

THE HUMAN MEMOIRS
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PART I

I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made

--HOUSMAN

Running feet pattered and clicked on worn flagstones, the sound echoing hollowly through the Library's cold stone corridors. Of course running in the Citadel was frowned upon, but at this hour the halls were practically deserted; the only ones around to witness such infractions were the rats and mice, and they couldn't care less.

The cavernous oval floor of the foyer - packed with students during daylight hours - was as deserted as the rest of the Library. Beyond the antique leaded glass of the high ceiling dome, night-bound clouds scudded across the sky, seemingly just arm's length outside. He blinked up at fat raindrops blatting against the glass and shivered; the heating was turned down for the night, not that it ever made much of a difference in a room this size anyway. Somewhere in the library an old water clock chimed the hour, making him glance at his timepiece for confirmation. He grimaced. Rot it! Late enough already.

In the dimness, terminals - a few with green characters flickering up their screen - stared glassily from their cubicles. Beyond the glass partitions, row upon row of ancient shelves stretched off into the shadowy vaults. The soundproofed viewing and study chambers were tucked away in a quiet corner behind a row of wood-paneled doors, one with the 'IN USE' plate glowing. He sighed and took a guess at exactly what she'd say, then opened the door.

"You took your time!"

He grinned. Close enough.

Mas swung her feet off the edge of the desk, spun the chair around and glared up at him as the door hissed shut behind him. One finger was impatiently drumming a tattoo on the well-worn upholstered armrest. "So, did you bring it?"

"Love you too," he retorted, flopping into the second chair. She glared at him. "All right! I got it," he waved the plastic case under her nose. "Why did you have to wait for the last minute anyway?"

"I had other business," she growled.

He'd heard that one before. "Sure. More important than your finishing grade?"

"Yes."

"Oh? What? Someone die?"

She stared at him, then began to bristle. "None of your business!"

"All right." He shrugged. "Sorry. Forget it. Anyway, you could have booked some of the libraries disks earlier in the year."

"I didn't know they'd all be booked out. That festering video they showed; suddenly everyone wants the disks. Great timing," Mas scratched fingers against the wooden countertop, "Just in time for a thesis. Why on earth did they set THIS as the topic?!"

"Come on. You know it's customary for every Academy graduate to do it."

"Every year?" she asked with a wrinkle of her nose. "You'd think the 'Great Learned Ones' would be filled to the back teeth reading all those recycled essays. Most of the students just load a thesis saved a year ago and rewrite it. If you look through the files you'll see they all seem remarkably similar."

"Those files're supposed to be locked!"

"Huh!" she snorted. "You of all people should know the locks they use are a joke. There's no way they can keep a dedicated system wanderer out. If you know the right people and right software, you can get access to anything."

"You wouldn't!"

She just grinned at him.

Perhaps she would. That was her style: all take and no give. He didn't know why he'd agreed to help her. A strange one she was: Only recently arrived at the Academy, perhaps not even from the east coast. Intelligent enough - in the Academy that went without saying - probably smarter than he was, but also incredibly aloof and arrogant. Nobody knew anything more about her other than that she kept herself separate from everyone else, never entering into relationships: a frigid bitch to all appearances. He'd never known anyone who had even claimed to have spent a night with her. He had never found her files in the admin system. She seemed to be a nobody, but nevertheless she held some kind of sway over the establishment, that was the only way they'd been able to bend the rules and get into the Library after hours.

Her arrival at his dorm had come as a complete surprise and her request. . . no, her demand for help on this project had left him flustered and tongue-tied. Perhaps if he'd been thinking straight he wouldn't have agreed to help. It was his high academic achievements that'd caught her attention and he knew in his gut that when she'd squeezed him for all he was worth, she'd dump him.

Somehow, he didn't care.

Frigid she may be, but she was also undeniably attractive; any red-blooded male would gladly give a testicle for a chance to be shut in a cubicle with her. A shame she had a tendency to turn it into an experience akin to being shut in refrigerator. A real waste.

He sighed. . . Oh well. "If you're going to do it that way, what do you need me for? I'll just let you get on with it." He began to stand but she kicked his feet out so he fell back into the chair.

"Sit down! You're a walking encyclopedia when it comes to this kind of thing. And I know you get a rush out of doing it. Already got a career planned out, haven't you? What was it? Historics and Research?"

"Uh. . . yes. How'd you know?"

"Heard you in the canteen."

"Oh." When had that been? He hadn't been to the canteen for. . .

"I can't understand why you enjoy this kind of thing," she snorted. "We could be researching something practical, like matrix memory, or the space probes and parallel junction projects."

"And where'd those come from?" He waved the disk. "Aren't you forgetting who actually suggested those ideas. We've just developed the capabilities to actually build them."

"History!" she muttered. "Shackles of expectations!"

"Huh?"

"Nothing." She shook her head. "Just forget it."

"Forget it? You like riddles?"

"No. It's nothing. Just something my father once told me."

"Your. . ."

"Don't ask!" she snapped. "Now we've got work to do. That video: how accurate was it?"

"Uh. . ." her sudden change of tact had thrown him. Her father, that was a fascinating slip. There was more there. . . but later. "I. . . It was fairly well done, but of course you could still tell they were costumes. And they 'cleaned it up' a little: rearranged parts to make it more interesting." He flipped the disk box in the air and caught it again. "This transcription is copied verbatim from the original translation. Well, as close as possible anyway. Everything's there."

"Great," she muttered unenthusiastically. "Ah, well. What about the museum? You recommend it?"

"Definitely! You haven't seen anything until you've seen them in the flesh, so to speak. Weird!" he chuckled, then added, "And you should look up their mating habits. That's got some interesting tidbits."

Mas snorted, snatched the case and popped it open, checking the disk's label before dropping it into the drive. The screen flickered, the manufacturer's logo blinking across the top, then the disk's boot sectors took over and a menu appeared, icons arranged in neat rows. Mas selected one, pressed the puck's button and the drive light flickered for a second, then the high-resolution digitized graphic of an ancient, worn leather volume appeared on the screen along with title and dates. Beat his old system back home clear out of the running speedwise, and the graphics were so clear they seemed to jump out of the glass. Another few seconds then the screen cleared and the text of the translation began to scroll down the VDU.

"Put it up on the big screen," he suggested, then after a few seconds added, "Who knows, you might even find this interesting."

She bared teeth back at him and he smiled to himself.

At the touch of a key, the featureless black wall above the monitor flickered, text appeared on it, the lights dimmed. Without another word the pair settled back in their chairs and began to read.

THE HUMAN MEMOIRS

This ain't no technological breakdown,
this is the road to hell. . .

Chris Rea's voice faded in a burst of white noise, then pulsed back to full strength again as the transistor radio swung like a electronic pendulum from the dash. The headlamps of the world-weary Deuce n' a Half illuminated the road ahead for fifty meters in the clear night air, the catseyes down the center glaring back at the truck as the lights swept over and past them. I squirmed on the uncomfortable seat, trying to work some feeling back into my numb tailbone. I think they cut cost in the earlier models: welding the axle directly to the chassis without bothering with suspension.

"Will you stop squirming like that!" Tenny Dalton shifted gear and glared at me, his face turned into a cragged monstrosity by the faint green

glow of the dash. The stub of cigar jutting from his mouth glowed like a malevolent LED. "You got a rash or something?"

"Not yet," I groaned and stretched melodramatically, "but it's only a matter of time. Where are we anyway?"

"How should I know? You've got the map."

"You don't NEED a map!" I protested, then rubbed my eyes and picked up the flashlight from the dash, illuminating my watch. "Shit. We should have caught up with them an hour ago."

"Hey! I've been going where you tell me. You sure it's the right damned road?"

I leaned back and flashed the battered old angelhead at the map strapped to the dash. "Uh, what's this road?"

"Ah. . . last sign was US29 to Charlottesville."

"Uh-huh." I squinted at the map. "Uh. . . Yeah, that's what I've got here. How long ago was that? Half an hour?"

"'Bout that."

"Well, next stop's. . . " I peered at the confusion of lines, "Lynchburg. . . I think. That's not too far now. Might catch up there."

"Shit. Better hope we do," Tenny growled. "Can't you imagine it? Trundling into camp two hours after the others. A truckload of live ammo rolling around the countryside unescorted, SOP out the window. . . Shit, Jefferson'd have a field day." He slapped the wheel in disgust, then reached over to fiddle with the radio as it faded out again. "What the fuck's wrong with this thing?"

"You put fresh batteries in it? Try another station. If the coil hadn't died on us back there there. . . "

"Oh, yeah. Whose fault was that? You're the mechanical whizkid. You were supposed to overhaul it in the pool. 'Sure,' you said, 'get right on it' you said." He clamped down on the cigar again; the tip glowed furiously as he puffed away on the reeking thing. "And get your feet down."

"I did the coil," I snorted, dropped my feet and made a show of dusting off the scratched metal. "It'd take me years to fix everything on this heap."

"Heap?" He actually sounded outraged. "Don't criticise a classic piece of machinery. He patted the worn steering wheel affectionately. "She don't like that kind of abuse, do ya girl?"

"Talking to a truck. . . " I shook my head despairingly. "Have you ever thought about professional help? Or at least a long, long vacation?"

He laughed and took his right hand off the wheel to flick me the finger. "You're going to eat them words," he grinned. "It's a good truck. I like the way it handles."

I stuck my feet up on the dash again, unintimidated. "You're only saying that cause you keep drawing the short straw. It handles like a four ton lump of shit. I mean, hell, even SLEP didn't want anything to do with it."

"Really?" he asked lightly and the truck lurched over to the right.

I glanced over at him, "You trying to prove. . . OHSHIT!!" I yelled and grabbed for the dash as a car's lights glared from around a corner, the driver hit his horn and Tenny held it to the last second. Tires screamed as the truck lurched back to the left side of the road and a seconds later the vehicle itself flashed past us.

"Jesus Christ!"

"Might have been," Tenny said with a glance in the mirror. "I didn't see."

I shook my head. Join the Army; See interesting places; Meet interesting people. It's a man's life. . . And then there's the Quartermasters Corps. It's a living. It pays more than regular army, and I was scraping for every cent I could. These days college really costs.

One of the rules engraved in the rank and files' unofficial handbook is 'never volunteer'. Okay. That's no problem. You don't have to volunteer: they do it for you. You can wake up one morning and find you've pulled a duty riding shotgun on a fifty year old truck on a run from Fort Delvoir out of DC

down to Fort Jackson with a couple of tons of outdated military hardware on the bed.

And then to cap it all was the driver. . .

Tenny Dalton: PFC, old friend. Oh, he could drive all right. In fact the way he handled a truck was downright uncanny, as were some of the other things he did. Everything he did he accomplished well and with a slight air of indifference, as though he really wasn't trying. This applied whether he was overhauling an engine or coming on to one of the noble Ladies in a dive in Jacksonville. Still, they weren't as annoying as his insistence on smoking: cigars of all things.

I coughed and tried to fan a streamer of smoke aside. Useless to ask him to chuck it; he'd sooner amputate his right hand. I don't know where the hell he got them from, but he only smoked Havanahs.

I just wound the window down a bit further and let cold air whip around my face. When the local FM station vanished completely into the sea of static, Tenny spent only a few seconds fiddling with the dial, then snapped it off.

The engine growled and the transmission grated, then settled down again as the truck started up a grade. The shadows of the trees along the roadside blurred past in the darkness and occasionally the bluish-white smear of the cloud-covered moon was visible through the black crests of trees and mounatins.

With nothing to see or say, I yawned, then settled back to doze. Well, I meant to doze. Not my fault I dropped off completely.

A slap on my shoulder snapped me out of my slumber. "Davies. HEY! Davies!"

I yawned, shook my head and roled my shoulders. Damn kink in my neck. "Huh? Wassup?" There was no sign of civilisation outside. Just trees, darkness, trees, and more darkness. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere near Roanoke." He was leaning forward, trying to watch the sky.

"Oh. . . WHAT?" I grabbed for the map. "Damnation! You decide to take the scenic route did you?" How the hell did I sleep through that? "Why didn't you wake me?"

That wasn't a rhetorical question, but he still didn't answer. "Hey! The power was out when we went through Lynchburg. Lights and everything. I took the wrong turnoff. . . Look, there's something weird going on. Check the sky and tell me if you see anything."

"Huh? The martians coming?"

"Goddammit! Will you look!"

What the hell was he on about? I shrugged and wound down the window. "Oh, wow man!"

"You see it?" he urged, just about smearing his face across the dusty windshield in his efforts to see upwards.

"There's nothing there," I told him. "You were perhaps expecting the Hindenburg? You should check those cigars: anything besides tobacco in there?" I grinned and looked up in time to see a bolt of white-blue lighting arc across the sky. Less than a second later the horizon ahead flashed with a white glare that died just as fast.

"Holy shit!"

"You see that?" Tenny yelled, his voice too loud in the cab. "You see it?!"

"Yeah. Weirdest lightning I ever saw. . . There's another!"

"And another!"

The bolts had all originated at different places in the sky, but they all seemed to finish at the same spot, out of sight down the road. The sky just over the hill was pulsing like a gigantic strobelight. I stared as more pulses of blue-white light snapped across the night sky. The clouds had cleared, the stars bright.

"No clouds," I muttered.

Tenny glanced at me, then fixed his attention on the road again. His fingers flexed on the wheel. "Yeah, I noticed. . . What the fuck is it?"

"Ball lightning?"

"Say what?"

"Fireballs. A kind of lightning. . . maybe." I leaned out of the side window, peering ahead. "I can't see anything, I. . . SHIT!" I cursed and ducked as the air above my head was ionized.

That time the bolt came from behind us, 'bout ten meters above the road and going straight ahead, it disappeared into the darkness ahead. A couple of seconds later, the sharp crack of its passage hit.

Tenny hadn't even noticed the near miss, he was staring at something else.

SOMETHING was forming in the air ahead. . . no, all around us. No real shape to it, a whirlpool of the deepest blue hanging in the air, like one of those laser light shows. Jagged bolts of cyan and electric blue lighting materialized out of thin air and shot into the vortice, highlighting it and the surrounding landscape in strobing flashes of surreal color.

We were heading right for the hub of the thing.

The hood of the truck blazed with dazzling corona discharges and St. Elmo's fire coruscated around the headlamps and other metal fixtures. The radio blared to life with a scream of static as electrical sparks flared on the antenna.

"STOP!!" I screamed. There was a continuous almost sub-sonic rumble from the mega-high voltage plasma sculpture building in front of us.

He snarled something back. Bitten in half, the glowing stub of the cigar dropped into the foot well. He had already floored the brake and clutch. Nothing. He jammed the transmission into reverse: A spectacular shower of sparks gouted from the back wheels and tortured metal under the truck screamed, but we kept going.

I grabbed for the dash and yelped as fat blue sparks kicked me back.

Whatever it was, we hit it at seventy five. . .

And kept going, right through it.

Hit something with an impact that almost broke my neck, the front of the truck leaving the ground, superstructure protesting while the engine noise went off into an earsplitting whine. There was a retort that could only be an axle breaking, then the headlights illuminated flashing glimpses of grass, stones, and trees.

Pounding and crashing as the crates in the back broke loose. I was thrown against Tenny, then against the door as the truck fishtailed, threatening to roll, then the door broke open and everything was still for long seconds then a giant backhanded me and everything spun, rolling and bouncing against bushes and rocks. Stunned, I didn't have time to do anything but lie there gasping for air as the back of the truck slewed past, just missing my head.

It flipped, again and again, rolling and skidding along on its side, sparks flying, canvass flapping and cargo crates tumbling end over end, metal screaming, then something caught and it became a fireball slamming into rocks where it stuck, burning with a vengeance.

"Tenny?"

The explosion ripped the night apart as cargo cooked off, more fireballs bursting to life. There was a sound like machinegun fire. Thousands of tiny trails of smoke arced and corkscrewed high into the air and fell back to earth as smoking and glowing debris was hurled away from the mass of flames. Tracers whined overhead like mad skyrockets.

"TENNY!"

I lurched to my feet, then promptly keeled over again.

Warmth on my face woke me.

I opened my eyes, then closed them nearly immediately, groaning at the morning sun dazzling me. I rolled over onto my hands and knees. The movement startled a family of deer on the edge of the forest. With graceful precision they melted into the trees. I stared after them, then remembered.

The road. . . the lightning. . . the crash. . . Tenny.

It hadn't been a nightmare. Smoke was still curling up from the wreckage of the truck. Blackened and twisted debris was scattered far and wide over across the gentle slope, like driftwood on a beach.

The shattered skeleton was still ticking and pinging as I picked my way around warped pieces of metal, olive crates with blistered paint and contents data stencilled on the sides, small craters gouged in the earth by ordinance cooking off. Gobs of melted lead and objects that were just identifiable as fragments of shell-casings littered the ground. Actually it was surprising that there was this much left of the vehicle. If so much of the cargo hadn't been thrown clear as the bed broke up, the truck would probably have been reduced to pieces too small to find.

Now there was just a framework, the cab scored black with carbon, crumpled like an accordion and tipped to one side. The door on the drivers side was still closed, jammed into place and facing the sky. Where the windshield had been was a hole framed by shards of glass: a mouth with jagged black teeth grinning at me.

Behind it. . . Tenny hadn't gotten out.

I turned away and vomited, hard and violently; heaving until I gagged on bile, felt it running from my nose. Help. Where was help? Surely someone had seen the fire! The road. . . there were cars, trucks. . . I coughed on smoke and puke then ran for the road.

A few paces into the forest I stumbled to a halt, leaning against the slender bole of a pine. The road! Where was the fuck was the freeway?!

A road isn't something that wanders off by itself. People don't steal them. Still, it wasn't there. For fruitless hours I searched for it; wandering around in circles, climbing hills and trees. All around me, as far as I could see to the east: trees, trees, and trees, finally fading into the horizon. Westwards were The Smokies, seemingly unchanged in the brilliant afternoon sun.

There was no, repeat no, road.

Numb, not understanding I returned to the clearing to wait. Something else I noticed. The scars the truck had torn into the grass: They ran about forty meters from the wreck before stopping.

In the middle of a gently sloping grade, covered with summer-gold grass, the tracks just. . . stopped.

The night was chill. I curled up close to the small fire, lying there with my eyes open, watching the flames. Strange to be almost killed by fire, to have friend die by flame, then use fire to keep me alive. I shuddered, then closed my eyes and tried not to dream.

Something that night woke me.

There was movement on the periphery of the light cast from the dying campfire. Shadows, like circling sharks orbiting just beyond the terminator. Many eyes glowed dull red, feet brushed against grass and pine needles. A low rumbling hung in the air.

I rolled to my feet, reaching for a knife that wasn't there. Out of the darkness, like a ghost from the shadows, a grey wolf materialized, head low and growling.

"Uh, sit boy," I said.

It snarled. I yelled as it lunged toward me, teeth bared. It hit me low, tumbling me backwards. I caught handfuls of fur and kicked, sent the animal flying over my head. Sparks exploded into the night and a terrified howling cut the air as the wolf landed in the fire. Coat blazing, it

scrambled to its feet and fled. I could see it running across the field like a flare, its fur burning brighter and streaming sparks.

There were still more of them out there. I took up a hefty branch, only just smouldering, and fanned it in the air until the glowing end burst into flame. Another wolf lunged towards me and I jammed the brand into its mouth. It yelped and turned tail and ran as fire lapped from its mouth, catching on its facial fur. Waving the burning branch, I yelled and charged the remaining wolves. They retreated before me, but stopped when I stopped.

I turned in time to jab another attacking creature in the eye. It leapt backwards and rolled on the ground, yelping in agony, then bolted blindly for the trees. Now they'd had enough. The pack melted away into the night, in search of easier prey.

I stood there panting hard. Wolves?! In Virginia! Attacking a human! This was beyond bizarre.

For the rest of the night I didn't sleep. Instead sitting by the fire, snapping awake with my heart pounding whenever I began nodding off.

I used the piece of spring steel to prise the lid off another case from which the stencilled lettering had been obliterated by heat. The top came off with a screech of nails, revealing neatly stacked rows of olive green 81mm mortar shells. Thank god they still had their handling caps on. If they'd cooked off in the crash, I wouldn't be writing this. In another case I found the fuzes for the shells. Impact fuzes. Another box yielded grenades. Another a trio of M-60 GPMGs, one with its bipod twisted and carry handle snapped off. Three 81mm mortar tubes survived intact, along with five of the Stokes-Brandt bases. Hell, those things were practically indestructible.

Case after case I went through. We'd been hauling a miscellaneous shipment, surplus and outdated equipment, everything from ammunition and weapons to socks to the old cans of C-rations. While some stuff'd been turned to charcoal briquettes, a surprising amount had survived intact. I sorted through the mess of crates and boxes, gathered together some bits and pieces to keep me alive and kicking if I had to walk out of here: food concentrates, canteen, pack, knife, and a few other odds and ends.

