun on a chain, burning away the thick, dark air. The floor became solid again. She raised the talisman as shield between herself and the sa'necari.

He recognized it as a thing of power, Sharani-forged. He felt its effect upon his spell, and retreated to a higher step, drawing strands of darkness out of the air. The strands dripped through his fingers, changing shape as they touched the floor. Black snakes sped hissing toward the warrior. Chimquar raked the ground with her sword, the touch of consecrated Sharani steel withered the snakes. Still there were scores and scores of them. Too many to get them all. One got past, wrapping around her legs. She cut it away. Two threw themselves around her arms, lashing them together as living ropes. Chimquar shifted the sword in her hand, attempting to reach them. Then the weird creatures wrapped down her arms. The silver-hilt of her sword and the chain of the talisman held no magic against them, thus the snakes could loop around her hands, prying them apart until the sword and the talisman dropped to the floor.

Makajia let out a cry. Chimquar glanced and saw Hazier on the floor, bound as she was. Waving snakes kept the girl from her brother's fallen sword. Makajia huddled on the floor, her left hand groping behind her. She sprang up with the statue's arm, flinging it with all of her might. It flew past Chimquar, but the sa'necari stepped from the marble arm's path and it shattered against the wall.

He advanced on the girl. She retreated to her corner, her shrieks dying to whimpers. Makajia knew the horrors of earlier would be repeated—but this time he would also kill her. The enchanted shawl that the woman in red had cast over her was beyond the girl's reach, and the women-in-red was not there this time.

The sa'necari passed Chimquar. Makajia did not fight as she had before—it had done no good then. Chimquar dropped to her knees, scraping her arms against the steel blade of her sword. The metal withered the snakes, and her fingers closed on the cold assurance of the ancient hilt. She freed her legs, snatching up the talisman, and turned to attack the sa'necari. Chimquar cast aside all pretense of being Euzadi. "Sa'necari filth! Warring on children! There is a Sharani ha'taren in your midst!" She threw the talisman, striking him between the shoulders. Sparks flew from the talisman, and he staggered. The remaining snakes vanished. Makajia ran past him

The sa'necari faced the Sharani woman with a strange, incredulous expression as he realized her true nature. He seemed unsure, then raised his arms and dropped them with a word Chimquar could not understand. His image wavered as if a heat haze shimmered up from his feet. A great, saber-tooth cat, larger than a lion, vied with his human form for the same space. The cat gained substance; the human-form became transparent, then vanished entirely.

Chimquar stood her ground, turning as the cat circled her.

"My mother wore a manticore's hide. I shall wear yours. You know who I am?" Her hand closed on the bronze demon-head. She threw it savagely, then sprang forward as the cat leaped back to face her, snarling, its tail lashing angrily.

"Stalemate, dear brother," a high arrogant voice said from the doorway. The cat did not turn, but his ears went back and he spat. The person laughed, a mocking note that Chimquar knew. "She slew the sa'necari Duke Glandreth at the Fords of Iea in Shaurone. Remember?"

"Tomyris Danae!" The sa'necari cursed.

Chimquar did not take her eyes from the cat. The beast wavered. Chimquar felt the sudden rise of powers, prickling ice and fire that surged and pressed in contesting currents that vanished in mere seconds. Then Anna was speaking again. "We are too equal, always—until now. Are you afraid, Korlinn?" She laughed. "Of a Sharani woman? You told me you had no fear that a woman could call your powers to account. Are you afraid, my little yellow cat?" Chimquar glanced and saw Anna shaking her shawl in the doorway. "You cannot come this way," Anna said. "And the Sharani stands before the stairs."

The beast sprang suddenly, in the moment that Anna held the warrior's gaze. Chimquar caught only a flash of yellow fur, and swung her sword up in a warding gesture, stepping back. They crashed to the floor, landing hard amid the splintering shards of pottery and furniture. The sword was wrenched from the warrior's grasp, and she drew her stiletto, even as she knew there was no need. Above her, Makajia flayed the beast with Hazier's sword, screaming blasphemies Chimquar never thought to hear from a Euzadi girl child.

Chimquar shoved the carcass aside and captured Makajia's hands, twisting the sword from her grasp. "Have done. He is dead." The girl's shrieks continued and the warrior slapped her sharply, silencing her. Makajia's eyes lost their terror, clearing as Chimquar handed her to Hazier. "Take your sister and go. The first landing opens onto the plains in the same manner as the bottom one opened."

Hazier took his sword, swiping it clean on the lion's flank, slipped an arm around his sister, and passed Anna. At the doorway he paused, but at Chimquar's terse gesture he did not stay. Chimquar ignored Anna, yanked her sword free, and wiped it.

Satin rustled. Anna's red skirt was gone. A blood red ribbon held her hair instead of a scarf. Her brown eyes show with pleasure as she prodded the cat's body with her toe.