However the object I had really been seeking I finally found lying under a bush: a case with the legend M-16A1 GI867503 PROPERTY OF US ARMY stencilled in black on olive green. I tore the box open and hefted one of the black weapons. Inspection revealed no firing pins in the rifle. I had to crack open a case of spares for those. And for the ammunition. . .

I knew for a fact that we'd had twenty ammo cases with one thousand twenty four rounds each of the old 5.56 ammunition, about five of the standard IMR NATO 5.56 rounds, another twenty of 7.62mm, and fifteen 12.7mm listed on the inventory. I found twelve metal cases of the smaller caliber rifle ammunition and four catering to the heavier 7.62 GPMG rounds. Although I also found five containers of 12.7mm ammo, they were useless. Even if I did have a weapon of that caliber, I wouldn't be carrying it around with me. However it might have been useful in case I came up against - say - a hostile tank.

Not that likely in Virginia.

I overloaded on ammo: three hundred and sixty rounds of Armalite ammo, enough to fill twelve thirty round magazines. I scrounged six clips and filled those, the excess rounds I loaded into canvas belt pouches.

Obsolete hardware. Surplus. Scorched and dented, but more than enough had come through to ensure that if those crazy canines came back I didn't have to worry about being turned into dog food.

So, from the remains of the truck I came away with an M-16 with an Armalon optical sight and three hundred and sixty rounds of 5.56mm ammunition. A silver-anodized survival blanket sealed in its packet, the small anglehead flashlight that'd also survived intact, one canteen, a couple of C-Rations

packs, a pizo-electric cigarette lighter (almost full), a digital Casio watch, a small notebook and ballpoint pen. The small medical kit contained antiseptics, antibiotics, a vial and styrettes of morphine, old fashioned gauze bandages, surgical suture and needles, three syringes(Disposable).

The small tool kit for the M-16 yielded a set of allen wrenches, a couple of small screwdrivers, some three-in-one oil, and some spare screws, nuts, and firing pins. My sheath knife had the standard Bowie blade with a hollow pommel concealing a spool of approximately ten meters of single-strand nylon fishing line, five hooks, and five needles and thread. A gimbaled compass was built into the pommel.

My pack was a canvass job; singed, acceptably waterproof and very tough. My helmet was my own, one of the new kevlar coalscuttle jobs. I'd found it near the ruined cab: slightly scorched, but otherwise fine.

For clothing I had what I was wearing on my back as well as a lifetimes supply of oversized shirts and socks. Didn't bother me too much. It wouldn't take me that long to find a house or gas station; somewhere I could use a phone or stop a car. I'd survived basic training so I could live off the land if need be. This wouldn't be too much different.

That out of the way I took another two hours to collect the dangerous hardware together and hide it a short distance away in the trees. The branches I cut to cover the pile would die and turn brown eventually, a dead giveaway, but it would keep until someone came for it. Leaving it lying around for some redneck or hillbilly to stumble across wasn't a fantastic idea.

Then there was time for a parting look at the blackened mass of twisted metal that was Tenny's impromptu coffin. That one look into the cab had been one look too many. It was hard to believe that what I had seen had once been a good friend. I swallowed hard.

"I'll be back," I choked. "Promise. Get you a decent burial."

A final informal salute, then I slung my pack over my shoulder, plonked the helmet on my head, and set off eastwards. I looked back several times, until the wreck was hidden by trees.

As the day went on I grew more and more disquieted. There was no way that I could have walked that long without seeing SOME sign of man.

But I had.

It was creepy.

I didn't sleep well that night. Several times I awoke abruptly, heart beating a tattoo on my breastbone as I strained to hear something that was no longer there. Something seemed very wrong, but I couldn't place it. I laid back and tried to pinpoint it until I slept again.

Next day I started east again. Damnation! I was in the middle of some of the most populated land in the U. S. : there was no way that I could walk for any distance without coming across some sign of civilization: a house, a road, a gas station, even a plane. . . anything. At this rate my next stop would be the Atlantic ocean.

I saw more animals: raccoons and red squirrels chattered at me, deer that placidly watched as I passed by. I heard the deep belling of a moose or elk. This far south?! Nothing was right. Was I in the middle of a wildlife park? How?

Later that day I did come across a road running north-south. Well. . . not exactly a road, more of a track. Maybe a trail used by rangers. It did seem well used, but the tracks were weird: much too narrow to be car or truck. Perhaps bicycle or trailbike tracks. I shrugged, then decided which way to go. North or south.

"Eenie, menie, minie, moe. . . ."

South I went.

The twin tracks of packed earth in the grass rose over an exposed and

eroded crest then slowly turned and dipped into a broad, shallow valley. Lush greenery - huge trees of every description - cloaked the length and breadth of the valley floor while fields of wind-blown grasses grew along the gentle slopes : turning golden from the summer sun that also coaxed heat-shimmers from the ground.

And the track simply dipped down to follow the valley, two faint ruts through the long grass before it vanished from sight in the treeline below.

Sweating in the midday heat and humidity, my shirt stripped away and used as padding between the straps of the backpack and my chafed collarbone, I shaded my eyes with the blade of my hand and looked around. I was starting to feel desperate. . . and scared! It was impossible, utterly impossible that I could have walked for so long and yet have seen absolutely nobody. Still there was nothing. Not a building or vehicle anywhere. I sighed, spat phlegm, hitched the pack up and started down into the valley.

It was like something out of the fucking Twilight Zone: There had to be somebody somewhere!

The steady tramp, tramp of my boots was a continuous, monotonous, mindless rhythm that went on and on. Each footstep raised a small cloud of dusty ochre Virginia clay, turning the olive drab of my fatigues a rusty red. At least nearer the river it was cooler, the more luxurious flora offering some shade.

Shadows began to stretch out again as noon passed and the afternoon crawled across the countryside. High overhead a hawk circled and hovered before diving upon some unsuspecting rodent. I sighed a deep breath, wiped sweat from my forehead then threw the pack and rifle aside and sprawled out in the grass on the verge. For a few seconds I considered taking my boots off, then thought better of it: I'd never be able to get them on again. The water in the canteen was warm - almost hot - but it was wet. I took a mouthful, swilled it around, then spat out a mixture of water and the grit that I'd accumulated. I raised the canteen again and this time took a deep draught. And froze with the bottle against my lips, water spilling down my chin. The faint sound of metal grating on metal.

I lowered the canteen and listened hard. Wind rustled leaves and birdsong was bantered back and forth through the trees.

Then it came again; slowly growing louder, more distinct, closer. A faint creaking and the unmistakable rumble of wheels being tested to destruction on the pathetic excuse for a road. It was coming from behind me; back the way I had come.

"Alright!" I whooped, then my grin faded: there was no engine sound.

No matter. I fumbled the camp back on the canteen and and grabbed my equipment. Tipping my helmet back on my head I stood to wait for them. The day no longer seeming so stifling, a cooling breeze seemed to have sprung up from somewhere. There were a few questions I wanted to ask whoever this was. One that came to mind was: where the hell was I? a private estate of some kind?

Abruptly they rounded the corner, shafts of sunlight shining through the canopy above illuminating patches of dust as the breeze wafted it away from wagon wheels and the llamas' hooves.

Llamas?!

I stumbled to a halt and just stared stupidly as they clattered to an abrupt standstill, bleating and tossing their heads. I stared at them, then at the riders.

Is this a joke?!

The llamas skittered impatiently and moved forward and I saw it was for real.

I bolted.

Branches and leaves tore at my face and arms and roots tried to steal my feet from under me as I stumbled and careened blindly through the foliage with yowling cries sounding behind me. Then there was an embankment rising before me: A near-vertical face of dark, crumbling earth, carpeted with multi-fronded ferns and held together by a labyrinth of tree roots. I hardly slowed as I

clawed my way to the top, to fall flat on my face and scramble around to see if they'd followed.

The road was just visible through the boughs, trunks, and foliage; less than thirty meters away. I wiped sweat from my eyes, liberally smearing myself with dirt at the same time, and saw the riders staring back, gesticulating wildly amongst themselves, pointing towards me.

"Oh Christohchristohchrist. . . ." I was babbling to myself as I leaned back against a moss-covered boulder, out of sight for the moment. When I looked again, they were still there. One of them had dismounted and come a few paces into the trees. I grabbed for the rifle and snapped the bolt back, safety off, but held my fire.

Eyes the green of molten emerald held my disbelieving stare and I shivered at the chill that ran up and down my spine on spider's feet. For an eternity the tableau held; that thing staring at me, our eyes locked. It can't be. . .

And I jumped backwards when the creature turned and barked at the others then it caught its llama's reigns and swung back into the saddle, waving the others on past. They left quickly, the single wagon gathering speed and rumbling off after them.

For a few moments the single remaining creature on its llama did nothing but watch me, then the furred muzzle wrinkled and sharp teeth grinned at me. My finger tightened on the trigger, but the rider had reigned its llama about and was hurrying to catch the others.

The sounds of their passage faded into the distance.

Several minutes later, my heart pounding, I climbed back down to the road. There wasn't a sound, not a sign of the creatures. I stepped into one of the dusty ruts with the rifle at the ready.

But there were the hoof marks, llama droppings, and thin hard lines like bike tracks gouged into the clay by iron-bound wheels.

Perhaps I should have gone the other way. Perhaps it would have been for the better, but hindsight tells me that my fate would almost certainly have been a grisly death. . . or worse. I have spent my time in a cage and do not relish the thought of living my life out in one.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?!"

My scream to the heavens echoed through the trees and hills, scaring birds, but eliciting no other answer. What WAS going on? I couldn't explain it and my brain was threatening to curl up and play peek-a-boo from some remote corner of my cranium. I wanted to head for the hills, anywhere.

But then you'll never know what happened.

I don't WANT to know!

Yes, you do. . .

Chalk one up for human curiosity. I followed them.

The river - a broad, shallow stream actually - followed its meandering path through the valley an oversized ice cube had gouged millennia ago as it inched its way down from the polar icecaps, then retreated again. Along its banks, the trees cast their branches out over the water to form a leafy corridor that didn't quite meet in the middle. Pines: loblolly pines, longleaf pines, slash pines, overcup oaks. . . My knowledge of botany gave out on me.

A cormorant - surprised while drying its wings - took to the air as I approached. It dropped off its perch, skimmed the water and climbed away from the stream that continued burbling along its way.

The road itself twisted and contorted as much as the river as it dodged through and around clusters of trees and boulders: indigenous and erratics. At times it ran along the river bank, while at others it had climbed halfway back up the side of the valley: always following the easiest route. I followed the track, always keeping an eye peeled on forest around me.

The afternoon was beginning to cool off, the shadows growing longer and deeper when I heard the sounds coming from down the road: ringing of metal on metal through the trees. Animal cries and howls wailed through the valley.

What the hell?!

My heart started to pound as I took my rifle into my hands and cocked it. Keeping to the side of the track I moved forward, carefully, like I was walking on glass. Every damn broken twig sounded like a gunshot, but with the noise from ahead, there was no way anything could have heard me.

Then I rounded a tree and saw them.

There was a ford here where the track crossed the river. The wagon sat in the middle, tipped crazily to one side, one of the front wheels almost completely sunken beneath the waterline. The driver was a bundle of cloth and limbs lying face down in the water, the current gently butting the corpse against a rock and wafting a trail of red blood away downstream.

More corpses lay in the shallow current, some still kicking their life away, turning the water to a pinkish froth.

There were others still fighting.

They had to be soldiers of a sort, those creatures from the caravan. Wearing stained and battered leather armour, trimmed with blue and silver designs that despite the dirt were still recognisable as a uniform of a kind. They waded knee-deep in the water fighting wildly against others garbed in a hodge-podge assortment of armour.

And they were losing.

Hampered by the water and the treacherous footing, they didn't stand a chance against their opposition safely entrenched along the banks. Swords whirled and gleamed and grew red, another yowling scream rang out and another of the soldiers fell. Now only four of them left against at least ten assailants.

A couple of the soldiers may have made it out as together they overcame an opponent on the riverbank, then they both twisted and went over backwards, falling with stubby feathered shafts embedded in their necks and chests.

I ducked as more bandits stalked into view between the trees on my side of the river. Just twenty meters away, their backs to me as they recoiled their crossbows. Why were they bothering to get their feet wet assaulting the wagon? They could've just shot them all from a distance.

I sank a little lower behind the tree.

The last soldier was crouched low and slowly turning to face its opponents as they circled, slowly closing in. Backed up against the wagon there was nowhere for it to run, it had no chance, but it still clutched its sword.

I began to move out, leaving the cover of the tree to retreat back down the track. The last thing I wanted here was to be involved in a firefight with. . . with whatever they were. I was out of my league. I didn't know what kind of shit I was in, but whatever it was, I was in it over my head.

Two loud cries came at the same time: one a truncated yowl as that last soldier fell, and the other from the archer who spotted me.

"Ohshit!"

I ducked automatically and a hastily aimed quarrel fired from the hip bisected the space I had occupied a split second earlier. Shit! I ducked behind a pine trunk and there was a sharp Thwok! as a stubby bolt sprouted from the wood near my head.

Red feathers, I thought as I stared idiotically at the arrow, spun around wideeyed to see bows being aimed again and started running as another blur hissed past my ear, then a hollow sound and someone hit my pack with a baseball bat and I stumbled, then dove for cover, headlong into the bracken and undergrowth. Ferns and bushes crackled around me as I scrambled on all fours while more quarrels rattled into the thicket over and around me. A fallen log offered some solid protection and I took it, diving over it and hugging the ground.

There were no more quarrels. Reloading?

Gasping air as quietly as possible, I struggled out of my pack, wincing as leaves and branches rustled. Red feathers were protruding a few centimeters from the canvass. If it hadn't hit something solid, I doubted my backbone would have stopped it. Bastards. Where were they? What were they doing? I listened, hearing wind in the treetops, water burbling, and a faint growling and the crackling of bracken.

Again, shit!

I risked a peek, then hugged the dirt again, mud and slimy leaves rubbing against me.

They were coming after me!

Not many options. . .

I charged the rifle, checking for a flash of bronze in the breach to make sure a round was seated then gripped the rifle, flexing my fingers against chill metal and feeling the checkered grips grow slippery with sweat. Three of them, with swords, taking it slow. The archers didn't have a good angle on me. Just three of them, a few meters apart. I took a breath, clicked the safety off and swung the M-16 up and over, not aiming, squeezing the trigger, the rifle kicking like a jackhammer in my hands, plants jiggling wildly in the muzzle blast. Not three - four of them, one down, the others staring, now starting to react, screaming, skidding and spinning to the dirt as the bursts of slugs buzzsawed into them. First rounds were low and wild, kicking their feet out from under them. I compensated and hit torsos, heads, splintering bone and shredding flesh. They fell, two howling and threshing.

Over the log, dodging and firing at the others. They'd frozen, some standing in the middle of the stream, on the wagon, on the far bank, staring wildly. The archers tried to fire, their shots going wide as I hit the deck again and sprayed them with a wild burst. The first one's head split open like an overripe melon and the corpse crumpled like a deflating balloon; Small, red roses sprouted on the others' torsos and they died slower. NOW the others were turning, running.

I was on my feet again, staying low as I ran and dodged for the cover of rocks and trees by the stream. One of the creatures I'd first hit was rolling and thrashing in the bracken. I shot it in the head on the way past and it bucked once then was still. A bolt from a crossbow struck glittering sparks from a rock near my head.

"Fuck you!" I screamed, firing back, emptying my weapon into the fleeing figures: mowing several down like scythed wheat. When the bolt clicked on an empty chamber I automatically buttoned out the magazine, plucked a fresh one from my belt, and rammed it into the well. I emptied half the magazine at shadows running into the trees, kicking dust and wood chips from the trees, sending rounds ricocheting. I don't think I actually hit any of the bastards. They were fast!

Then they were gone.

Ten seconds perhaps.

Heart still pounding I looked around, clutching the rifle like it was the only solid thing in the world.

In the trees, a couple of birds ventured hesitant calls while the stream continued enthusiastically on its way. There was the slow drip drip as the blood from a corpse on the river bank ran down a rock, beaded on the edge as if gathering its courage before dropping into the swirling water. The wagon rocked as the beasts pulling it - bison, I noticed with dull surprise - tugged at their harnesses. The corpses weren't neat, with chunks of meat the size of baseballs ripped out of them. Blood. . . it was red. Red and glistening like wet paint. A cloying, fecund smell hung heavy in the air: the flatulence of death.

A coughing, moaning sound from the water.

One of the creatures - one of the ones in blue armour - struggled weakly on all fours half in, half out of the water, blood from a gaping slash in its side swirling away with the current. It was dragging itself out of the stream by its hands, kneeling coughing and retching in the mud of the ford.

When my shadow fell across it, it stiffened, raised its head to see my boots, then shuddered and collapsed on its side with a grunt: eyes closed, one outstretched hand curled half-shut, chest heaving while blood mingled with the mud.

I was standing above a creature that could never be, my rifle levelled at it and staring in mute shock while my credulity took a beating.

Putting it bluntly, it was a cat.

Well, my transport problem - probably the least of my worries - was solved. . . sort of.

The hole the wagon wheel had been trapped in had been deliberately dug, deep enough that the wagon couldn't be pulled out. The axle was a solid iron bar that I sincerely hoped was tough enough to take that kind of treatment. To get the damn thing out I had to drench myself in water that felt like it was runoff from a glacier, digging away one side of the hole with my bare hands until the bison were able to pull the wagon out.

They were huge, stupid, reeking beasts, these bison. Not the plains variety every American should be familiar with, but rather Wood Bison: a much rarer breed. So rare in fact, they were an endangered species. Not recommended as beasts of burden.

Endangered or not, and despite their problems with personal hygiene, they seemed docile and efficient: hauling the wagon from the water on the southern side of the stream and waiting with moronic patience, chewing and farting.

Hmmm. . . and people wonder why I hate horses. I shook my head and tried to wring the last of the water from my shirt, then hesitated and looked back across the stream at where a furry body was still sprawled in the mud; one among many.

Water splashed around my ankles, but there wasn't a sign of life as I cautiously approached. Motionless, eyes closed, twisted crippled-looking hand clenched in the mud. The wound was a sodden mess, the blood as thick as the mud it was sprawled in. Liquid bubbled in a nostril.

Incredible, it was still breathing. I poked it with my toe.

The thing didn't budge.

I bent down and touched it cautiously. It didn't respond. The fur was soggy wet, the flesh beneath nearly hot to my fingers. Kill it? Uh-uh. That didn't feel right. It couldn't hurt me. So, do I just leave it lying here?

"Damned if I do, damned if I don't," I sighed.

Now, how the hell do I do this?

Gingerly, awkwardly, I scooped the sodden creature up.

The felinoid was a limp weight in my arms, its limbs completely lax and bumping against my own legs as I lifted. Its head lolled and saliva drooled from a corner of the mouth with its thin, black lips. Water washed around my legs again as I crossed the stream; carefully, unsteady with my burden. The thing was surprisingly heavy; I had to struggle to lift it into the back of the cart. This creature was much shorter than my five foot eleven - probably an even foot shorter, maybe more - but it was solid; not fat either. There was already a blue-armoured corpse in the wagon that I hauled out and dumped on the ground to make room for the still-living creature.

The upper half of the creature was almost completely encrusted in drying mud while the lower was sopping wet where it'd been lying in the water. Covering its upper legs was a sodden kilt made from wide strips of tooled leather, weighted at the lower ends with brass disks. Blood continued to ooze from a slash high in its left side, seeping through the reinforcing strips of the once-ornate leather cuirass it was wearing.

First, get that armour off. That had me scratching my head: there were no zippers, buckles, or buttons; just leather ties securing it up the left side and on the shoulders. The wet leather had swollen; resisted all attempts

to untie them. Finally I settled for cutting them and peeling both the cuirass and kilt off in one piece.

Judging by the way the plumbing was arranged, it was a she. There were no breasts to speak of, just twin columns of three black teats buried in the fur.

The sword had broken through the tough-looking skin and cut into the side at an angle before being deflected by a rib, ripping away one of those teats as it went. There was a non-too-modest flap of flesh dangling loose while a lot of blood had pumped out, covering and matting the fur. Still more had been lost to the earth and the river.

What was lying in front of me was way beyond anything I'd ever covered in my basic medical training. Perhaps nothing serious had been hit; then again, perhaps it had. How was it put together? Was its metabolism anything like mine? What medicines could I use? How the hell was I supposed to know? Stuff like simple aspirin can kill a cat.

Was it worth it? I bit my lip, then swore and reached for my pack.

The quarrel was still stuck into it, stopped by a pack of C-rations. I turned the dented tin over in my hands, not quite believing it. Saved by a freeze-dried meal. I knew the stuff was tough, but using it instead of a flak vest..?

Of course the med kit had wound up at the bottom. I snapped it open, and selected a small plastic bottle of antiseptic and a roll of gauze. Nothing to lose. I used my knife, methodically cutting away the fur and dirt around the wound, washing away filth: clotted blood, mud, and grass with water from my canteen. That wouldn't be enough.

The creature stirred and its jaw spasmed as I prised the wound open with my fingers and squirted antiseptic from the squeeze bottle into it. I swabbed it out, then tore open a large sterilised gauze pad, bandaging it tightly in place even as blood started welling again.

Tossing aside the ruined armour, I stripped one of the cleaner cloaks off a corpse and settled that over the cat, again finding I was hesitant to touch it. Its breathing was rapid, almost panting.

All the others were as dead as luncheon meat.

I avoided the messy body with half a face grinning uselessly at the clouds when I examined the corpses. One of the other archers was sprawled in the middle of a bush, his/her chest punctured where the rounds had smashed through. The shock would have killed faster than the wound. S/he was dressed in rag-tag cloak, but the armour underneath looked well used and functional. Red and black. It looked like a uniform. The crossbow lying nearby wasn't that large or powerful, but that was simply due to the diminutive stature of the user. It was well made: laminated wood and metal, with recurved tines of wood and bone and some kind of twisted fibre. Six quarrels were clamped to the stock; each about twenty centimeters long with a wicked triangular iron tip.

I weighed it in my hands. Oh, well. You never know when something like that might come in handy. Then another thought struck me and I frowned at the creature in the back of the wagon. Its armour was in pieces. Would it want clothes?

What was I thinking? Clothes?!

I shook my head, but still managed to scrounge some stuff from a soldier. It'd been stabbed through the throat, covering the front of the cuirass with blood. Nevertheless, it was in much better condition than the stuff I'd cut off.

The creature's sword: a beautifully crafted scimitar. I found it in the middle of the stream where it'd dropped it. I picked it up, shaking and wiping the water and mud off it and holding it up so the sun threw dazzling reflections off the slightly curving blade. Nice piece of metal. I tried a few practice swings and nearly took my own leg off. Hastily I stuck it back in the sheath then tucked it up on the drivers bench, out of reach of furry hands.

I looked back over the scene. Like something out of a picture: the

stream, lush greenery dappled by light and tall trees, patches of sky and clouds. Then there were the figures tumbled like distorted shop mannequins, blue against green, water running over glittering metal and leather, teeth bared in hopeless snarls at the sun. Shaking my head, I tried to figure the reigns out. How DO you drive bison? To start with, there's no clutch. . .

I made camp several klicks further down the river valley.

The road split at a junction: one branch continuing eastwards along the river, the other climbing out of the valley, going south. I rubbed my tired eyes then decided not to make a decisioin, not until I could learn more about my passenger and what was going on.

It wouldn't hurt to hang around a few days; I doubted that the bandits would be back, and there was a terrible feeling that there wouldn't be any search parties out looking for me.

It took a while to find a suitable campsite, but I finally settled on a small, grassy clearing. Close enough to the stream for convenience and far enough from the road that any fire couldn't be seen. Roughly triangular in shape it was, with a pile of huge boulders - broken and whole - in the northernmost apex, small conifers persistently hanging on in small patches of earth between the rocks. I hitched the bison up to a tree, leaving them contentedly cropping away at the grass. Watching them eat set my own stomach to snarling.

I didn't have to go too far to find a rabbit that was too curious for its own good. It was the matter of a single round from the M-16 and dinner was laid on. The rest of the daylight was spent skinning and gutting and laying a fire, then while waiting for a bed of coals I turned my attention back to the wagon and the cat lying in the back.

The bandages were working. The wound had stopped bleeding, but the fur covering its chest and side was completely matted and plastered with clotted blood and mud. Mud covered its broad face and one of the pointed ears was stuck down against the head. I splashed water onto a rag torn from a cloak and began to sponge away the worst of the blood.

Still unconscious she flinched away from my touch, her jaw twitched and she voiced a high chittering noise.

Her eyes flicked open, focused on me, then widened until a rim of white circumnavigated the huge pupils: Green, flecked with specks of copper. A small, strangled noise escaped her and she scrambled backwards into the hay until she was backed up against the drivers bench, unable to retreat any further. The face contorted, wrinkles marching up the muzzle as she bared a glistening array of needle teeth, canines, and a curled, pink tongue. Centimeter-long, ivory-colored claws slid from her fingertips.

The bandages around her chest and shoulder flexed and shifted.

I jumped out of the back of the wagon and held my hands in front of me, trying to look harmless. If she tried to move any more, that wound was gonna reopen. "Hey," I coaxed. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you."

"Fegar s'sahrorna nieck herasti. . . fe, fe!"

Well that's what it sounded like. Not a high yowling as you'd expect a cat to make. They were modulated, sibilant sounds, fairly deep, probably due to length of the throat. It was a langauge, no doubting that. I'd bet her vocal chords were just as sophisticated as mine.

You, the reader of this journal will probably already know what I was looking at, but I'll still take the time to describe what I saw.

We stared at each other, man to cat, eye to eye. Her head was mounted on her shoulders, she had two ears and eyes, one nose, one mouth, bilaterally symmetrical, but there the resemblance to a human ended.

Take the classic feline features and anthropomorphise them; just the slightest touch. Shorten the muzzle a little. Raise the brow and bring more expressive musculature into the features. The result would be something like

the visage I was looking at.

That face came out into a classic cat's muzzle, complete with a broad, leathery, valentine-shaped nose and hare-lipped mouth with thin black lips. Sharp, triangular furtufted ears were half buried in the mane of fur that grew from the crest of her head and continued on down her neck. One ear was pierced by a single silver earring. Her entire face was covered with the same fawn coloured fur that enveloped the rest of her body, highlighted with lighter gold stripes pushing over between the ears to disperse into that mane.

The arms ended in a hand with four short fingers and a thumb. No fingernails. Instead those claws slid into sheaths in the tops of the stubby fingers. Except for the black pads on palms and fingertips, her hands were completely covered in fur.

Her feet - especially her feet - were so different from a human's. More like a cat's pads. In fact her feet were all toe, her heel the leg joint above them - digitigrade, not plantigrade. Must have balanced on those clawed toes, walking on toe tips only. That sleek, streamlined face was somewhat marred by the mess of blood and clay, but there was no doubting the purpose and intelligence in the being I was staring at. Nor the reality. There was no way that this was some kind of costume; a joke or hallucination.

"Rsacen esc na fe sfecer?" she sputtered, then shouted to the surrounding silence: "FARES WHER'R RSE FE! SAE EI! "

If she was expecting someone to answer - one of her kind - she was disappointed. The branches of the trees hung heavy in the darkness and the stillness, but there was no other sound. She turned back to me, the iris dilated to turn the eyes to wide pools of black.

"Fe," she almost breathed the sound.

"Sorry, but I don't speak the lingo," I said with a shrug and a smile.

She plastered herself against the end of the wagon and bared her own teeth in a grin that was definitely NOT friendly. My bared teeth she perceived as a threat. I closed my mouth and made placating gestures with my hands. That only served to get her even more agitated. I couldn't speak to her and she was completely vulnerable.

"Goddamn it! I'm not going to hurt you!"

She hissed.

"Look! Hands empty! No weapons. Savvy? Shit, look! Here, take this."

She looked as if she would go catatonic when I drew my knife, her eyes riveted on the watery steel blade. Carefully, slowly, I laid the knife on the wagonbed and pushed it towards her - hilt first - and stepped back to once more raise my hands. Just as slowly she leaned forward, then snatched the knife, both hands wrapped around the hilt as if it were a lifeline.

"Feel safer?" I asked.

She was still panting hard, but those eyes had changed: not so much terror, calculating.

I unclipped the canteen from my belt and sloshed it around a couple of times, then unscrewed the lid and took a sip out of it before slowly holding it out to her. She shrank back, shivering and with teeth bared. I continued to hold it out to her, and after a few seconds, she screwed up enough courage to take it, claws clicking on the plastic, she raised it to her nose and sniffed warily, her eyes still on me. She took a careful sip, then tilted it back and gulped greedily, spilling much of it down her front. Her jaw was just the wrong shape.

"Hey, watch it. You'll be sick if you drink it like that!"

At the sound of my voice she dropped the canteen as though it had suddenly become red-hot. The knife came up again, wavering wildly. Then white membranes slid from the corners of her eyes and her hand flopped heavily to her side.

But her chest was moving steadily, breath whistling through her nostrils. I found a pulse in the hollow of her neck and it was strong and regular. She voiced a low growling moan when I moved my hand. Just passed

out.

I stood and stared at her for a while. Just leave her; let her wake up and find I hadn't touched her. That'd be the best way to tell her I didn't want to hurt her. Shrugging, I set off to put another bit of wood on the fire. It'd been one of those days.

It was an amazingly clear night, one of those nights when you can literally see forever. The galaxy was a stream of white dust spilled across the heavens. . .

And all of the constellations were there.

I must have sat atop the granite crag for an hour in the dark, just staring at those flickering beacons in the sky. They hadn't changed at all. That red dot was Mars. . . That was the sky of Earth in the late 20th century.

I must be on Earth. . . so where did THEY come from ?

Aliens? Huh, I doubted it. If they had the technology to make it from another star to Earth, why did they wear flimsy leather armour, use antique weapons, and ride around on animal powered vehicles?

Why did I feel so out of place?

There was something I was missing here.

The felinoid was still lying in the back of the wagon, asleep in the warm night air. Nearby, the fire I had started had died down to a glowing bank of coals, the skinned carcasses of the rabbits lying nearby: ready to be spitted and cooked.

Soon the smell of roasting rabbit was drifting through the clearing. I turned the meat on the spit and glanced up to see the felid awake and watching me over the side of the wagon, her eyes flicking from me to the fire then back to me again. She licked her lips and a string of spittle dripped from her jaws.

Smiling, I reached out to tear a haunch off the browned carcass and then - slowly and carefully, every movement deliberate - I got up and walked to the side of the wagon and offered the meat at arms length.

Just as cautiously, she snagged the proffered morsel with a claw and after sniffing it, took a small nibble, looked at me, then started tearing at the meat with dagger-sharp teeth, taking big mouthfuls, chewing noisily, then swallowing hard.

So, she had an appetite. Tough little thing.

And some appetite too.

Whilst she was absorbed in satisfying her hunger I sat down on the tailgate, swinging my legs over the side while watching her. She finished the meat and stared back, her eyes catching the firelight and reflecting it, the rest of her matted coat dull and indistinct in the flickering firelight. Her claws were still at the ready.

"Uh. . . hi," I said.

She flinched.

"I guess I should introduce myself. I'm Kelly," I said. She just stared. "Kelly," I enunciated with exaggerated gestures toward myself and repeated the name twice, three times.

She blinked at me.

I tried again.

"Freh ash an shirai se fe," she hissed.

"That's not your name, is it?"

"Hers a saf, s'shesaf."

I'm no linguist, but that was no language I'd ever heard before.

Guttural, with hisses, growls merging with sibilants. All right, I thought I could manage that: "'Hers a saf. . . uh. . . shesaf' to you too."

She jumped as though I'd suddenly grown another head.

"Hers a saf, s'shesaf" she repeated slowly, watching me intently. I got the idea. "Hers a saf, s'shesaf," I echoed her, completely oblivious of what I

was actually saying.

"Sthre ts'ref n'esur s'shesaf, surio saf fe," she hissed slowly. I tried to repeat her, stuttering and stumbling over the sibilants. She repeated herself twice. Finally I managed the sentence with a modicum of accuracy.

Her jaw dropped, then closed with a hollow clop.

I leaned forward, touched my chest and said, "Kelly."

Her eyes went even wider as she twigged. That was my name! I had a language of my own! By gum, what a concept! She stared at me, opened her mouth, and gave a croak, cleared her throat and tried again, "She'ae." The consonants of the kay and ells lost completely, my name turned into what sounded like a steam leak.

"No, no, no. Kelly," I repeated.

"K'h. . . K'hy."

With that mouth, she couldn't get the ells at all. I shrugged then pointed at myself, repeated my name, and then pointed at her and shrugged. She got my point and said something that sounded like:

"Tar?"

She moved her hand in a gesture that must mean 'no': a horizontal slash in the air with the hand open and palm down. "Tahr," she corrected.

We went on like this until I got it right. She was willing to let my name slide, but when it came to her's, she wanted it perfect. Afterwards, we tried a few more of her words. With each new one I learned she stared at me; like she couldn't believe it.

By now the fire had died down to a few feeble embers; warmer than the moonlight albeit not as bright. I squinted at my watch and decided to call it a night: she needed her sleep.

With my pack as a pillow, the smooth, metallic creases of the survival blanket over me and the cold ground below, I watched the stars reeling through the familiar sky overhead until I dropped off.

The morning was perfection.

I squinted against the glare of sunlight and groaned, finally managing to unwrap myself from the silver folds of the sheet I stood and stretched. My joints popped and crackled, stiff muscles stretched and relaxed again. The felid was still sleeping, half curled up under her cloak. I stared at it for some time, feeling an uneasiness at the very centre of my being.

This was the way my distant ancestors would have felt when a sabre-tooth appeared on the skyline.

Damnation! I clenched my hand to stop it trembling and abruptly turned away from the blanketed figure. A furred, clawed, twisted foot was poking out from under the cloak, hinting at what lay beneath.

I got out of there.

For all our civilization we are still primitive at heart I reflected as I crouched by the river. The water was a cold shock against my skin as I dunked my head, then shook it dry. The droplets flew in all directions, glittering in the morning sun.

We'd come a long way: we have electrically lit homes, kept warm in winter and cool in summer. We travel thousands of kilometers in hours, move mountains out of the way of our roads without really thinking about it.

That's right, we hardly ever think about it.

How many people are there in the world who can say they actually know how an electric light works? How a radio works? Who can even light a fire without matches? For most people, all they need to know is how to flip a switch, press a button, turn a dial. Tasks a moronic chimp can carry out. If their transistor radio breaks down through a loose wire or burnt-out resistor, they chuck it out and get a new one: a disposable civilization.

We have reached the moon and sent automated probes beyond the farthest corners of our solar system. There are instruments to explore the macroscopic

and microscopic worlds: Electromagnetic telescopes that can detect a nebula's faint light years away, microscopes that can give a visual image of xenon atoms we've manipulated to spell IBM.

And still there are those who hang crosses and prayer beads in their shiny new cars. It's as if they need someone, like an imaginary friend that children conjure up: someone or something to whom you can attribute the inexplicable.

Damnation! I don't consider myself an complete ignoramus. I didn't have to let my emotions and instincts overrule logical thought.

But that thing gave me the willies.

I cupped my hands and drank. Water ran through my fingers and dribbled back into the river. Several times I dipped my hands into the stream, then opened them to let the water trickle out. Finally I sat back against a rock that hadn't had time to warm in the sun, was still cool from the night. The fingers of my left hand trailing in the stream.

I looked at myself.

My fatigues were covered with dust and dark stains that could only be dried blood. Not mine. Not even human, but just as red. I stripped off and staked my clothes down in the current then scrubbed at them until my hands were raw.

The felid was awake when I returned.

In fact she was out of the wagon, leaning heavily on the tailgate with one hand clutched against the bandages. She stared at me when I appeared and her lips parted slightly in a smile that showed the whiteness of her teeth.

Returning the smile I took a step forward, then froze when her hand darted into the back of the wagon and came back with a cocked and loaded crossbow wobbling in her unsteady grip. Her eyes wobbled, seeming to lose their focus, then snapping back again. Her grin broadened. I swallowed hard. Remind me to take the string with me next time.

"Tahr?"

"K'hy," she snarled - literally - and gestured sharply with the bow and I slowly raised my hands, freezing motionless again when her ears went back flat against her skull and she barked something at me. Her ears slowly came up again when she saw I wasn't trying anything. The end of the crossbow jerked and again she snarled something at me: "R'rtsa!"

What the hell did that mean? I just stood there.

She snorted and wagged the crossbow at the ground, "R'rtsa!"

I took a guess and sat down.

Her ears flicked and she stood there staring at me.

I stared back, noticing her shifting on her feet, as though she was about to collapse. And that crossbow was wobbling dangerously. I licked my lips. "Rtsa," I invited, gesturing slowly at the ground.

She blinked at me, then her ears twitched. Slowly, her face contorting in what could have been a wince, she settled until she was sitting cross-legged, facing me across the remains of the fire. Meters away, she glanced down at the bow, then at me again as if she were trying to decide to use it or not. I hadn't hurt her; I'd patched her wounds. Perhaps she just felt the need to take some kind of control.

With my hands still in the air, I carefully pointed one finger at the bow and said, "Fe?. . . Tahr."

Muscles in her face ticked and pulled and she sputtered something at me. The crossbow stayed targeted upon my guts.

"Shit! Look, you can't point that thing at me all day!"

She growled.

Warily, I lowered my hands.

She flinched and snarled.

"Okay," I coaxed. "I'm not going to hurt you. Tahr."

"K'hy."

When I moved again she gasped, head going back and eyes fixed on me. I saw her muscles trembling as I carefully - inch at a time - reached out and plucked a single blade of grass, holding it up. "Grass," I said.

Her eyes flicked down to the small green leaf, then she said, "Frwuch," a deep, guttural sound coming from the throat. I repeated it as best I could, then she picked a blade and said a short sentence with her word for grass in it, then pointed at me and said slightly different phrase. I repeated them:

[have/hold] I grass.

[have/hold] you grass.

For a few different items - sticks, pebbles, dirt - we did this. The words were difficult to pronounce. The basic sentence structure was predicate-subject, reversed from English. That threw me several times, but she corrected me.

Several minutes later she put the crossbow aside in order to use both hands to get a point across. The weapon lay in the grass, easily within her reach, and both of us stolidly ignored it and concentrated upon the language lesson.

Morning dew was beading on the blanket and grass around my head; tiny crystal beads sparkling in the dawn. I closed my eyes and rolled onto my back. Something touched my shoulder.

I opened my eyes and looked up into a puma's face, a bobcat's face, eyes like cold jade with a slit of night etched into them. A hand, twisted, furred and clawed, was reaching for my face.

With a lurch of terror I tried to scramble backwards, slipped on the wet grass, fell on my back with dew soaking me. The cat knelt above me, reached for my throat. . . and gently touched, feeling the pulse racing there.

"Scre ne fe ther ri seth m'resh," she hissed, fast, too fast, impossible for me to follow. Her head was cocked to one side like a cat regarding a bird in a cage. The rising sun was behind her, still barely a glow over the horizon turning the streamers of clouds above it russet and gold. Seeing that I was as nervous of her as she was of me gave her that touch of confidence.

Her hand moved down to touch my chest in the vee of my shirt, touched the sparse gold hair there, then travelled up, stroking my skin. If anything, she looked puzzled. The question she asked I couldn't understand, so she continued examining me in silence, her hands moving to touch my face. I shivered slightly as she pressed a finger against my cheek, rubbing gently. I could feel the almost-leathery pad on her fingertip grating on stubble. Growing bolder, she traced my jaw, tracing the bones. I flinched when she tried to peel my lips back to examine my teeth: she pulled her hand back, then patted my cheek. So I suffered claws tapping against my teeth, fingers touching my canines. Delicately she bent my nose from side to side, then ran a fingertip around my eyes and eyebrows and ears. Finally she stroked my hair for a while, tugging at it curiously, then sat back, still staring at me as if I were a specimen on a lab table.

"You []?" she asked.

"No understand," I replied. The first phrase I'd learnt, and the one I'd be using for a long time to come.

Her ears flicked - as though routing invisible flies - then she touched her chest. "I sathe," she said.

Sathe. That could be her species name, family name, job, or just mean she was hungry. Well, I took a gamble on it being her species. "Sathe," at least that word came easily to my lips.

"Yes. Right. Good," she approved, then waited.

"I human," I hastily provided.

"H'man," she tried the word, tasting it. "H'man."

I sat up and reached out my hand, to touch her. With a start she pulled away from me. She stood just out of reach, one hand almost unconsciously clutching the bandages over her ribs, that arm cradled in turn by her other. "H'man," she murmured, then turned and limped back to the wagon.

Goddamn it! She wanted to leave. With her wound still red, swollen, and threatening to tear itself open, she actually wanted to hit the road!

"Damnation! No! I'm not going to help you!" I stormed in frustration, slouched back against a tree and crossed my arms. She hissed something back and threw the bisons' harnesses to the ground in disgust, being unable, in her condition, to lift the wagon tongue. She glared at me, then caught up a crossbow from the wagon.

For a second I thought she was considering using it on me, but without another glance my way she started off on her own.

"You're cracked!"

I watched her limp off into the trees and disappear from my view.

"Anyway, the road's THATAWAY!" I yelled at the forest.

Christ on a crutch, she's serious!