"Poor half-brother," she purred. "I warned him. I said, Korlinn, a dark woman from off the plains will be the death of you. He thought I meant that girl—well, it's of no matter. There can't be two powers in one realm."

"You are to blame for all," Chimquar said, quiet, and weary. "Even the way the beast impaled itself."

Anna smiled coyly. "You know what I am—what I am not. We have no quarrel. I can tell you how to avoid Anaria."

"I have no quarrel with Anaria. We were never rivals as were you and your brother. One day, Anna, a Sharani will be the death of you."

"You threaten me?" Amusement filled her voice.

"I do not," Chimquar said, turning to follow Hazier and Makajia. "Knowing the way of things, I predict."

"I could slay you..." Anna raised the charred talisman.

"Anna...." Chimquar did not turn. Her voice held an odd patience in measure with her weariness. "I aided you unknowingly, but that does not lessen the deed. By your own laws, you would bring your house down if you refuse to let us part in peace."

"You know Diangar's servants well."

"We destroyed Waejontor."

"We will meet again, Chimquar. When the geis of your aid is not upon me. We will meet again."

"Pray to your gods, Anna—" a grim strength rose in Chimquar's voice—"that we do not!"

With her wards, Chimquar returned to Marleone, retrieving the horses. Then they rode madly until the city was lost to sight. Chimquar did not feel free of the evil until she felt the strong wind in her face and the tall grasses brushing her legs as she rode. Makajia drew level with her, tossing back her long, unfettered hair. Chimquar caught the faint promise of a smile on the girl's lips. Makajia would be all right—it was hard to scar the spirit of a Euzadi, even a child.

"Makajia," Chimquar asked. "Do you wish to see Shaurone?"

"Yes, Chimquar." The girl's smile grew a little, and then wavered.

"Hazier?"

"Yes!" He laughed then, sudden, joyous, and unrestrained as only the Euzadi could laugh.

"Then we shall go to Maya's land, Shaurone," declared the warrior. She raised a nomad's song to the heavens, the heady freedom of the plains blending with the sense of unburdening that her decision gave her; and Marleone was far behind them.

Concerning "Wolves of Nakesht"

This is the story that got me most of the attention. Jessica Amanda Salmonson had asked me about sending her another story and I wrote it. I never expected to get paid for it; it was another 4theluv as they call it now. I got a letter from her and carried it around in my purse for a week without opening it because I was having some family problems and had taken temporary refuge at the friend's home. When my folks and I got things (apologies mostly) worked out and I went home, I finally opened it and there was a check inside with a note saying she had just sold an anthology to DAW and my story was her first purchase. It became my first pro sale. When Amazons came out I walked into a bookstore in an Arlington, Texas mall and found it had come out sooner than I expected. With my boyfriend trailing me, I bought a copy and managed, by iron will, to get out of the bookstore before breaking into a loud Rebel Yell and racing through the mall to the car.

WOLVES OF NAKESHT

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—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 swordsmyn. 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—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 plainsmon. Pain deepened the lines in the Sharani's weathered face; her breath 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 east ... we go,"—Tamlys struggled with her words—"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 said..." 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 plainsmon ... 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 Sharanis had 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 trust her torch into the south opening 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 shove 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—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—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—" 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 where her 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' thing," 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—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 fore hooves, 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 Sharanis', 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 people.... 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 of 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—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—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 girl—"

"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 so...."

"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—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 their pursuers. A high human wail sounded. 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 horsemyn 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 dogged, 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, she 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. "Anaria...."

"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.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

HOW THE TAIL WAGGED THE DOG

Although it looks like Chimquar is going home at the end of Wolves of Nakesht, she doesn't because the Death-Angel War has broken out in the meantime and the overland route is blocked. My, as yet unpublished, novel quartet, *The Path of the Sacred King*, covers the opening of this war.

My recently published *Dark Brothers of the Light* series cover the middle section of the Death-Angel War as an unleashed hellgod strives to take over several kingdoms and free her fellow hellgods. The third and final theatre of the war is on the Great Plains and involves Chimquar.

Originally Chimquar's exile was conceived as being self-imposed. Later, I saw it as having been imposed by her half-sister, the Saer'ajan. Chimquar had been the general who led the invasion of Waejontor and came back from the Great War in bad mental shape, which had caused her to kill an innocent. Zaren Asharen, the Saer'ajan, had hoped that exile would lead to her getting her senses back and she would then be allowed to return. Chimquar originally planned to remain in Shaurone's sister realm of Doronar, which is where the episode that Anaria refers to took place (unpublished story called "Outcast"). No one ever dreamed that Chimquar would just keep going east until no one could find her. In the novel, *Sins of the Mothers*, Aejustrys Rowan gives Anaria the clue that would eventually lead to her finding Chimquar.