So what? What did I care for her? If she wanted to kill herself, that was her business. Wasn't it? I mean, it wasn't like I owed her anything. Anyway, I wrestled with my conscience for a couple of minutes.

What can I tell you:

"Shit! GODDAM IT! WAIT!"

I found her twenty or so meters into the forest, perched on a sun-warmed rock and obviously waiting for me.

"Okay lady," I gritted my teeth and rubbed the bridge of my nose, forcing the words out, "You win."

She bared her teeth at me and hissed slowly and clearly, "We go?"

"Yeah, sure. . . We go."

She looked down and dropped her hand away from her breast: the bandages were stained red with the blood seeping out under them. "Oh, Christ," I shook my head. This was one stubborn and determined bitch.

The beast-lady lay quietly in the back of the wagon, staring up at branches and clouds moving past. I glanced back at her, assured myself the new bandages were still in place, then turned to look out over the mountainous shaggy backs of the bison as they plodded along.

This Tahr knew where she was going. At the fork in the road she had directed that we should continue eastwards, toward the remote sea. I briefly considered debating this, then shrugged. Why not? I wondered what destination she had in mind and felt the fear again.

Were there more of them? How many? Where were we going? Christ's sake, I didn't have to go along with this! All I had to do was dump her somewhere. I didn't need her. . . did I?

I don't know!

So we travelled together, strange companions, each trying to come to know the other. Learning her language - Sathe - was hard.

English was next to impossible for her. Her mouth, all of her vocal apparatus from her larynx to her tongue to the shape of her jaw weren't as flexible as mine. With effort I was able to imitate the growls, snarls, and sibilant noises that made up the Sathe language, but she could barely manage a coherent english sentence at all.

Also there was the fact that she wasn't human. . . or that I wasn't Sathe, whichever way you want to look at it.

Language is a means to communicate ideas and impressions, its

development influenced by the environment, by physiological and psychological traits. This creature I was learning from was mammalian, bipedal, and bilaterally symmetrical. We seemed to have a fair bit in common.

But whereas my distant ancestors were brachiating primates hastily adapted for lives on open plains, her's were dedicated hunters, perhaps forest-dwelling quadrupeds who - God knows how or when - began to use tools. As we'd evolved from such distant and diverse beginnings, so had our languages. There were terms she used to refer to things she could see at night, to sounds I couldn't hear and to things I couldn't smell. Conversely, I was unable to find words for differentiating between certain tints of a color. . . and there were no words to describe things I had grown up with. Different outlook. Different mindsets. How do you describe color to a blind person?

Given time I'd eventually come to grips with that language, but for the time I had to live with my questions. And she had to live with her's.

So the language lessons continued every day as we made our leisurely way east. The grammar wasn't that hard to pick up, but my vocabulary was extremely rudimentary. I would point things out or have them shown to me, then Tahr would give me her name for them. It was that way I learned the cat. . . Sathe terms for fascinating things like tree, bush, rock, road, bison, wood, bird, and other things that would come in handy if I intended to live the rest of my life in the wilderness. The only man/Sathe made things we had to work from were the things we had with us, the wagon, Tahr's possessions, and my things.

My things: the contents of the pack, my rifle and clothing. These fascinated and bemused her. She scrutinized everything from the fabric of my clothes to my gun (a puzzle I quickly confiscated, to her obvious annoyance and indignation). She tapped the aluminium of my canteen, tried to bend the laminated steel of my knife blade, stared and poked at the compass mounted it its perspex bubble in the hilt. Just what I could be doing with such things was confusing and frustrating her.

Looking at it from my point of view there wasn't all that much, but I was thankful for what I had, especially the automatic rifle. All Tahr had to call her own was her sword and the tattered remains of her armour.

And the days went by. Sometimes the merciless Virginia sun, sometimes rain that brought the bugs and mud. The lessons continued and increased in complexity, graduated to abstracts, there was more confusion and more late nights sitting around a campfire struggling to grasp a concept. How can you describe something that you can't simply hold in your hand; something such as thought, hope, or fear? Miming just didn't work too effectively on a creature who used different body language.

Things progressed slowly, at their own speed and as I learned more, I was able to fill in the blanks. But it was so maddeningly slow! There's nothing more frustrating than wanting to ask something but not having the words to do so.

Apparently there were also questions that Tahr wanted to ask me, and she did try as best she could. What was I? Where did I come from? Things along those veins. Because of that I was slightly grateful for the barrier between us. Despite my equipment she still sometimes seemed to think of me as little more than a well-trained animal: sit, wait, fetch this, fetch that. I played along. It was easier to go with the flow until I found out more about my situation.

Mid-summer. Hot and dusty after days without rain. Insects buzzed in irritating clouds around the bison. Grit from the road hung around in the air before finally settling in hair, mouth, and clothes. I was itching and covered in an irritating coating of dust and sweat.

Of course when I had the chance to bathe, I took it.

As the sun sank low - a red eye over the hills to the west - the moon

was already high in the sky. The temperature was starting to drop.

I pulled my head up from underwater and gasped air, shaking water out of my hair in a spray of droplets. Arggh, cold. Goddamn, it was good to be clean, but I was looking forward to getting back to the campsite where I had left Tahr and a hot fire. I rubbed my hair as dry as I could and turned to where my clothes were drying.

Sitting among the shadows on the mossy bank with my clothes beside her, Tahr was watching me, one hand pressing lightly against her bandaged ribs. She was regarding me with her head cocked to one side, expression unfathomable. Damnation! How long had she been watching while I was gathering goosebumps in my birthday suit? She continued to watch me as I waded over to collect my clothes. Damnation, she was studying me as. . . as I had studied her. I felt an embarrassed flush burning up under my skin, then even more embarrassment at feeling like this in front of something that wasn't even human. I guess she had a right to be curious about something she obviously had never seen before, or perhaps she was feeling hungry. Those greenstone eyes followed my fingers on the closures as I pulled on my damp clothes. "So what are you staring at!" I snapped. "Never seen red hair before?"

In return she gave me a glistening grin.

"Damn peeping tom alien bitch," I muttered as I finished dressing. "Satisfied?" I asked sarcastically.

She hissed something in obtuse sibilants, struggled to her feet with a open mouthed gasp, then pointed at the water. "Help me?" she mimed washing herself.

"A cat that likes water, eh? You sure? It's getting cold. . . "

She hissed and fumbled with her kilt, dropping it at her feet. I had to help her into the pool, where she settled slowly, yelping as her wound went under. I'd have to clean that again later on. Soon I found myself scrubbing her back. Actually it wasn't too much different from washing a dog, but this one cooperated. Caked blood, dust, and mud swirled away downstream. Finally, a soggy arm about my shoulders, I helped her back to the camp and the fire.

As we huddled close to the fire I couldn't help but stare at the felid on the far side of the flames. With the wet fur plastered to her skin she took on an appearance somewhere between ludicrous and pathetic. Her inhuman skeleton was accentuated: the long legs and short torso with broad chest. The bones in her legs and arms looked. . . wrong; twisted about each other the wrong way, perhaps a few too many.

That ridiculously bedraggled fur slowly dried as she meticulously groomed herself with her claws, puffing out as it did so. By the time a slab of venison was roasting over the coals it was a glowing, glossy tan. Cleaned up she looked much better than before; sleek, warm. . . cuddly?

Her pelt was a dark tan with lighter streaks around the ribs and on the stomach. She didn't have whiskers, but there was that mane: actually long fur that began at the crown of her head and along her cheeks and grew in thick strands down her neck. Small was not an accurate description of her size; compact would be much more suitable. As I had noticed when lifting her, she was heavy for her size. There was more muscle tucked away there than her stature revealed. Was her's denser than human muscle tissue?

She glanced up from the haunch she was rapidly reducing to bone and saw me studying her: "Thresss n'rethi ai sa fe r'rescast. Fe'si?"

I recognised it as a question, but that was all. As I looked away in sudden embarrassment Tahr broke into a shuttering, uncontrolled hiss.

Laughter?

Tahr seemed certain she knew where we were. With much waving of hands and drawing with sticks in the dirt, she managed to convey the fact that were near a small place-with-[house?]-many called Traders Meet.

"Town? Traders. . . Meet?" I asked, struggling over the

pronunciation. You try and emulate what sounds like a hybrid catfight-leaking boiler. It would get easier with practice. Strange name. Still, I guess it's no weirder than Los Angeles or Buffalo.

But a town.

"Where this? Where town is?" I asked.

Tahr pointed ahead down the road.

"No. Not understand you not. . . ." I scratched my head in bewilderment. God, how to ask this? I picked up a stick and began to draw a rough map of the road we had come down, the stream we had just crossed, the river where I had saved her sodden hide. "We here," I scratched out an X about where we were. "Town?" I asked and passed the stick to the felid. She was staring at the map with a strange expression, then she took the stick and put in a triangle for the town. Further down the road.

I moved my hand to indicate a much larger area. "Here?" I asked. "Show?"

Tahr hesitated, then began drawing, filling in the blanks.

She drew a recognisable map of the east coast, Canada, of Florida, part of the Gulf, the Appalachians, the heartland, the Great Lakes. This was America. The States! But where was everybody, everything? It didn't fit. I opened my mouth to speak, but she wasn't done yet.

She was dividing the map up into sections, lines splitting it up into four. . . no, five parts.

I stared, perplexed. Tahr pointed to the eastern-most section.

"Kerr'sther Hytors," she named it and started adding more details.

"Hey! Whoa! Hold it!" Tahr looked up in surprise. "What the fuck's this!" I demanded in English, jabbing my finger at the map. "This! What's going on. . . Oh, shit! What's the point in asking you!"

"Kerr'sther Hytors," she repeated; looking confused.

I suppose I must've looked just as puzzled, staring at her map without understanding. Finally I nodded. Very well, cat, we shall see. We shall see.

"Kerster Hytors," I acknowledged, pointing at that place on the map.

There were five Realms - she explained - and the one we were in was named Kerr'sther Hytors: the Eastern Realm; so called because - no prizes here - of its location on the eastern seaboard. The four other Realms she tried to describe, but there the language barrier slammed in our faces.

No matter where she thought we were and despite the fact I had seen no sign of civilization for over a week, I was not yet willing to believe that I was anywhere but some obscure backwoods block of Virginia with a town around the next bend. Everything, the flora and the fauna, was absolutely identical. Even the lay of the land was approximately the same: the Appalachians levelling out to the wide coastal plains covered in a mixture of coniferous and semi-deciduous forests. It was just this damned cat!

Well, she said we were making for a town. When we got there I would see what was what.

As my grasp of the Sathé language progressed, I tried to ask some of the questions that had been bothering me for some time:

"Tahr. Who you? Why you attacked?"

Her wound was healing well. I had taken the stained bandages off and thrown them away, but that angry red scar would be with her for some time. One of her fingers absently traced it out as she turned to blink at me from where she sat on my right. From what I could read of her expressions, she seemed startled by the question.

"I [] not you give. Understand?" she said.

I frowned, trying to think that one through. Finally I had to give up. "No understand I," I said.

"I do not understand," she corrected my grammar to Sathé proper and tried to explain. "I like []. I give you thing; you give me other

thing. We [trade]. I do this. I trader, [merchant]."

"You give what?" I asked. "You have no. . . give things. You have much. . . Sathe with swords. You no merchant, yes?"

Her eyes flickered away from me for a second. "One my [mate, husband?]."

Ah. I had trodden upon hallowed ground here. She was trying to change the subject. I got the message. I dropped my questioning about what she was and instead asked about the unknown word. It turned out it meant a prospective mate, she was [courting?] him, a boyfriend. "Tahr. . ." What could I say? "I sorry." It seemed inadequate.

She looked at me in brief surprise, then turned away, ears down and subject successfully changed. If she was telling the truth about her friend, I was sorry, but I was itching to find out what she was really doing. A trader with no trade goods or even supplies and a number of guards. I believed her story about as far as I could throw the Washington monument.

Well, two could play at that game. If she wasn't being entirely honest with me, then there were a few snippets that I could withhold from her. Not exactly lying, just not offering all the information.

The next few days drifted by with monotonous similarity. By now Tahr was able to take her turn driving so we took shifts watching the bison - not that they needed much, they seemed to have a natural autopilot; just point 'em the right way and they keep going - and continued language lessons. In the late afternoon we'd stop and set up camp; a short ceremony where one of us'd start a fire and the other would go and kill some food.

Tahr would get a fire going with my cigarette lighter (she fascinated in flicking it and watching the sparks fly). If we had nothing from the night before, I'd set off with the crossbow and go hunting small game. Of course the Sathe weapon wasn't as powerful or accurate as my twentieth century firearm, but it was adequate and spared ammunition for other contingencies.

We drifted along following this pattern and slowly, one after the other, the days turned to weeks before we came to Traders Meet.

From the cover of the wooded ridge I looked down onto the walled town lying on the crossroads below. It sure wasn't Richmond, Virginia.

The James river was there; faithful to form as it wound blue and serene between hills. And the beautiful countryside of Virginia was all around us, verdant and vibrant green, even if the city that should be there. . . wasn't.

Smoke curled from the chimneys of the wooden buildings below, nothing larger than two stories high. Afternoon sunlight glinted off the glass windows of some of the buildings, the rest all boasted wooden shutters. The entire town was arranged around a large square and it looked like it was market day.

Small figures scuttled through the streets and amongst the brightly coloured stalls in the square. The 4x power magnification of my sight was enough to let me pick out the various colours of the inhabitants' fur.

I sank back against a tree and shook my head. I had hoped that I wouldn't be seeing this, but there it was, large as life. A whole fucking community of furry sapient, slap bang where the state capitol of Virginia should be. Somewhere I'd taken one hell of a wrong turn.

Shit! I thought this kind of thing only happened to little girls with small dogs.

"What wrong?" Tahr asked, turning from where she had been sharing the view. She stared at me with her head cocked to one side.

Oh no! Whatever could be wrong? I've just been whisked off to the Planet of the Cats. I'll have to spend the rest of my life eating Tender Vittles, and she asks if anything is wrong!?!

"No, all fine," I lied. Understanding Sathe was easier than speaking it, especially with such bitterness choking from the inside. I took another look at the town below, "This where you go?" I waved my hand at the town;

offering it to her: "You here. All fine."

Good luck lady, this is where I get off.

I walked back through the trees to where we had left the wagon, the bison placidly cropping away at the grass.

"K'hy?"

I snagged my pack and pulled it on. The M-16 I left dangling by the strap as I set off back the way we had come, my feet dragging up dust.

"K'hy!" Claws caught my sleeve and stopped me in my tracks, pulling me around. "Where you go?"

"I go," I pointed west, the direction I was facing.

"Where?" Her hand was still on my arm.

I just shrugged. How should I know?

"You come with me?"

I stared at her, then started shaking again. She twisted her hand to disengage her claws and stepped back. "K'hy?"

"I not," I said.

"Please! Much please. I [] you [] come. Please."

Much of what she said was totally incomprehensible to me, but she seemed desperate about something.

"I not!"

"Why?"

"I afraid. I much afraid!" I blurted out.

She stared at me in what could only be astonishment. Then her hand reached out and gingerly touched my beginnings of a beard. I flinched from her touch and she hesitated, then withdrew her fingers. "Saaa," she hissed. "I afraid too. Help, please."

I looked at her, then at the wilderness surrounding us. There was really nowhere for me to go. It would take me weeks to get anywhere on foot, and now, now I knew I wouldn't find a human city. . . I wouldn't find another human.

"Yes?"

I sagged. "Yes."

So we entered Traders Meet with me riding in the back of the wagon, disillusioned and scared and trying to look harmless. All my equipment had been shoved under a pile of hay up front. All I had were my clothes. . . and my knife strapped around my ankle. Tahr's ears had laid back when she'd seen me concealing it there, but she'd said nothing.

Tahr had not wanted me to be too conspicuous, as I would have been if riding up front. She was vague about the reasons, but she didn't want to advertise the fact I was intelligent - relatively - nor that I could talk. Again I submitted to her wishes and rode in the hay.

First there were the farms: Small clusters of buildings surrounded by their fields. Cattle - deer, bison, and goats - roamed everywhere. Not surprising when you look at a Sath's teeth. What was surprising were the number of fields sown with crops. I'd never seen Tahr eat anything besides meat: cooked or raw, but then I'd never offered anything else. I guess becoming omnivorous would be a plus in the evolution of a species.

On the outskirts of the town lay the manors: the homes of the affluent, set among shady, stately trees and grass: not manicured lawns but long, wild grasses that stirred languidly in the heavy breeze. They were beautiful, those estates: white walls with exposed beams stained lamp black - Tudor, I think the style's called. Big, rambling affairs with glass in the mullioned windows.

Just outside the town walls were the rundown piles of lumber that the lowest classes called home. They had their own streets; dusty little alleys branching off everywhere. Inside the walls were the rest, the ones who fell into the middle, the lower merchants, traders, dealers, hawkers, along with business of all kinds crammed into the walls.

Small, narrow streets laid out to no set plan, just placed according to

whim and need. Some were cobbled in rough-cut stones while others were just bare earth packed down rock-solid by feet and iron bound wheels. A heavy, pervading stench from garbage and shit hung in the air, but it wasn't as bad as I'd been expecting. Periodic gratings in the street meant there was a sewage system working. It also probably meant there was seepage through to the water table. I'd better be careful about the water I drank.

Wood, brick, plaster, tiles. Buildings with stained whitewash splashed on their walls between old creosote-stained timbers and the second stories hanging out over the streets to form dark, reeking tunnels. Stalls with faded cloth that at one time was probably brightly coloured - a few still were - fronted shops. Smoke poured from the stacks of smithies and from the open doors of alehouses came raucous yowling. So like a medieval European fortified town, yet the inhabitants set it apart as markedly different.

Noise: that was everywhere.

A modern city is has its own pulse: the beat of traffic, sirens, bustling humanity, shouting, engines, planes, music. In the night halogen and neon lights beckon while spires of reinforced concrete create their own skyline with uncounted millions of illuminated windows. The streets throb to the subway hurtling beneath them and humanity is a neverending flow and ebb, like the tides, regular as the night and day: Vendors, salesmen, loners, delinquents, buskers, businessmen, punks, mavericks, pimps, fat-rich contessas, hookers, winos, teenagers, actors, children, queens, losers, writers, dreamers, drifters. . . A true city can be a representational cross-section of humanity. It was an exhilarating, terrifying experience to an out-of-towner, but just everyday life to the cityborn. This town was alive in its own way. The shouting of pedlars, hawkers, and merchants competing with the bass rumble of heavy wheels and the clamouring of animals. As we passed the city gates I studied my Sathe. She was relaxed, an alert glint in her eye. This was no stranger to city life, she had grown up in a place such as this.

Maybe even this town?

The next thing I noticed was how everything seemed to stop as we passed. Everyone dropped what they were doing and stared at us. Well, at me.

They all looked the same, yet they were all different. The same features: long muzzle, sharp triangular ears, green slit-pupiled eyes, stripped fur, compact bodies with well proportioned limbs. And all seemed different: A different shade of fur: some light, some dark. I saw one female with a pelt of silver-grey. There were scars on the body or nicks in the ears, flecks of gold in the eyes. Sizes varied enormously. Some were about Tahr's size - fairly large for a Sathe - and the young (would you call them children or cubs?), looking for all the world like ambulatory teddy bears, would come to about hip height on me. Males were slightly larger than the females, with heavier manes, thinner hips, and lacking the unobtrusive twin rows of three teats, but there didn't seem to be any obvious segregation of the sexes. Females haggled with males over the cost of bread while other males seemed quite content to keep the cubs in line.

Fashions obviously played a role in Sathe culture, to judge from the riot of colour on the felids staring at us. Although many wore nothing but their fur - male and female genitalia hidden by the tufted fur at their groins, hinting at a very relaxed or nonexistent nudity taboo - a large number wore breeches or cloaks in various styles and various colors: eye-searingly brilliant colours to mud drab. Nearly every one of them was armed. Daggers, blades, scimitars like Tahr's looked to be the weapon of preference.

And some saw me, slapped their neighbour's shoulder and pointed. More and more heads turned. There was laughter from some, silence from others.

This isn't happening!

The weirdest sensation, like my brain was cringing in my skull, staring out at the world through the eye sockets, yet not really seeing. All I could do was huddle in the back of the wagon and try to make myself invisible. I

wasn't very good at it. I became abruptly aware that my teeth were chattering. In fact I was shaking all over.

Tahr seemed to know where she was going, slipping into the halting flow of creaking, rattling animal-drawn vehicles, yowling at other wagoners and pedestrians. As we moved slowly through the town we picked up a small entourage of cubs who ran after us. I was the attraction and they scurried after us, hissing and pointing at me.

She pulled off the street and into a gateway leading to a small cobbled court surrounded by doorways with wooden gates blocking off the lower half. A strong animal smell permeated the air and various animal heads poked out of the stalls; I recognised llamas and bison. Must be a stable.

As she reined in the bison a portly individual, greying about the ears, ran out of an open doorway and chased our young followers off with shouts and snarls. The cubs avoided him with ease, scampered off to a safe distance and returned the calls with obvious glee.

Dismissing them with a disgusted wave of a paw the Sathe turned back to our wagon. Tahr jumped to the ground, hissing as the jolt put sudden pressure on her still tender wound and went to meet him. Seen from the back, her walk was a lot like a human woman's. The fact that she walked on tiptoes with her heels off the ground almost gave the illusion that she was wearing high heels.

The Sathe looked past her at the wagon, and his eyes met mine.

With the number of flies that were buzzing around the stalls I'd have thought it was a rather risky to stand around with your mouth hanging open like that.

Tahr had to raise her voice to catch his attention. He finally managed to tear his eyes off me and pay her some heed. Their conversation seemed to have a lot to do with the wagon, the bison, and me; They were to far away for me to catch details, but Tahr would say something, the male would sign a 'no', until finally they seemed to settle on something. They approached, the stable owned watching me with eyes as green as Tahr's. He relaxed a bit when I backed away from him as if afraid. It wasn't all an act. "Is it dangerous?" he asked Tahr

"Only []," her ears flicked up and down in her version of a smile.

This was doing a whole lot for my ego.

He considered a moment, then agreed to let her leave the wagon and bison in the courtyard. After the pair slapped paws in a what I guessed was their version of a handshake, he wandered back into the stalls muttering something to himself.

Tahr scrambled into the wagon bed and grabbed my pack. She slapped my leg and before I could protest - ask what was happening - whispered, "I back. Not long." Then she was out of the wagon and off across the courtyard.

I sighed and dropped back into the hay, squinting up into the muggy sky. God, my head hurt. Too much, too strange, too quickly. I tried not to think about Tahr selling me or handing me over to the authorities. I didn't know what they would do to something like me, but spending the rest of my life in a zoo or medieval laboratory was not on my retirement plans.

What's happened to me?

Another planet? Not likely. Everything but the local inhabitants were the same. The flora and fauna identical to that back home. No two worlds in the same universe could have evolved so perfectly, so exactly.

Not in the same universe, the same reality.

But there were theories, not necessarily restricted to the bounds of science fiction. Realities are numberless, superimposed on each other like frames in a movie. And like that film each is different. In each of those realities, whenever a certain point is reached - a certain decision is made - another universe is created, branching off from the main trunk like a branch from a tree, a twig from that branch. . . .

Hah! That theory was so full of holes you could curdle it and call it Swiss cheese, but it was the best one I had. It was the only one I had.

Two hours passed. Fear passed into exhaustion and despite my predicament

I dozed.

The lurch as the wagon began to move jolted me awake again. Not seeing anyone in the drivers bench I sat up alarmed. A Sathe, perhaps a stablehand judging by the pitchfork he. . . no, she was carrying, was leading the bison by the reins, moving them to clear an access way. The movement as I sat up caught her eye. She turned, squalled, and dropped both the reins and her pitchfork as she backpedalled wildly.

On all fours she crouched on the cobblestones with her mouth gaping, teeth bared, chest heaving. She reminded me of Tahr back when she first laid eyes on me. Over in a stable door another Sathe, I think it was the one Tahr had been talking to, appeared and yelled at the stable hand. She stood and yowled back at him, too fast for me to get a grasp on. He gave a snort and vanished back into the brick building.

I guess the owner of the place hadn't briefed his staff on their unusual visitor. I smiled nervously at the stablehand who was scooping up her pitchfork. She snarled and went to catch the reins.

"Oh, hostility."

She sputtered something back at me.

"Fuck you too," I said and flopped back into the hay to wait.

The hay itched, the afternoon sun was hot, and the flies were an incessant irritation. Once and only once I went to stand at the entrance to the courtyard and stare out at the activity on the street. Inconspicuous I wasn't and I soon retreated back to the wagon as I started attracting attention. I had the feeling that if I stepped out of the bounds of the stables I'd be fair game.

I was starting to feel slightly nauseous.

Tahr didn't get back until late. The sun was low over the stable buildings, the shadows growing. For hours I had been waiting for her, and I was beginning to despair that she may have ditched me. But she came marching back into the courtyard, my pack slung over her shoulder, engaged in animated conversation with a Sathe decked in heavy utilitarian breeks, several carved, wooden bracelets around one wrist. They clattered as he waved his arm at the wagon.

I had trouble keeping up with the rapid-fire chatter, but I was able to pick up that she was trying to make a deal of some kind with this guy.

Currency was something my language lessons hadn't covered, however that seemed to be the main topic of their conversation. Tahr was trying to sell something.

ME!?

The Sathe went around to the front of the wagon where the one in green began to inspect the bison: lifting their legs to check the hooves, inspecting their teeth and eyes. He obviously found something he didn't like and barked something at Tahr. She spread her hands and hissed in reply.

The other grunted and moved on to inspect the cart.

They finally came to a mutual agreement and slapped palms. Tahr came around to the back of the wagon. "K'hy, we go," she said slowly, beckoning me. "Come."

I hesitated, then uncovered the pack and slung it over my shoulder. She caught the crossbow I tossed her and settled its carry strap around her shoulder while I caught up the assault rifle and dropped off the end of the wagon.

I towered over the two Sathe and the one who had just bought our faithful transport looked me up and down (nervously?). He asked Tahr a question.

"No, he will behave," Tahr said. Slow and deliberate enough for me to understand and with a stern look thrown in for good measure.

I nodded and said, "Okay Kimo Sabe," in English.

They both looked at me.

"Very well," the unnamed Sathe said uncertainly. He reached into a pouch at his waist and pulled out a small leather purse. From this he counted nine

roughly-circular gold coloured coins, each about the size of a dime, and handed them over to Tahr, who passed them on to me.

Heavy as gold. I examined them closely, then bit them and looked at the tooth marks in the soft metal. Shit, real gold. Probably not pure, but worth a pretty penny nevertheless. I dropped the weighty gold lumps into one of the cargo pockets down the leg of my fatigue pants. The buyer looked astonished; had he never seen pockets before? "You would give [money] to an animal?" he asked.

"He is [reliable? trustworthy?]," Tahr glanced at me again, "And who would [mug?] [something] like him? K'hy, come. Follow."

I followed her out of the sheltered courtyard and into the street, into pandemonium. On the wagon I'd been above the foot traffic; now I was in the middle of it, buffeted by a sea of colourful, furry bodies.

Heavily laden wagons rumbled and clattered over the cobbles and clay of the streets while pedestrians scurried out of the way. Sathé shopkeepers yowled and hissed at the passerbys, hawking their wares. Brilliantly textured, dyed rugs, and tapestries hung on display in some shops, others sold bowls and implements, some delicately carved, others crude hunks of wood, while still other stalls sold goods that I couldn't imagine a use for. The air was heady with the hissing white noise of a thousand cats fighting, the scents of spices, and fur, animals and shit and decaying meat. Flies swarmed around a butcher's stall, occasionally swatted away by a bored cub wielding a whisk.

No matter how thick the crowd was a small island of empty space remained about Tahr and I as Sathé melted away from me like ice from a blowtorch. Green eyes stared at me, multicoloured, multitextured muzzles turning aside to confer with neighbours. Questions were howled at Tahr and she growled or sputtered her replies. Many times laughter hissed back.

It wasn't as if the town was big, and it was primitive - worse than Jersey - but everywhere I looked over the heads of the aborigines there were more. And more. The streets were full of them, as were the buildings. The smells were thick and heavy and often nauseating, so many of them, almost tangible. My senses were overwhelmed, overloaded by too much strangeness too soon. I felt my mind cringing and fought back a rising panic. All I could do was follow Tahr automatically, dodging around a wagon and onto the porch of a large, two-story building with a sign depicting what looked like a blue stormcloud hanging above the front door. A cub cautiously stopped Tahr at the threshold and in neutrally respectful tones asked something to fast for me to follow. Tahr answered and the cub looked from her to me, then scampered back into the building. A minute later a fawn and cream female with grizzled fur stepped out onto the landing, looking Tahr up and down with the air of someone who has just discovered what the dog has trekked across the carpet. I guess Tahr's stained and battered armour, the tooling all but buried beneath strata of dust, didn't make for much of a first impression.

"You want a [room]?" she asked. "You and that []?"

"I do," Tahr replied, head bowed.

She glanced at me. "It is [ugly]! No!" Without another word she turned her back to leave. Tahr looked startled, reached out to touch her arm, then jumped back when the other swung her claws in a vicious slash that just missed Tahr, ears flattened and snarled something too impassioned for me to understand. Tahr straightened and snapped back.

Their voices rose in volume as the argument gained momentum; fur bristling, snarls and spats like tesla coils. Tahr was obviously furious and the other female was determined to stand her ground. Finally Tahr gave a disgusted hiss, turned her back and stalked off, snagging my sleeve with a claw to drag me along.

She smoothed her fur down with a hand as we walked, occasionally glancing at me. I was too stunned by my surroundings to really notice it.

At the next place - inn - we stopped, the innkeeper didn't waste time arguing; he slammed the door in Tahr's face. A few seconds later it opened again, a furry arm snaked out, hung a sign in a crabbed script from the door,

then whisked out of sight again.

Tahr snarled impotently at the door.

Back on the main thoroughfare again, the jolting unreality of the situation all around me. Tahr was still seething to herself, running her hands repeatedly over fur that refused to lie flat. She looked around, then made a beeline for a nearby stall, unadorned flat planks displaying wickerwork baskets. The boards bounced as Tahr leaned a closed fist on them, half shouting at the merchant behind the counter to be heard above the streetnoise. He pointed a fur-tufted finger - small knuckles - up the street and gave directions. Tahr thanked him.

Again I followed. There was nowhere else to go.

It was a two storey building with a picture of what looked like a rabbit or hare hung above the door. The sign also had a line of that text: indecipherable, scratch-like marks done in black paint. There was no resemblance to the greek alphabet english utilises; more like a coalition of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese ideography.

I had to stoop to get in through the front door.

Inside there was just enough headroom for me to stand upright, provided I stayed put. To walk about I'd have had to duck under or avoid the oil lamps hanging from the ceiling. Not that there was much room to walk around. Sathe are small of stature and their buildings are built to their scale, not accommodating to my build.

Most of the ground floor was a common room, a long split-log table and benches in the middle of it. Over the fire hung a black-iron pot, bubbling, filled with what smelled like some kind of stew. A narrow, flimsy staircase led through a hole in the ceiling to another floor upstairs. A couple of doors led to what could have been a kitchen and the landlord's quarters. The room was also full of Sathe.

They sat at the communal table, some eating, some just talking; six of them. As I stooped into the room they forgot about their food and goggled. A Sathe, male, fur grey and stippled with jet like a dark ocelot pushed his way into the room from the kitchen, wiping his hands on the apron wrapped around his waist. Abruptly he froze, eyes locked on me, then without shifting his gaze demanded, "What is this?"

"I ask for a room for a few nights," she said. "For my [] and I."

The innkeeper stared at her incredulously. There were a few hisses from the other guests. "You are []," he finally said. "I will not have []! What do you take me for, a []?!"

"Sir, he is [] and quiet. He will be no [trouble]. I [] you I can pay!"

He huffed and planted his hands on his hips, stalking across and looking up at me. His breath reeked of fish and meat. "What is it []?"

Tahr answered him with a string of words I couldn't cut through. From then on their haggling became indecipherable; fast and curt, slang and honourifics, vocabulary beyond my primer stage. But Tahr seemed to be getting somewhere; at least we hadn't been thrown out on our ears this time.

Finally he feigned spitting: "I [yield?]." He waved a hand at the stairs. "Pay in []. But it had better give no [difficulties]. It is your [responsibility]!" Tahr flipped a gold coin that he plucked cleanly from the air, and led me toward the stairs. The patrons watched me warily

Our room was small; little more than a cupboard with one thin mattress rolled up on the floor, a stool, and a small slit in the wall that served for a window. The wooden floor was rough, dirty and the room had a faint but definite odour of pine and urine and wet fur. Great place. The Holiday Inn would seem palatial in comparison.

That window and a small tallow candle were all the lighting we had. It didn't seem to bother Tahr in the slightest. I recalled the way in which her eyes caught firelight, how she seemed to have little difficulty moving at night. Cats' eyes. She could see one hell of a lot better in the dark than I could.

Tahr glanced around and huffed slightly: "Huh! Well, it will serve. Wait here." The door swung shut and the piece of wood that served for a latch made a hollow thok as it dropped into place.

I was in no hurry to go anywhere. It had been a long, weird day. I unrolled the pallet, sat down, and leaned back against the wall to wait. She was pretty quick, back within a few minutes carrying a pair of steaming bowls and two cups on a tray.

Whatever was in those bowls smelled unbelievably good. I was drooling even before she'd kicked the door closed behind her. She set the tray down and passed me a bowl: a stew of some kind with a weird implement stuck in it, a sort of cross between a fork and a spoon. Tahr watched in unfettered amusement as I fumbled with it. To her the idea of me doing something as civilised as eating with a tool would be unusual. She'd seen me using my knife to cut food, but watching me trying to imitate her facility was something different. She ate from her own bowl, but still watched me over each noisy mouthful she took.

The cups were unusual: they had a small spout on one side, made for different jaws. Only water. I didn't try and drink from it. The water would have come from the local well and I didn't want to know what varieties of microscopic entities called that well home. The stew was nothing special: The meat was undercooked and might have been slightly gammy, but the worst was covered by the plentiful addition of spices. Vegetables were a surprise: you just have to see a Sathe grin once to swear on your mother's grave they're pure carnivores.

Still, my hunger made that the best meal I'd ever ate. I wolfed down my share in no time, revealing a rib bone at the bottom. Tahr also had one, but she could do something with it: picking it up and biting through it with jaws that treated the bone as though it were no more than marshmallow. Meticulously, and with obvious relish she worked the marrow out with her tongue.

I'd left my rib lying in my bowl. She had noticed I'd never bothered with the bones as she had, but up to now she'd never commented.

Tahr ran her tongue around her mouth. "Not eat?" she asked, gesturing at the bone.

"I cannot," I explained. "My teeth. . . cannot."

"Saaa!" she hissed in understanding and twitched her ears. Picking up the other bone she bit it cleanly in half, then handed half to me. "Here. Try."

Gingerly I took the morsel. Tahr watched intently and with obvious amusement as I tried to work the marrow out. It didn't taste of anything much: a little salty, perhaps a bit sweet. Not to my taste. The felid laughed outright as I passed it back to her. Within a minute she'd polished it off and let the stool lean back against the wall, the bowl dropping to the floor. She closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and belched loudly and contentedly.

The light coming in through the thin window slit came from the late afternoon sun, still following its inexorable path from east to west. After the meal I was feeling pleasantly drowsy. Tahr was stretched out on the pallet, looking like the proverbial cat that's swallowed the canary. What the hell do we do now? Watch TV? Go down to the bar? find the swimming pool? Shit, I sighed, leaned back against a wall and picked up the M16, idly running a finger through the dust and grime coating the receiver.

When the rifles had first been issued to the troops in Vietnam, they'd been handed out with the message that the rifle was so efficient that it never needed cleaning. Of course the troops were happy to accept such statements and never did clean their rifles. How many good men had that snafu killed?

I was using the old ball ammunition, M193, a dirty-burning propellant that would eventually clog up the barrel with residue. The new IMR stuff was cleaner and more effective, but not compatible with the M16Als. I buttoned out the magazine and opened the chamber, holding the weapon up to the light as

I squinted through the barrel, frowning at the grime. I was tired, but this gun had saved my life and kept me fed. I started breaking it down for cleaning.

I put a couple of drops of oil into the barrel and then pulled a cloth through, clearing away crystalline traces of propellant. As I was scrubbing the rotary lug bolt a floorboard creaked. Tahr squatted down beside me.

She picked up the forestock assembly, turning it over in her hands, the black pads on her fingertips stroking the synthetic materials and the blued steel. "You never tell. What is this? What is it for?"

Perhaps she had guessed it was a weapon of some kind. Although I hadn't told her what it was and made sure that I was well away from the camp when using it for hunting, the facts were there if she had cared to look at them: I left the camp carrying the otherworldly device and came back with meat that had obviously been killed by some means other than a knife or crossbow.

Now she was asking me directly. Well, she hadn't been completely straight with me. . .

"Hunting," I replied vaguely.

"Hunting? How?" she pressed. "What do you do? Club the animal to death?" She mimed beating some small creature with the stock.

"I not understand," I lied, looking confused. She sighed and turned back to the assembly in her hands: "Where is this from?"

I thought about what I should say. Should I tell her where I came from? No, not yet. That was something I wasn't sure she would take too well. Finally I answered with, "My people make. My kind."

"So small, so fine," she murmured testing the machined steel with a claw. "Your people, where are they? West?"

I thought hard again before answering.

"My people are far away. I not think I can go back to them. I here, no way back. Tahr, what you do with me?" This was her terrain. She was my lifeline, without her I was lost. Besides, I liked her.

"You help me, I help you. I try to go north. Town named Mainport. You come, help me?"

I slipped the barrel back into place, tightened it. A magazine slipped into place with a smooth click, the bolt slid back and forth freely. I squinted through the Armalon optical sight. The lens was smudged and dirty. I cleaned it with the tail of my shirt, not exactly spotless, but passable.

"What you there do?"

She uneasily turned away to look out the window.

"Tahr?"

She stood and made for the door. "I back soon." With that she was gone. "Damnation!" I swore and pounded my fist against the floor in frustration.

In the narrow street below the inn a couple of teamsters were arguing over who had the right of way. Their shouting sounded like a catfight, and the noise grew louder when they started taking swipes at each other and passerbys stopped to shout encouragement.

There was a fair-sized crowd out there when I slammed the shutters on the window and slumped against the wall, sliding down to sit on the floor where I buried my head in my hands. On the wall opposite, pale, horizontal bars of dusty light from the slatted shutters covered the wall and door, filling the room with a muted orange twilight.

"I back soon," she'd said.

Again I was waiting and hoping that she would return. What could I do if she didn't? I had the feeling that I wouldn't make it hundred yards down the street without her, so I was effectively trapped in here until either she returned or the streets cleared enough for me to make my way to the gate.

Amongst these felids I'd just be an exotic animal; rare and possibly worth a lot. I caught a shuddering breath, leaned my head back against the

rough wall and closed my eyes.

And what if she doesn't come back ?

She has to. She said she would.

Yeah, but if. . .

I tried not to think about that.

How long was this going to go on? How long would I be stuck here? There were things I wanted to do, places I wanted to see. Nothing I'd ever been in any particular hurry to accomplish, but now they all seemed that much more important.

There had been the flash of light and a truck scattered across a hillside and Tenny dead and I was here. That was all there was to it.

I covered my face again and moaned.

When the latch on the door rattled I could scarcely hear it above the cacophony from the fight taking place on street outside. I looked up, but it wasn't Tahr who stepped into the room.

And it wasn't room service.

Two Sathe males dressed in nondescript tattered breeches stepped inside, casting a glance out into the hall before carefully closing the door. One of them - a dark-grey with a dappled pattern of dark spots on his fur - hissed something to the brown-furred one and began sidling towards my pack. Brown Fur slipped a slender dirk from his belt and moved slowly towards me, beckoning with his free hand and making coaxing noises. The assault rifle was with the pack: on the other side of the room. But my knife. . . Brown Fur was looking worried, tossing his blade from one hand to the other. Grey looked around at him and hissed something I COULD understand: "Kill it!"

Brown Fur almost skewered me. The blade whispered passed my cheek as I dodged blindly and kicked out with a heavy boot. I was rewarded with a solid impact, a grunt of pain and the Sathe staggering backwards.

I scrambled to my feet and Brown Fur's eyes widened when he saw that my head almost brushed the ceiling. He lunged again, fast and scared. I dodged again - barely - and caught his hand and kept him going, straight into the wall with his wrist taking the brunt of the impact. There was a crackling snap and yowl of pain as his wrist broke.

His howl changed as I swung him and launched him at the window. He hit hard, shutters splintered and cracked as he went through them. The howl cut off to the accompaniment of something heavy bouncing off the shingles of the porch roof outside, then shouts rang out as he dropped in unexpectedly on the Sathe below.

Breathing hard I turned to face Grey. He had drawn his own dagger and was down in a low crouch, his claws and fangs bared and a deep rumbling sounding in his chest.

I snarled back at him and pulled my knife from its boot sheath. The steel blade slithered out with a hiss. "I cut your heart out!" I snarled with my best scowl smeared across my face.

The Sathe stared at my trench knife; its blade twice the size of his and wickedly serrated. He stared at me, at something that spoke Sathe and threw them out second-floor windows.

His ears went back, then he turned and fled.