Although it looks like she's going home at the end of this story, she doesn't because the Death-Angel War has broken out in the meantime and the overland route is blocked.

Chimquar the Lionhawk was one of the very first woman passing for male stories to emerge in the sword & sorcery genre. The Lionhawk stories enjoyed a very brief popularity, which ended mostly because I simply quit writing fiction to move into journalism. The first one saw publication in 1979. I was twenty-three when I sold the first one "Ruined Tower" and twenty-four when they started coming out. I was forty five when I wrote the last one, "A String of Werewolves' Teeth." The changes of age show in them, changes of my take on the character, maturation of style; most of it minor, but of obvious consequences stylistically over all from the earliest one, "Ruined Tower," to the last one written, "A String of Werewolves' Teeth."

For me, the Lionhawk was a case of the tail wagging the dog. I had believed that my trilogy, *The Moonstone of Reyanon*, was the more important work. They share the same world, the same people—my Sharani—as protagonists. However, I set them on different parts of my world. Chimquar was swaggering across the steppes and plains of Murshay'di rather than participating in the epic events happening in the western kingdom of her birth. I wrote them to be as hard-edged as I could make them at that age. Which meant they were totally different in style and texture than the "High Fantasy" trilogy. Conan-esque in many ways.

Well, the trilogy sold to Donning/Starblaze in 1980, but never came out because of a change of editors. But part of

the reason it sold was simply that people liked Chimquar. At which point I had to scratch my head and wonder what it was that I did right—or wrong. I had editors actually ask for me to write them a Chimquar story.

When I finally started writing again it was not in the style I used in Moonstone. It was that of Chimquar. The tail had not only wagged the dog, it had transmogrified the dog. To further help you understand Chimquar, let me tell you about Shaurone, the realm she came from and put her world in perspective.

Shaurone is one of the strongest realms on the continent of Merezia on a world called Daverana, after their earth god (no gender endings) Davera. Daverana was nearly destroyed by the legions, wives, and get of a hellgod. The devastation destroyed all but a single deity in the opposing pantheon whose cry for aid was answered one winter solstice and eight emerged from the ether with their legions to throw him back. Bellocar proved too strong at the end for these young gods to destroy and they sealed him and his surviving wives and get behind a great escarpment wall with magic and technology. The escarpment lies at the northernmost edge of the Murshay'di where Chimquar wanders in her largely self-imposed exile, battling his minions who would release him if they could.

Then these gods set about cleaning up the mess. They brought in settlers from the distant worlds of their birth, some with familiar technologies and magics and other with far different. Their settlers were drawn from among thousands of tiny fragments of cultures, individuals who called out to them

in moments of dire need and the fragments were forced to merge in order to survive, creating complex hybrid cultures. However, these gods and their legions did not get all the dark creatures and there are still uncleansed continents sealed off across the seas. Two continents are slowly being settled, Merezia and Jedrua; a third has been opened, Ursarius; Sealandia has been taken as the god Willodarus' private preserve for his sylvans; but there are nine continents in all. The Chimquar stories are set on the continent of Merezia, which is the most settled of them. Dark things creep out.

The Sharani are a genetic and magical mutation that requires three parents to produce viable offspring and, for that reason, form triadic marriages: sire, bloodmother and wombmother. The women are ferocious fighters and devout paladins struggling against the servants of the hellgod, Bellocar.

I eliminated the feminine endings on words (priest instead of priestess) except when necessary to show cultural differences. And I developed an independent set of neuter words. Among the Sharani, when you put the gender on words (whether male or female) it makes the word a diminutive or an intimate pronoun.

The Chimquar stories are set during the first maneuverings of the renewed godwar. She doesn't realize it yet, but all Hell is about to break loose.

[Author's note: The stories has been altered slightly from the original due to the way the cultures have evolved in later works]

THE END

In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk
by Janrae Frank

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At age eight, while Janrae Frank was hospitalized with polio, her grandmother presented her with an expensive pen and pencil set with the admonition to go out and "whip them with a pencil." Janrae interpreted this as "get good grades and write books." She was first published in 1979, in *AMAZONS* (edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson), the volume that went on to win the World Fantasy Award for best anthology of 1980. She sold a handful of short stories and then a trilogy to Donning/Starblaze before leaving fiction for a 15 year stint in journalism which included pieces published in *Movieline* and the *Washington Post*. During that same period she worked as an outside editor on new age and metaphysical books for Newcastle and Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc., among others. While *MY SISTER'S KEEPER* is under editorial consideration, she finished three sequels to the book. Janrae lives alone with her Chihuahua mix dog, Leviathan (Levy for short).

Her collection, *In The Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk* is available in trade paperback from Wildside.

Her blogs can be found at:

www.livejournal.com/users/cussedness

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