I dove for the rifle and was out the door after him, slamming into the wall opposite with my shoulder in time to see him reach the stairs. I fired from the hip on full auto. My burst shattered the wall above his head as he took the stairs full tilt; sending wood chips flying, half-deafening me and filling the tiny hallway with the acrid stench of cordite and hot lead. There were alien screams from down below but I dashed back into the room and to the window. From there I saw him help his semi-conscious accomplice to his feet and then the both of them disappeared down an alleyway. I tracked them but didn't fire: too many bystanders.

Whom - I realised - all seemed to be staring at me now their little fight had been unexpectedly upstaged. I jumped away from the window and stood shaking as shouting sounding like hot iron being quenched in water came from

outside.

The innkeeper was seething at the damage done to his property.

I squatted on the thin mattress holding the rifle against my chest, its butt resting on the pallet, the blue steel of its barrel cool against my cheek. Vaguely, downstairs I could hear the snarls and yowls of Sathe arguing. As yet nobody had ventured upstairs. I waited, staring at the door hanging drunkenly from its broken hinges.

When a Sathe stepped into view, I almost shot her.

Tahr stopped in the doorway, one hand resting on the frame as she surveyed the wreckage of the room, then me; crouched scared behind the assault rifle. When she moved, it was slowly, cautiously, as one would approach a cornered animal.

She was afraid of me.

"Oh God!" I breathed in despair and let the weapon fall aside as I buried my face in my hands. "Tahr. . ."

A hesitant hand touched my hair, stroked it.

I looked up and she froze with her hand still extended. "I not hurt you," I said in my clumsy Sathe and she lowered it slowly. I opened my mouth, wanting to tell her, to try and explain what I was feeling, then hung my head. It was hopeless; I didn't have the words.

"K'hy," she said quietly, firmly, and hooked a claw under my chin to tilt my head up so we were eye to eye, "what happened?"

It took time, but she was patient; coaxing and helping me when I didn't know how to tell her. When she finally had the whole story she sighed and picked up the dagger that the intruder had dropped. Her ears were back tight against her mane. "This is []?" she asked.

"I do not understand," I replied.

She looked surprised, then those sharp, tufted ears twitched up and down in her version of a smile. She held up a paw: "This hand. You do not say this not hand? You say the [truth]?"

"Yes!" I nodded vehemently.

She slowly imitated my nod.

Furious, the innkeeper was, but he was also scared of me. He wanted to throw us out, but in order to do that he had to come upstairs to challenge Tahr face to face. I watched them growling and sizzling at each other, occasionally punctuating their argument with basso roars. It was hard to think of them as actually talking.

Tahr was just as pissed as the other. She blamed the innkeeper for what'd happened, saying that I was harmless unless provoked and it was his fault that the intruders had got in to provoke me in the first place. I had just been protecting myself. The innkeeper insisted that she pay for the damage to the premises, then quoted a price. Tahr's mouth dropped in outrage.

"Four golds?!"

That was half of all we had!

"Saaa!" he hissed at her. "You do not pay and I shall make sure that you find it very [difficult] to leave. The [garrison?] here can make a few simple questions a matter of running against the wind for outsiders."

Tahr opened her mouth, about to snap something in return, then she closed it again and looked helplessly at me. "Give, K'hy," she told me.

I opened my pocket and counted out four of the bulky coins. The innkeeper didn't move to take them, so I handed them to Tahr who passed them on to the agitated male. He grabbed the cash and glanced at it, then turned to leave.

Halfway to the door he did a double-take and squinted at me. "It can count?!" he asked.

Tahr sighed wearily. "Yes. Why? Do you wish to take him from me as well?"

The innkeeper cocked his head to one side in his scrutiny of me. "No, it is ugly; I would not want it. Is it strong? able to work?"

Tahr glanced at me. I nodded slightly. "Yes," she said.

"Perhaps it will be able to earn you some of that money back," the innkeeper mused. "There are some jobs it might be able to do."

Tahr glanced at her hands. There was fire in her eyes as she seemed to will her claws back into their sheaths in her fingertips. Finally she growled, "Show him what to do. He will understand. But it is growing late and he does not see well in the dark."

"Tomorrow then," he replied. "You may sleep here, but cause any more trouble and you are out with the llamas. Understood?"

"Understood," Tahr said to the innkeeper's retreating back, then she muttered something she hadn't taught me - probably obscene - and forced the door closed.

I had picked up the dagger dropped by my assailants and was turning it over in my hands, examining it. It was cheap, poorly crafted, with a simple wooden hilt bound with some kind of plant fibre. I looked up at Tahr; she met my gaze for a split second, then turned away and pretended to be busy fiddling with the string on her crossbow.

She was worried. Scared?

Perhaps.

Why was she nervous about the law? Those Sathe I'd wasted in the hills; were they bandits or something else? Why would common thieves waste their time with someone who was well protected and obviously didn't have much in the way of material possessions? And why did she lie to me about who and what she was?

Shit! There was so much about this strange female that didn't click.

"Tahr, who are you?"

She flinched when I spoke, then faced me with her ears back. "I do not understand, K'hy."

"Don't give me that! " I snarled and she took a step backwards, glancing at the naked blade in my hands. "Christ on a crutch! I not hurt you!" I dropped the knife and held out open hands, "Who are you? No merchant, I know. How help you I if you not say the. . . truth?"

Her ears came up a little and she combed her claws through her ragged mane as she regarded me. "Truth," she murmured. "Very well, I tell you.

"Do you know what 'Born-to-rule' is?"

I rolled my eyes. "Someone born to rule?"

Awkwardly, laboriously she told me.

Their ruler - the one who is born to rule - is an individual whose entire upbringing and education has been geared - from birth - to leading and being a figurehead for their people. They are trained in politics and diplomacy, economics and trading, weapons and tactics.

They are raised on private estates - private schools - being tutored by old masters, returning to the Capital only when the former monarch became incapable of effectively leading the Realm, through either illness or death

Tahr was one of the candidates. She had received news that the former ruler - the Shirai - was dying. She had left her southern estate with sixteen armed Sathe, one of them her prospective mate.

"We were attacked three times," she held up a hand with three claws out, retracting them in sequence, like a human ticking events off on his fingers.

"First we drive them off, lost four soldiers. Second time we escape, lost [six] and also supplies. Third time, we have six Sathe left, my mate one of them, he killed by arrow." She dropped her eyes. God, if I had just been a few seconds faster. . .

That got me. They had been engaged. . . or whatever it was they did. Did that loss hurt her? Could she actually feel that kind of pain? How could I tell? Her face remained as inscrutable as a statue's.

"My [life] I owe you."

That line. . . Jesus, I'd never dreamed I'd hear that anywhere in the

real world.

"You help me?" she asked.

I stared, meeting eyes that hit like an electric shock. All she'd told me. . . "You say the truth?"

Goddamn if she didn't look hurt. "K'hy, yes!"

"Who were they?"

"I do not know."

"Yes you do. Are they soldiers?"

She gaped. Outrage or astonishment, I wasn't sure. Finally she just said, "Perhaps. Not Eastern soldiers. . . others. I am not sure."

I weighed that up.

She was on the run, not from the forces of this realm, but from others. If that was the case, then why didn't she go to the garrison posted in this town? Surely they would help her.

"[]," she said.

"Not understand," I said.

Her fingers twined together as she tried to explain. "Some who not want me. Some who belong to others. They try and stop me. Dangerous. Easier if they do not know where I am."

Turncoats? Traitors?!

"Where do you go?" I asked

"North. Very big town."

Shit, I had nothing else to do, why not help a cat princess?

"Yes, I help."

She smiled and held out her hand. Uncertainly I touched palms with her; Shake.

The old iron axe imbedded itself in the wood with a shock I felt up my arm. I shifted my grip on the straight, worn handle and hauled the piece of wood up over my head, then brought it down hard on the chopping block with a sharp BANG. The wood split, the halves flying apart. I took a moment to lean against the axe and wipe the sweat from my brow. My hands were sticky with resin and the scent of pine added a fresh touch to air that smelled predominantly of animal shit. A couple of cubs scurried forward. One tossed the stuff I'd just split on the woodpile while the other set another piece up on the block.

"Thanks, kids," I smiled at them. They chattered and hissed and snarled back at me. I had a small audience gathered around sitting in the shade of the rickety fence surrounding the dusty yard behind the inn. The cubs of the town of Traders Meet loved me. Better than a circus.

Early that morning - shortly after I'd started on the daunting pile of uncut wood - they'd been nervous little shadows: watching me, but vanishing whenever I so much as glanced in their direction.

However, they learned that I wasn't about to come after them, bellowing, screaming, and brandishing the axe. Now they crowded around, following and touching me. They weren't as sleek as their elders. Instead they looked more like overgrown teddy bears with oversized heads, hands, and feet, their gangling limbs lending them an air of awkwardness. Cute as hell. When I went to the local well to fetch water for the inn, I returned carrying a bucket in one hand and a squealing, laughing cub in the other. I was almost enjoying myself.

And Tahr was as twitchy as a cat in the rain.

Later that evening she had perched herself on the windowsill to stare moodily at the setting sun, her chin resting upon a clenched fist. Money, that was her concern. She had counted on getting enough for the wagon to buy passage on a caravan bound for the seaport of Bay Town. While we could have used the wagon ourselves to get there, Tahr decided that we would get more for it in a small town where vehicles of any kind were always in demand, and

we would attract less attention arriving as passengers in among other Sathe. Also, I guessed she was counting on the value of protection in numbers.

"Although after today I doubt you could be [inconspicuous] if I were to put you in a box," Tahr sighed while examining her claws. "Why did you [encourage] the cubs?"

"What do I?" I asked with a shrug. "Give them scared? Make them run? Not good for my image."

"Huh!" she snorted and ran her forefinger down the window frame. A single gouge in the wood appeared, following her digit, wood curling away from her claw. "You did not speak to them?"

I shook my head and gave a twisted smile. "No."

Tahr muttered something that I translated as 'thank God for small favours' and dropped her chin back onto her fist.

"He not pay?" I asked after a minutes silence.

Her head snapped about and she glared at me, then gave the classical hissing spit of a furious cat. "He not pay," she confirmed.

Bastard! I work my butt off and get shafted. . .

I nodded and thought for a second, then opened my pack and rooted around in the depths. My fingers closed on what I was groping for and I pulled it out.

"Tahr, here."

She looked curiously at what I was holding.

The velcro fastenings on my wallet made their characteristic ripping sound as I pulled it open. Before I handed it over to Tahr I took the credit cards, old photos, and receipt slips from a pocket. She took it hesitantly.

"I have not seen this before," she said as she stroked the nylon fabric then opened and closed it several times, squinting at the closures. From inside she pulled a fifty dollar note and held it up to the light.

"Strange. . . What is it?"

"Money," I replied. "Human money."

"Money?!" she looked and sounded incredulous and examined a bill more closely. "Strange," she repeated, "but what am I to do with it?"

"Can you sell it?"

"Sell?" Her hands froze in their inspection of the wallet and she looked up at me, a spark catching in her eyes. "Yes. Yes! Any leather worker would be interested in the pouch and I can find an artisan or [somesuch] who would be interested in the pictures."

"Enough?" I asked.

"Enough?" She smiled. "Yes, I think there is plenty." Then she sobered and stood up to touch my face.

I flinched as that hand brushed my skin: fur on the back of the hand, knuckles, fingers. Black pads on fingertips and palms. Strange joints and bones. Tips of claws poking from small indentations where the fingernail should be.

"Do you want to?" she asked.

I shrugged. "It is. . . nothing. Small thing."

"Not much. . . !" Again she opened the wallet. "I thank you. . . what is this?" she pulled a couple of small foil packets from inside the wallet, sniffed at them and quickly jerked her head back, looking affronted.

"Ah," I coughed and reached over to pluck them from her fingers.

"Not sell those." No, Condoms might not be appreciated. . . or comprehended.

"And you are sure you want to sell this?" Tahr asked again.

"How else get money?"

She laughed. "Not hard, perhaps not [nice]. Always [] to sell."

"I not understand."

She frowned, rubbed at the wrinkles marching up the velvet of her nose.

"Ah. . . Thing-make-more Sathe. Between male and female: [Sex]. Do you understand?"

Oh. "Yes."

She stared, then her ears dipped sideways and twitched. She was laughing at me, however silently. "Is it the same with h'mans?" she asked.

"Is the same," I replied.

"Always male looking for female not in []."

I didn't even ask what that meant but I suddenly realised that I may never see another human woman again. And that thought hurt.

Before we left I took time to clean myself up. It may have been a bit of a mistake, but I was still living and thinking by human standards. That would change in time; so slowly and gradually that I wasn't always aware of what was happening to me, but it would change.

After getting my hands on hot water - you can't just turn on a faucet here - I did my best at shaving my scraggly beginnings of a beard away. Saying that it's not easy shaving with a knife is a classic understatement. It's fucking difficult. . . and unless you've got skin like a buffalo's backside, it hurts!

Tahr was astonished by the whole performance. She sat and watched my selfmutilation for a time before hissing something to herself and leaving. At least afterwards I felt human again.

For the two days we had before we left Traders Meet time passed slowly. Nights were long, jolted awake sweating from disturbingly vague and shadowy dreams. Days were spent sitting at the window watching the street outside while Tahr continued my education in the Sathe language and culture. Late into the night she would sit with me and patiently correct me as I practised my grammar and vocabulary. More often than not her exasperated and slightly pained expression could only hint at the atrocities I had committed upon her native tongue.

"Three Realms I have travelled, but I have never seen the likes of this!"

The wagon master was a stocky, grizzled Sathe with brown fur lanced with grey stripes, circled me, examining me with amazement. Across the street naked Sathe labourers were panting from exertion in the morning coolness as they loaded sacks onto the back of a wagon. Early traffic rumbled along the cobbled streets and there was already the sound of merchants shouting.

It had been the same every morning.

"I had heard rumours of a Sathe with a strange pet," he said. "Tell me, where did you find it?"

"West. In the mountains," Tahr said. "Yes, rare indeed."

"You are a [trapper?]" he asked. "Hunting such a creature?"

"Not exactly," Tahr replied with a twitch of her ears, "he found me. I think he []." Whatever she said, the wagon masters thought it hilarious.

"Very well," he said when he had finished hissing his laughter. "If the others will allow it, it may ride in the wagon." He waved his hand in the general direction of a wagon with a pair of rough passenger benches in the rear half of the cargo bed.

"Thank you, sir," Tahr smiled and stooped to pick the pack up from the dust. The wagon master turned to shout at some of his employees, then looked at me again.

"Why is he wearing clothes?"

"To keep him warm, of course," Tahr said. "He has hardly any fur of his own."

"Strange that you should find it in the mountains then," he mused. "I would think that he would be more comfortable further south." He looked me up and down again, then snapped his jaws and returned to his work.

Tahr took me aside into the shade of a nearby porch. Away from the dust

and bustle of the street; also away from sharp Sathé ears.

"Pet?" I almost spat the word out.

"I am sorry, K'hy. . . "

"You not. . . do not look sorry," I sulked.

"It is the easiest way," she tried to explain, clicking the claws on her index fingers together in frustration. "Do not attract too much attention."

I snorted. "Do not speak?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Perhaps a week."

"A week?! I do not know if I can. . . "

She touched my sleeve. "I will try to find time to speak with you. I will try."

I closed my eyes for a second, then opened them and nodded. "Alright. Your pet am I."

Shades of Lassie.

"Good. Thank you K'hy." She surprised me by flashing me a grin that could only be an imitation of one of my smiles, then she swatted my arm to get me moving. Her claws weren't completely pulled.

I trudged along beside the llama as it made its steady way along the rough road with the caravan. There were three Bison drawn wagons, two carrying cargo and supplies, the other carrying the passengers. Two guards on llamas brought up the rear. There were ten. . . I'll call them people in the caravan: nine Sathé and one human. The wagon master - name of Char - drove the passenger wagon in the centre of the convoy. The two cargo vehicles led the way with two Sathé wagoners apiece, one driving while the other either rode shotgun or - more often - stretched out asleep on the canvass covering the wagon bed.

Aside from Tahr and myself, there were only two paying passengers in the caravan. I had plenty of time to watch and listen to them, learning about them.

Elmerth was a merchant from a small town with the morbid name of Lost Lives. He was predominantly brown-furred with only a faint stippling of red ochre. As his wares were textiles, it was fitting that his breeches were made of something that looked expensive, as was his jewellery: silver filigree bracelets and armlets. Fancy. Damned impractical out there.

A young female Sathé wearing a black cloak and leather kilt spent most of her time dozing in the warmth of the sun. She was called Hymath. She seemed to be a bodyguard to Elmerth, and even though she didn't seem like much, Tahr warned me she could be very dangerous. That I found out for myself. Later.

The two guards, each decked out in leather armour, kilt and carrying a scimitar, were called Kharm and Samath. A pair of male youths hired to escort the caravan. They were there more as protection against errant animals than against trouble of the twolegged kind. Animals here are not as scared of the Sathé as animals in our world are of humans, there had been a few incidents of trouble with bears and wolves after the easy food at campsites. Not many, but enough to warrant a guard.

Two days. Two days of the same countryside, the trees, the dust and bugs. Everyone was bored, especially me. Plodding on, hour in, hour out. The Sathé who weren't occupied with driving rode in the back, some wrapped in their own thoughts, other dozing, the only sign they were alive were their ears twitching at persistent insects.

Just to the north of what could have been the Pamunkey River. The road

had started across the hilly, rolling plains to the east of the Chesapeake Bay. Everywhere you looked sweetgum, green ash, yellow poplar, hickory, chestnut oak, white oak, red oak, Loblolly. The deciduous proliferated; the number of conifers slowly waning. Grouse, quail, and wild turkey made sure that we didn't go hungry. In the low twenties, the weather was warm and muggy, but not oppressive. Typical for Virginia. The passengers in the cart dozed in the sun.

The first quarrel took the driver of the first wagon through the throat, he fell sideways in his seat, the bison kept moving. The second got Kharm through his right arm, pinning it to his armour. He howled and toppled off his llama.

By that time I was moving. Scrambling full tilt toward the passenger wagon with my head down. I heard the soft swish of a steel blade leaving a leather lined sheath as Samath dismounted, facing off the twelve red and black armoured Sathe coming at us from both sides of the road, six to a side. Three archers slung aside their crossbows and drew swords.

Three? . . . I'd only seen two arrows.

Elmerth was sprawled on his back, collapsed over a pile of his wares with the black shaft of a quarrel poking from his mouth. Fur glistened red. A hand twitched.

I was staring. Someone howled my name, jerking my attention away as other Sathe left the wagon: Hymath vaulted over the left side in a swirl of black cloak, looking for all the world like some giant predatory bird. Tahr went over the other side, her blade sweeping out of the sheath in a glittering arc and mouth gaping in a vicious grimace that was ninety percent teeth. If she made a noise - snarled something - I didn't hear it as I dove onto the wagonbed, scrabbling for my gear half-buried among the other cargo, pulling frantically when the M-16 snagged on something. The closest Sathe were only a couple of meters away when I swung the muzzle up, cocking and firing.

At that range, I couldn't miss. The slugs smashed into their chests, the muzzle blast punching charred discs across their fur. They stopped as if a wall had hit them.

For a second the entire skirmish seemed to freeze, all the Sathe staring at me with obvious shock on their faces. A shout rang out from the trees and more of them burst from the foliage. I saw a crossbow being raised towards me and put four rounds into the Sathe wielding it. And they kept coming. Something that killed them before they could get near and they kept fighting. That spoke volumes about their training: they were good, or fanatic, or perhaps there was something more terrifying than my weapon awaiting if they fled.

Tahr was facing three, her scimitar parrying and thrusting at an amazing speed, a blur of steel. She was damned good but she didn't have a prayer of defeating all of them, the best she could do was delay them for a few seconds. It was enough.

One attacker fell, with her point in his stomach, clutching at his entrails. Then I fired: One attacker's head half-shattered in a pink and grey spray. The other took a round through her throat and died slower, thrashing on her comrades' remains as the dusty road turned sticky with blood. I saw Kharm huddled on the ground, clutching at the quarrel through his arm. One of the attackers paused in her rush and was almost casually raising her sword for a stab at his unprotected throat. The crosshairs settled on her neck and she spasmed as a small red flower seemed to bloom there. Hot brass rattled to the floor of the wagon.

"K'hy!"

I'd underestimated their speed. There were two of them at the tailgate of the wagon. . .

"Shit!"

I jumped straight up. A sword hissed under my feet and I planted the sole of my boot in his face on the way down. He fell back out of sight.

The other one lunged forwards, sword point aimed at my guts. I dodged.

. . and staggered when the wagon unexpectedly jerked forward:. The bison had decided enough was enough: they were leaving, taking my balance with them and my feet skidded out from under me and my helmet cracked on the tailgate. . .

Flat on my back, choking on bile, a red and black figure looming over me, sword raised then spinning in sunlight as a body toppled, pinning me. A sharp, metallic-tinged warmth spread across my shoulder. Tahr stood over me, fighting something that clattered like a manic typewriter. Hot brass spattered against my cheek. Everything just faded out.

Heat on my face.

Sunlight? bright in my eyes, dazzling, motes of dust drifting above me, buzzing dots circling and blurring in and out. . .

Pain. . . My head was throbbing in time with a pounding in my ears. Where? Why was I lying here? The sky lurched and circled, floaters bloomed before my eyes.

There was fighting, there was pain. I didn't want to be here. Where was here again? I didn't know. Home. . .

Where was home?

I was on my feet. There were tall shapes. . . trees, solid against my shoulder with bright light glaring down in shafts that dazzled to look at. There, in the distance, that hill. I knew home was just beyond that hill. I'd go to that hill. . . The world reeled, or was it me? The ground hard against my feet with every step, trees rough under my hands. That hill; it was just over that hill.

Sharp pain in my arm, pulling me around. . .

Animals, attacking me, claws and teeth and eyes, and teeth, and catching me, and I was falling and screaming and they were over me as I struggled and twisted then coughed bile and vomited and choked as something stroked at my hair and closed my eyes so tired. . .

I awoke to night, a neon blue moon braving the cloud-cover and riding low above the crests of pines atop a distant ridge. Crickets or some other night insect rasped and clicked in the dark. Distant wind hissed through branches overhead with a sound like surf on shale. I looked up at dark branches silhouetted against a leaden sky.

Night. How long had I been out?

Then the throbbing ache in my head hit me.

"Uhhnnn. . ." I groaned.

"K'hy?"

The voice sounded from the dark nearby, followed by a rustling, as of feet on pine needles and a Sath's head eclipsed the moon and clouds. A hand - fur with the softness of sable - touched my face then pulled away. "You are awake?"

"Huhnnn. . . Tahr?" I couldn't see her and it was all I could do to croak her name; my throat was like sandpaper, foul with the lingering aftertaste of old vomit. I tried to reach up and found I couldn't move my arms. There was something wrapped around my wrists.

"Yes, it is me." She hesitated, "You are sane again?"

Sane? What was she talking about?

Oh.

I closed my eyes at the memory. "Please. . . drink?"

A creak of leather armour as she held a bowl to my mouth, trickling water between my lips. I drank greedily, but she pulled it away again.

"Thank you." Speaking was easier.

"How are you feeling?" A damp cloth dabbed at my face and came away stained with dust and something dark as dried blood.

How was I feeling? Like shit.

A jaw feeling swollen and stiff. The most god awful headache. . .

"There are little Sathe with hammers in my head," I groaned and tried to reach up again.

"Oh. . . ." Hands began fumbling with the bindings that held my wrists crossed on my stomach. "We had to. You were fighting us and screaming and you would not listen, you just spoke your own noises." She pulled away a length of rope padded with cloth. "I am sorry."

I didn't really know what to feel: anger, hurt. . . what? I wasn't quite firing on all cylinders. Almost absently I rubbed at my wrists. Despite the padding there was some tenderness, as there would be if I'd been struggling?

"All right," I sighed. "I remember. . . I did a few. . . strange things."

She hissed and stroked hair back from my face, fingers brushing lightly at my cheeks and forehead.

"How long was I out?"

"Out?" her muzzle wrinkled. "Sleeping? For the better part of two days since you fell. You worried me."

"Two days?" I winced. "I will be more careful next time. We won?. . ."

Tahr's ears flickered sideways. "You are talking to me, are you not?"

True. But what was the cost? I'd seen. . . how many fall? I couldn't remember. I gritted my teeth and turned my head. I was wrapped in a blanket, propped up against some sacks under a pine. A small campfire popped and sputtered nearby, its light and warmth lost in the dimness. A supine figure lay motionless under a stack of blankets. I stared hard before recognising Kharm. Under blankets; with his fur? His eyes were closed and his right arm lay on the blanket, a crude bandage - stained brown - wrapped around his bicep. Beside him, Hymath huddled, lost in her black cloak.

"He live?" I asked Tahr, mangling my Sathe again..

"Might. His arm, it will []."

"What?"

Tahr scratched her ribs. "Go bad. Bad smelling, black, then die. Understand?"

Damnation! Infection. Gritting my teeth I touched the lump on the back of my skull. I nearly screamed. Tender. Clotted blood matted my hair. So infection was something I had to worry about also. And it was a safe bet that the Sathe didn't have penicillin or quinine. "Yes, understand. In my pack -" I grimaced. It was difficult to think, my mind kept wandering to other things. I wanted to sleep again. With an effort I dragged my brain back online, " - box with red, uh. . . thing on it. . . "

Tahr didn't wait for me to finish. She jumped to her feet and scurried to the wagon. Char sat beside the fire while on the other side two furry lumps were two wagoners curled up and asleep. The wagonmaster's eyes met mine, held for a second, then dropped. Probably trying to figure out what he had gotten himself into.

There was no sign of Samath.

Tahr dropped beside me clutching my medical kit. "This?"

I opened the small kit and popped a penicillin tablet. Then directed Tahr as she applied antiseptics to the cuts on my head. She hesitated when I winced and my fingers curled, clutching handfuls of sod, then she clamped her jaws tight together and continued.

I was panting hard when she finished up. Lightheaded. Tahr sat beside me while I caught my breath and my pulse slowed down again. "That is all right?" she asked, concerned.

"Yes. Good." I rubbed at my temples, then popped the question, "Who was killed?" She grimaced, her nose bunching up showing her sharp teeth. "Four. Samath, two teamsters, and Elmerth."

"Samath?" I tried to take that in. It was difficult to grasp.

"You liked him?" Tahr asked after a short pause.

"Yes."

She ducked her head: "He fought well."

I closed my eyes and was quiet for a few seconds.

"Do you know who they were?" I asked without opening my eyes.

"They wore the uniform of the soldiers of the Gulf Realm."

The land to the southwest of the Eastern Realm, I remembered. Along the northern rim of the Gulf of Mexico. "Why they attack us?"

She shrugged and bared her teeth. "Difficult to explain. Ahh. . . I will try to keep it simple." She lowered her voice as she spoke. "Their ruler wants this province. If Hraasa stops the [candidates] getting to Mainport, the Eastern realm will be without a High Lord or heir to the line."

"Who?. . . Rasa?" I was still a few steps behind her.

"Hraasa," Tahr corrected me. "The High Lord, the Born-To-Rule of the gulf realm."

I tried again to pronounce the name, failing. "I am sorry," I said with a forced smile. "It hurts to think."

Tahr's ears twitched and she dabbed the cloth against the side of my face. I reached up and held it there, the cool moisture bringing a little relief against the pounding behind my temples.

"You were not honest about that weapon," Tahr finally said, sounding a little hurt. Or perhaps I was reading too much into that statement. Anthropomorphising. It was tough not to.

"Oh," I hesitated, then confessed, "I thought it would be best."

"Why?"

I looked at her beseechingly. "Tahr, please. I cannot explain. I do not know how."

"Can you not try?" she asked. "You come into my life so suddenly, yet you tell me so little about yourself. I know you have a weapon beyond anything I have ever seen before. But how much more about you is there that I do not know?"

"I am asking myself the same question," another voice broke in. Hymath appeared from the shadows and crouched down beside Tahr. Her hands were toying with something that looked sharp and glittered with the watery ripples of steel. Not a threat. Not exactly. "Both you and your. . . pet are much more than you seem to be." Then she turned to address me directly: "Do you have a name?"

I glanced at Tahr. She moved her hand in an unobtrusive gesture of assent. "My name is Kelly," I said; nervously aware that this was the first Sathé besides Tahr with whom I had ever spoken.

"K'hy." She tried the name, again giving the hard consonant of the 'K' and the aitch a sibilant sound, just as Tahr did. "That is all? Just K'hy? You have no Clan name?"

"It would mean nothing to you."

Hymath turned to Tahr. "My oath! Where did you find this one?"

"I have told you the truth about that," Tahr answered, looking guarded.

"And you do not know where it. . . he comes from?"

"I think that perhaps he comes from far to the west, but he has never been clear on that. He claims that there are others of his kind - his people, but he cannot return to them," Tahr said.

Hymath's muzzle wrinkled. "You have been []?" she asked me.

"I am sorry, I do not understand," I said.

Hymath looked at Tahr in surprise and Tahr explained: "He is still learning to speak our way."

"There is another?"

"He has. . . sounds of his own."

"Those noises he was making earlier?"

"Yes, those. I cannot pronounce many of them, but they are words to him," Tahr told the other. "K'hy, she asked if you had been []. Did your people make you leave? Is that why you cannot return?"

"No. I cannot return because I do not know how."

"You are lost?" Hymath asked.

"Umm. . . Yes."

"And what about that weapon you used?"

Why was she giving me the third degree like this? Tahr was doing nothing to stop her and indeed seemed to be wary of this small female in her black cloak. Her arrogant attitude made me think cop, but Tahr had told me she was a mercenary of some kind: Dangerous. Still, what business was it of hers?

"It is mine," I finally said. "Among my people I am a soldier. That is the weapon we use."

"Something happen. . . happened that I do not understand. I cannot explain. I was lost in the mountains. I walked much. . . many days before I meet Tahr. She help me. Before I see her, I not. . . did not even know that Sathe exist. . . existed."

The fire crackled loudly while the Sathe digested that.

"How is Kharm?" I asked into the silence.

"In great pain," Hymath replied. "Do you understand infection?"

"Yes," I nodded. "If that is trouble, I can help. I have. . . things to stop infection and others to fix wound."

"Are they safe?" Tahr asked suspiciously.

"They worked on you," I pointed out.

Tahr's ears flickered, a smile. Her finger absently stroked her chest where the scar still showed, then she gently reached out and batted me on the cheek with the palm of her hand, fingers curled. What did that mean?

Whatever it was, it meant something to Hymath; her ears went down.

"Yes, they did." Tahr looked back to Hymath. "His drugs are safe, I assure you." My head pounded as I tightened the clean bandage around Kharm's side. The wound looked serious; perhaps more than serious than it actually was, but I didn't want to take chances with it.

The quarrel had gone through the flesh of his upper arm, pinning it to his side like a butterfly to a board. It was a small blessing that they didn't have barbed heads on the bolts. The simple, pointed tip they used made a clean hole and was fairly easy to remove. A triangular head would have lodged in between his ribs and been pure hell to get out. Perhaps even impossible.

Each of the wounds were gory holes of half-clotted blood, tufts of fur, and the white substance of fat. I had to shave away the surrounding fur then rinse each of them with antiseptics then stitch them shut. Thank God there was plenty of surgical suture thread on the spool in the kit.

The hole in his side was pretty deep. The quarrel had ripped through muscle and just missed a rib. I still had no idea how a Sathe's vital organs were arranged, so I couldn't tell how serious it was. This I cleaned as well as I could and stitched it up, then bandaged it using the last of my clean gauze bandages. A penicillin tablet completed the treatment.

"Are you a []?" Hymath asked, fingering the gauze bandages.

I was sitting sucking air with my head between my knees, dizzy after that work. I looked up: "What? I do not know that word."

"A [], one who heals."

Oh. A Doctor, Physician, Shaman.

"No, but I was, um. . . taught to help until a real. . . healer could arrive." Hymath stared at me, hard and long. Finally in a soft voice she just said, "Where are your people, K'hy? Truth this time."

I met her gaze for a couple of seconds, then looked away. The crests of the surrounding trees were silhouetted against the night sky, the stars. Uncounted billions of suns up there - all equally insignificant, all equally important.

"I do not know. . . " I murmured. "I do not know."

Alone. Stranded in a way that made distance meaningless. This WAS earth, but it wasn't MY earth!

(My people Hymath? Sure. Take the first space/time warp to the fifth

dimension then it's the third wormhole on the right.)

The loneliness hit me then, as it would do often in the times to come. I swallowed hard and noisily and looked away from those myriads of worlds, away from the Sathé. Not fast enough.

"What is happening?" Hymath asked, head cocked to one side. "Your eyes are watering. Are you ill again?"

I scrambled to my feet, ignoring the nausea and dizziness, and staggered away from the fire, away from those things. Behind me I heard them arguing. Tahr sounded pissed with Hymath. I ignored them. I just wanted to be alone to wallow in self-pity. In the shelter of a wagon I sank down, curled up and buried my aching head in my arms, sobbing myself to sleep. As I slipped into the muzzy darkness bordering on nothing, I thought I felt a soft paw on my shoulder.

The morning came with daylight forcing its way under my eyelids. I groaned and sat up, rubbing small granules from my sore eyes. My head still throbbed, but not as fiercely as the night before. I ached from sleeping on the hard ground. Sometime in the night, someone had wrapped me in the anodised survival blanket.

It was a calm morning. Dew still lay on the ground, slowly evaporating into a thin mist. Birds screeched at each other in the treetops. The sun was a white glare on the horizon, and two five-foot cats fixed breakfast while four more snored away under blankets.

Char and Hymath looked up as I approached. I cleared my throat uncomfortably. "Good morning, Hymath"

"Is it?" The small female slowly stirred the stew. "You are feeling better? I had not expected something like you to react like that."

I shrugged. There was a pregnant silence. Kharm broke it by moving under his blanket and muttering something. "How is he?" I asked, moving over to kneel beside the young mercenary.

"He woke for a short time last night," Hymath instantly responded, obviously glad of the distraction. "And his wounds do not seem to be getting any worse. It is still too early to tell."

I lifted the bandage on his arm. He stirred as I moved the limb. Well, he seemed to be stable: I couldn't see any dirt or fur in the scab and the surrounding skin looked a healthy tone. His breathing looked normal for a sleeping Sathé. He was hot, but I'd noticed their body temperature was a little above my own. I didn't think he was running a fever.

He would live, but for a time he would be in considerable pain. That was something I couldn't do anything about.

When time came to leave, he was cautiously and gently lifted onto the wagon. I hated to move him, but I had to agree with the others' decision; waiting around could be unacceptably risky. The lurching of the wagon caused me almost as much pain as it did Kharm. My head still felt like an eggshell filled with nitroglycerine. I suffered in silence, trying not to groan when a wheel went one on one with an exceptionally deep rut in the road.

The foothills were behind us and now the land was broad, rolling vales and plains swathed in dense semi-continuous forests. Copses of trees defended their own individual territories, fields of grass and small shrubs in between; like no-mansland.

Something landed in the hay beside me. I turned my head to squint at it: the M-16. "Yours," Tahr said shortly.

"Thank you," I nodded and picked up the rifle to examine it. None the worse for wear, but the magazine was empty and the selector was locked on full auto. She'd emptied the weapon.

"Did you have a reason for not telling me what that was?" asked Tahr.

"I wanted to. . . understand, to learn about you," I said. "I did not want you to be afraid of me."

Her muzzle wrinkled. "Because your people are more powerful than ours?"
I shrugged. "Uh. . . Sort of."

She scratched her elbow with a delicate claw and looked around at the passing trees. "K'hy," she began without looking at me, "is there a reason you are here?"

The wagon lurched and I grabbed for a support. "I do not know. But if there is I would very much like to know what it is."

Her pupils abruptly went to pinpricks. "What I mean is did you come here to examine us? to watch us?"

"No!" I shook my head. "You think I am a . . . a . . . "

"[Spy]?"

"Jesus H. . . Why the hell do you think that?! I have told you the truth: I am lost!" Hymath was still facing forward, watching the bison, but her ears had rotated backwards, toward us. Tahr seemed not to notice. "You say that before you met me, you never knew that Sathe even existed. If you come from the west, you would have to pass through at least one other Realm: there is no way that you would not see another Sathe!"

I hung my head, then looked up. "That is very good, Tahr." Her ears twitched and I also smiled: "But you forget. I never said I came from the west - that was you."

"But you. . . you never saw a Sathe before me?"

"No."

"Then where did you come from? Did you simply appear in the middle of the Eastern Realm?" She gave a disgusted snort and started honing her claws against the bench. I swallowed and stared at the strands of wood curling away from her claws. A threat? I wasn't sure. "Will you at least show me how to use your weapon properly?"

Still watching her claws shredding the wood, I nodded. Tahr watched me pushing cartridges into the magazine.

"When these are gone, that is it. No more." I had about two hundred and sixty rounds left. I showed her how to insert the magazine, then pulled it out again and handed her the rifle.

"Should that not be in it?" she asked, pointing at the clip.

"I just want to see how you hold it," I said. She uncertainly raised the rifle to her shoulder. The M-16's not a big weapon, but it was still awkward for her diminutive stature. I shifted around until I was behind her, my arms lightly around her to help her adjust her grip. I could feel her twitching and tense; her fur bristling, muscles bunched like springs.

"No," I coaxed. "Relax. I will not bite. . . That is better. Pull it into you shoulder. Now press the trigger - that. . . Yes. Use your whole hand." I put my hand around hers and showed her how to squeeze the whole grip.

It didn't take long to show her the mechanics of the weapon, but proficiency comes with practice - hands on experience - and I didn't have enough ammunition for that.

"And your warriors are all armed with these?"

I nodded.

"Such a force would be [invincible]," she said.

"Until they meet a force armed in the same fashion," I retorted. Tahr looked surprised, then thoughtful.

Eventually she said, "True. It is a [] device, but only when the wielder is ready. If Hymath had not helped you, you would be dead."

"What?"

"If Hymath had. . . "

"I know what you said, but I do not understand. What happened?"

"Do you not remember?"

"Uh. . . I remember I was on the ground, then something happened. I thought it was you." I rubbed at the shoulder of my shirt, the spot Sathe blood had stained black. I glanced to where Hymath sat in her black cloak, the hood back, her ears occasionally twitching as insects buzzed around them.

"That was Hymath, she is [scirth]," Tahr explained. "A special

fighter. Like Born Rulers they are trained from the time they were cubs in the use of a variety of weapons and [techniques] known only to them. They are usually employed as mercenaries or bodyguards. . . And they are very, very good at their work."

I took some time to translate and mull over this information, then clambered up front to sit next to Hymath, grabbing at available handholds as the wagon lurched over the potholes the track seemed to be made of. The driver's bench was simply a plank with a backrest, the whole thing perched at the front of the wagon, much like the wagons you see in western films. Hymath glanced up as I swung up beside her.

"Hello, bald one."

I let that lie. "I want to thank you," I started awkwardly. "I want to thank you for what you did. . . ah. . . maybe I can repay you someday."

Her ears flickered in a smile. "Maybe you already have, ah? You repaid me several times over I think. I couldn't fight them all."

She was quiet for a time, then spoke again. "Why is the Gulf Realm so interested in you?" she asked.

"In me? I do not understand."

"Why else would they risk an [international incident] by coming this far into our Realm unless they were in pursuit of something extremely valuable to them," she said. "Would the [] in the [] know if they took you?"

"The what in the what?" I asked. "I do not understand! I cannot value to. . . be of value to them!"

"Who else?" Hymath said, then her muzzle wrinkled as her lips pulled back. She half-glanced back at Tahr, then lowered her voice. "Tahr. . . is her clan name Shirai?"

"I do not know," I confessed. "She has not told me."

"You are bound for Mainport?"

"Yes."

She twitched the reins and gave a low, warbling hiss: "Srrraaa. It is her." I half turned in my seat to look back: Tahr had her back to us, idly watching a small bird catching insects on the wing. Her ears were relaxed, but I wondered just how much of what we said she could hear. "Hymath," I was concerned. "You will not. . . "

"I will talk to whom I choose," she interrupted smoothly, correctly anticipating my request.

I was silent.

"But I am choosy about whom I talk to," she finally said with a small twitch of her ears.

The remaining two days passed slowly, the muggy hours dragging on under the unchanging slow, southern sky. It was a tedious and tense time. Tahr was nervous, and it seemed to rub off on the rest of us.

Kharm's recovery was slow, and for a couple of days was only able to hold liquids, but thankfully his wounds stayed clean. It was a shock for him to awaken to find me tending his bandages, but after Tahr and Hymath persuaded him not to shred my face and to get off me, he settled down and became quite amicable.

I kept up my language lessons and continued to learn just how similar and just how really alien they were.

And they learned more about me. . .

"Tahr, how old are you?"

Sprawled out in the beside Kharm, she cracked an eyelid open against the sun and lolled her head to look at me. "Sixteen years of age, K'hy, soon to be seventeen."

WHAT?!

I stared at her, then echoed, "Seventeen?!"

"Yes," she looked slightly puzzled. "Seventeen. There is a problem?"

"So young," I blurted. "Just a cub!"

Hymath laughed.

"A cub!" Tahr stared at me, her fur beginning to bristle. "K'hy, I came of age three years ago! How can you call me a cub!?"

Oh, shit. I grimaced awkwardly. "I am sorry. I did not mean it like that. It is just. . . to me you seem very young."

She growled and brushed at the upright fur on her shoulder. "Alright, strange one, what about you? How young?"

"I am twenty one years."

She blinked. "And you are definitely no cub."

I stared at her. "By our ways I am. How long do Sathe live?"

"Some have been known to reach five and forty years."

My mind spun wheels for a few seconds before it got a grip on that.

"Forty five?!" I choked.

"Yes." She blinked. "That surprises you?"

"Tahr, humans live to about eighty, and one hundred is not that rare."

Silence. Wide eyes.

"Truth?" Tahr said. "No [joke]?"

"Truth."

"H. . . How can you live so long?" Kharm finally asked.

"Our. . . our knowledge, our medicines help."

"Then you would know your great grandsires," he murmured in an awed voice.

"Yes."

"What were your's like?"

"Ah," I looked away. "Most do; not I. I lost many of my clan and family when I was a. . . cub. An accident. We have those too." I shrugged.

It was an uncomfortable silence this time.

"How many h'mans are there?" Kharm finally asked, if only to change the subject.

Oh God, I didn't know the numbers to tell them. I pondered for a few seconds then said, "I think that our largest city would have more humans than there are Sathe in this world."

I barely had time to realise my mistake before Tahr pounced on it:

"What do you mean, 'this world'?" Tahr demanded, leaning toward me.

"Where, K'hy? Where are you really from?"

Oh shit! The cat was out of the bag, literally.

"K'hy?" Tahr prompted as I hesitated.

"Hey, have I told you about the time. . . "

"K'hy!" This time her claws came out. "No games!"

"Do really want to talk about this here?" I asked.

"Yes. Now! Talk!"

I looked around at the Sathe faces staring at me and swallowed hard. It would have to come out some time, and if I satisfied her curiosity she'd stop pressing me.

"Very well. It was night. . . "

I told them everything I knew.

There was a long silence when I finished. The creaking of the wagon and the scuffing of the llamas' hooves were loud noises in the stillness.

It was Kharm who broke the silence. "Well, a tale like that. . . It is so incredible I do not think you could be lying." Then his ears twitched and he added, "All those bald hides. I think I would not like to live in a land like that."

Tahr said nothing. She watched me from under half-closed eyelids with what may have been pity. . . or something else entirely.

The Chesapeake Bay was different in the twilight.

It was quiet, still. There were no pleasure craft on the water, no

sounds of traffic, none of the multitude of lights that normally cover the water. None of the details that man had added: the houses, offices, and other edifices man raised for himself. Instead the bay was clear and clean, surrounded by woodland swarming with wildlife.

Bay Town sprawled on the southern bank of the Potomac, near the estuary where the slow river entered the huge bay - an asymmetrical mass of red-tiled roofs, walls, and towers behind the protective embrace of crenellated battlements catching the last light of a setting sun.

Much larger than Traders Meet, the town was an interface for the traffic of land and water. A place where goods were traded and travellers could buy passage, be it a ferry across the Potomac or transport on to another Sathe port by sea or land.

The entire northern quarter of Bay Town was dockside. Wooden wharves embraced by sea walls stretched out into the bay to where ships were moored. A small forest of masts were gathered around the docks; small wooden scows and fishing vessels tied to the larger seagoing ships.

To the south and west the entire town was surrounded by farmland. A lot of farmland devoted to cattle, others planted with crops, others left fallow. They wouldn't have farming machinery which would explain why the farms were so small and why there were so many of them. Easier for many to manage smaller parcels of land, especially when engaged in continual battle with the wilderness that threatened to overrun their farms and their lives.

Although not nearly as large as the average American town, Bay Town was swarming with Sathe. I estimated about four to six thousand. The town was a maze of broad streets leading to a central marketplace like spokes on a misshapen wheel, with countless small alleys connecting the streets. On all sides the rough buildings leaned over the streets as if trying to rest their gables against each other, none more than two stories high and with small windows, some with rough glass in them.

Stores, smithies, stables, coopers, carpenters. . . a hundred and one kinds of small businesses slotted in among homes and dwellings. The smell wasn't as bad as I had expected. Tahr explained that they had a sewage system flowing under the streets. There were many public toilets and fountains where residents could dispose of nightsoil and get fresh water.

Even though I lay low in the back of the wagon and tried not to attract attention we still drew stares as the wagons clattered through the streets of the outer town, headed toward the docks.

The warehouse was a large building with stone walls with a few small windows and a wooden roof. There was a shop connected to it with a sign above the door. Dim light from lanterns shone through the small windows. I didn't know what the sign said: I still didn't know how to read the chicken scratchings the Sathe called writing.

Char wearily dropped from his wagon and pushed the door open. Shortly later a group of Sathe emerged, grumbling and yawning and scratching, and started working at unloading the supply wagons. Another Sathe - obviously in charge - appeared, carrying on an animated conversation with Char.

"All right, K'hy. This is where we make our own way," Tahr told me and helped gather my gear. I noticed she took the rifle and knife along with her sword and crossbow, slinging the rifle and bow over her shoulder. Armed like that, she didn't look like someone to be trifled with. The pack was surprisingly heavy as I slung it over my shoulders. I didn't remember it weighing that much.

Anyway, Hymath took a couple of minutes to say farewell to us, clapping Tahr on the shoulder in a gesture that startled me with its humanness and wishing her luck. Me, she patted on my arm as she passed, then the black-cloaked mercenary set off toward the centre of Bay Town with a confident stride.

I would be seeing Hymath again.

Tahr looked around, then caught Kharm before he also vanished into the

town. "Kharm, do you know a place where we could get a room around here?"

The guard looked at me and rubbed his prominent jaw dubiously. "Any place would take you, but K'hy. . . The only place I can think of that might accept him is the Reptile, they get a lot of trappers with their animals passing through. They would have the facilities. . . "

I gave Tahr a pained look.

"I am sorry, K'hy," she sighed. "All right, I think that will have to do. Where is this Reptile?"

Kharm snorted and twitched his ears. "Along the docks, that way. It is comfortable, nothing more," he said and gave directions and Tahr thanked him then set off with me in tow. Looking back I saw Kharm staring after us. He hesitantly returned my parting wave and with a final pat at his scabbard, followed Hymath into the town.

The roughly paved streets were very dim and full of shadows. Of course there was no lighting. The inn so delicately called the Reptile was located in the southeast corner of the town; in the cheap sector not far from the wharves.

The wooden sign hanging over the door was illuminated by the orangish light that spilled out of the open portal. An unidentifiable lizard lay basking under a stylised sun while indecipherable ideographs were dotted beneath. From inside the building the sounds of a stringed instrument drifted outside: methodic scales that never quite sounded right,, eerie. The hairs on my neck crawled. Tahr stopped and petted her fur smooth.

"I hope we get a better reception than we did in Traders Meet," I muttered. She grinned and swiped me on the shoulder, then ducked in the door, pulling me after her.

The interior layout of the Reptile was much the same as that of the establishment we had stayed in at Traders Meet: a large (relatively speaking) common room opened on to what smelled like a kitchen while another doorway led to the owners' quarters. A narrow staircase against one wall led up to the guest rooms. The major difference between the two buildings was the quality of the finishing. While the Rabbit - or whatever it had been - in Traders Meet was rough, unpolished wood, all timber in this room was varnished and polished to a deep shine. Two common tables and their benches, the stairs, the chairs near the fire, the door frames, were all worn smooth and shiny from years of contact with furry bodies. Rough tapestries were hung on the wall and copper implements of various types were neatly displayed on shelves. The overall effect of the room was that of reassuring cosiness. It was a welcome change after the dark streets and the cool evening breeze.

The music was coming from a stringed instrument being played by a Sathe sitting in the rosy light cast by the fire and several tinted lanterns. The instrument looked like one of those old lutes: a large resonating chamber connected to a long, slender neck. The Sathe was playing it like a guitar, but the sounds produced were much deeper, much more mellow. I found myself staring at his hands as they danced over the strings. No pick, just a claw. Four other Sathe sat around at the tables and in other chairs at the fire, they all looked up as we entered, but the minstrel didn't even falter in his playing.

One of the figures by the fire - a female - got to her feet, smoothed down her fur with one hand, and came over to us. She didn't seem too perturbed at the sight of me. Our chances for a room were already looking good. I unshouldered the pack with a grateful sigh and placed it at my feet.

"It is late for travellers," the female greeted us. She looked like she was getting on a bit. She had a slight limp, her fur was tinged with grey, especially around her ears. "Can I help you?"

"Greetings," Tahr replied, looking around with interest. "I would like a room for a few nights, with meals. Also, is it possible to shelter my pet?"

I rolled my eyes. The goddamned pet routine again.

"Ahrrrr," the innkeeper dubiously looked me up and down. "It will cost extra to put your creature there in the [Kennels?] and take care of it. I

have to comment though: in all my years of seeing strange animals, I have never seen one like that. Where did you find it?"

"In the swamplands to the south," Tahr smiled. "However I have a somewhat unusual request. He is more of a pet and because he is such a rare creature, I wish to keep him in my room. He is quite tricky and I fear he could escape from a cage, but I can assure you he is harmless and clean. He will not foul the room."

Yeah, and I don't even have fleas!

The landlady looked me up and down, sizing me up. "A truly unusual request. . . A truly unusual creature. Why is it wearing clothing?"

"He is used to a warmer climate, that of the lands to the southwest. He was suffering in our cooler lands, so I altered some clothes to fit him."

God she was smooth, I had trouble keeping a straight face. Then I remembered that these people didn't know what a human smile was, so I broke into one.

"You are sure it. . . he is safe and clean?"

"Of course. He is very docile. See, I do not even have to worry about restraints. He is amiable and quiet."

The landlady tossed her mane and sized me up. "Very well, but he is your responsibility and I will require [collateral]." She looked at Tahr's somewhat ragged cloak and travel-stained breeches. "How will you pay?"

That had the ring of a euphemism for 'can you pay?'. How did Tahr plan to do that? We had spent our last silver on the ride here, how could we pay? Wash the dishes?

Tahr surprised me again. She grabbed my pack and opened it, pulling out a couple of bolts of cloth: blue and green. SO that was why the thing was so heavy. Those she handed to the landlady. "Will this do?"

She examined the bundles with a critical eye, rubbing the cloth between furry thumb and furry index finger, then she smiled and said, "That will do nicely madam."

I couldn't help myself. Visualising a five foot furry cat doing a credit card commercial, I cracked up. I leaned against a doorpost and shook with laughter, drawing alarmed looks from the other guests.

"K'hy!" Tahr warned me.

Our host looked from Tahr to me. "He is your responsibility, remember."

"Alright. He will calm down," Tahr growled. "Now."

I bit my lip and swallowed another laugh.

The innkeeper blinked, then squinted at me and scratched her chin.

"Saaa. . . yes. Well, provided it is clean. . . And I want no loud noises in the night."

Tahr looked at me and hissed in her own laughter. There was something there that I had missed. But Tahr left me no time to puzzle it out, she gave me a swat on the butt with claws only partially retracted: "Move along, []."

I jumped and moved, but I don't think it was that that drew amused hisses from the other patrons.

Our room was set at the front of the inn, overlooking the Chesapeake Bay. In the dark there was very little to see but the stars and moon. There were only a couple of faint lights shining across the water from boats or houses. I closed the shutters and turned away.

The room was a simple affair. Hell, a Holiday Inn would have seemed palatial beside it. A single wooden frame bed, almost round in shape and depressed in the middle like a huge bowl. A table with a small candle, and a chair all made out wood - albeit quite adequately finished - completed the set. I walked over to where a straw pallet had been set out on the floor and flopped down onto it, using my pack as a pillow. I looked across at the shadowy form of Tahr stretched out on the bed.

"Everywhere we go, I sleep on the floor."

Tahr looked back at me in mock surprise. "But you are just a dumb animal, you cannot talk."

"Do want to know what this dumb animal has to say to that?"
She laughed, a hiss of released air between nearly closed lips.
I lay there in the dark for another half hour, I was almost asleep
before a thought struck me.

"Tahr?"

"Mmmmmph?"

"Where you get the cloth?"

"Elmerth."

"Oh."

Ah well, I guess he wouldn't be needing it any longer.

I reflected on the morality of this for a few seconds, before turning
over and falling asleep.

The next morning I was up before Tahr. At 6:15 I was looking out the
window at the sun rising over the bay. The town was already active; Sath
going about their business, whatever that may have been. The sun turned high
wisps of scattered clouds to streaks of purple and rose as it rose over the
hills on the eastern side of the bay, throwing a ray of morning light across
the dim room.

I looked at Tahr, sprawled out naked on the bowl shaped bed, the light
cotton sheet down around her ankles, her fur keeping her warm enough. The
sunbeam speared across the room, illuminating swirling dust motes in the air
and settling across her back, setting the fur shining and highlighting the
ridges of her spine, the jutting of her shoulder blades, muscles gently
twitching as she slept. She really was very beautiful in a soft, sleek,
inhuman sort of way.

I turned back to the window, thinking about how I could get home again.
. . after I had helped Tahr - I had promised. The only thing that came to
mind would be to go back to the place I had come through and hope that the
portal or whatever it was would return and take me back. Of course even if it
did return, there was the chance that I would end up somewhere else again,
maybe a world where Earth had an atmosphere of methane, or life had never
formed. There were endless, hideous possibilities.

A noise from behind me interrupted my chain of thought. Tahr was sitting
up and stretching, a very human looking movement.

"Sleep well, fur-face?"

She blinked at me and yawned in a very unhuman way that bared her sharp
teeth. "Very, shave-face." She got up, scratched thoroughly, and started
getting dressed. "And how was your floor?"

"Hard." I also scratched at my head and stared at my pallet. "You know,
I do not think I was alone there last night. This place has a few small,
crawling no-paying guests."

Tahr smiled and finished tying the breeches up around her waist. "I will
bring breakfast." She padded out the door.

Breakfast was a welcome change from the cold gruel and meat we had been
having over the past few days: some kind of wheat flapjacks along with citrus
fruits - I wondered where they grew them - and what was probably goat's
milk. I polished it off rapidly then asked Tahr what she planned to do.

She smiled. "First we get you a bath."

"What?" I looked down at myself. I was dusty and my shirt was covered
with dried blood. All those days on the road sweating under a hot sun had not
really made me into an aesthetic delight. I was itching all over, my hair was
lank and dirty, and I guess I didn't exactly smell like a rose, especially to
a Sath's sensitive nose. "Yes. I guess you are right."

If they had public baths in Bay Town, I wasn't going to be invited to
use them. In fact, we had to leave the town itself, out to the wilderness to
find a secluded stream. The spot we found actually wasn't too bad: a
swimming hole straight out of Tom Sawyer, complete with shading trees and

sun-warmed rocks off to the side.

God, but that water looked good. I left my clothes in a pile and dove in, coming to the surface gasping and swearing. The sun had not yet warmed the neck-deep water and it was still a cold as a witch's tits. It took a short time a few more dives before my body acclimated and I began to enjoy it.

Tahr too had stripped off her clothes and had been rummaging around in my pack, searching for something. Now she tossed me a small greyish lump and waded in, grimacing and yelping as the water climbed. I looked at the slippery mess in my hands, then sniffed it. It bore a vague resemblance to soap, but I wouldn't want to swear on it. Then something yanked my feet out from under me and I fell backward into the pool and came up sputtering. Tahr darted back out of reach with wet fur clinging to lithe curves, ears twitching.

"Why you little. . . "

I cupped my hands and sent water jetting at the cat that wasn't afraid of getting wet. She tried to dodge and fell over backwards, floating there in a swirl of fur, laughing at me. I fished around the stony bottom of the pool and managed to find the soap. "I will do your back if you will do mine."

She laughed again, so I casually reached over and dunked her, then lathered up and proceeded to get clean. The soap was coarse, not Lifebuoy. There was sand in it and it was so alkaline I could have used it in lieu of sandpaper, but it got the dirt off. I idly wondered how long it would take Tahr to give herself a scrubdown. With all that fur it should take hours.

Perhaps her skin doesn't secrete as much oil. Anyway, all she did was give herself a quick lather over with the soap then ducked her head underwater and came up shaking out a glittering spray of water. Then she sank down and watched me.

"Why do you spend so long cleaning your fur, K'hy? You have so little of it. . . and in unusual places."

Fucking nosy. . . I self-consciously sank a little lower in the water, my eyes still screwed up against the fierce soap as I scrubbed my hair. I heard her moving around, then a sting as claws tweaked me underwater.

"Hey! Whatthefuck?! "

I dunked my head and shook soap out of my eyes. "What are you doing?" Her ears went back. "Your skin is changing color. . . I have upset you?"

"Yes, Dammit! Can you not keep your hands to yourself?" I was angry and embarrassed at the same time although I really had no reason to be. It wasn't that long ago when she hadn't been able to abide my touch. I mean, she was a different species, she wouldn't be interested in me. . . would she? I found her. . . attractive, but I could control myself, couldn't I?

"I am sorry," her ears drooped, large eyes with vertical slit pupils regarded me sadly. "It was only jest. I mean, you are. . . it looks so different from our males. I apologise."

I sat back in the water. "Yeah, okay. I should not have reacted so strongly." I forced a smile at her and she flashed her teeth in imitation. My anger dispelled and I splashed her in the face, a favour she returned very readily.

The warm breeze brushed across my bare skin and rustled the tall, green grass that surrounded and shrouded me where I sprawled on the ground, letting the sun dry me. I'd never been much for sunbathing au naturel. My shorts were still damp, but drying.

Tahr had left me there whilst she went to take care of business in town. I didn't argue, after all, I'd just be a burden following her around in a busy town. . . and this was better than waiting in a small, stuffy attic room.

Several gossamer seed pod drifted past overhead just as the sun appeared from behind a drifting cloud, making the fragile airborne pods glow with a

white aurora. I drowsily threw my arm over my eyes against the glare, then rolled over. Strange, not having to worry about burn time, ozone depletion. .

In front of my nose a ladybird was industriously climbing a stem of crab grass.

Images:

Trees, sun, moving grass, insects, polymorphic clouds.

Seed pods floating.

The sounds of the wind and lazy water.

I dozed.

Something thumped my shoulder, jolting me fully awake. The small bundle lay beside me:

A small, brightly coloured patchwork ball made from pieces of multicoloured cloth.

I curiously poked it with a finger, then picked it up and looked around. Sathelike laughter and voices sounded from the trees, then died as the Sathelike in question appeared.

The three cubs froze and stared at me crouched there in the grass. A couple of seconds passed before I glanced at the ball in my hand, then gently tossed it towards them. It landed about a meter in front of them.

They glanced at the ball, then back at me, then at each other.

Like the cubs back in Traders Meet. None of them were over four feet tall, all covered in thick fur - one a light brown and the others more reddish - making them resemble large, walking teddy-bears. Like all feline young their hands, feet, and head seemed disproportionately large and bulky: they still had to grow into them. They were wearing nothing but their fur, but the largest of them was wearing a belt with a leather thong for holding a small knife. The aforementioned instrument he was holding tightly in his hand.

"Uh. . . Hello," I ventured.

The small one with the light-chocolate fur bolted and hid behind a tree, peering around it with impossibly wide eyes. The other two looked frantically at each other, but held their ground.

"I am sorry if I frightened you." I slowly stood, holding out my hand. "It is all right. I am not dangerous."

"You. . . you can. . . talk?" the one with knife stammered.

"Well, last time I looked I could," I smiled.

"Not frightened," the other one declared, drawing himself up to his full three-foot ten and looking anything but unafraid. "We were just surprised."

"Sure. Of course you were." I smothered a grin, then glanced at the knife in his hand. "You don't actually need that you know."

It didn't waver. "What are you?"

"My name is Kelly. I am a human. . . "

I was interrupted by hissing laughter and looked in slightly hurt surprise for the source: the smallest cub - a female. "What is so funny?" I asked.

She emerged from her hiding place with a hand clapped over her mouth in a futile effort to stifle her giggles: still her ears fluttered like flags. "Ssss. . . n. . . names. . . funny. And why do you talk wrong?"

That was the first time anyone had actually criticized my Sathelike. "What is wrong with the way I talk?" I asked.

She giggled again. "It sounds wrong." Then she surprised me by coming right up to me. "You look funny too. All bald. Can I touch your fur?"

I obliged, bending over so she could touch my hair. In fearless fascination she stroked and tugged at my copper-coloured strands. Sathelike pelts had a variety of colours, but copper wasn't among them.

"Ha!" she gave a squeak and grabbed at my hand. "Why do you have flat claws?" she demanded as she manipulated my fingers.

"Why do you have pointed ears?"

She paused, reached up and touched her left ear. "I do not know. I just do."

"Why, that is also the reason I have flat claws."

She thought that was funny too.

With the ice broken the two boys approached, the elder one's grip upon his knife less certain. He stared at me, then his face twitched and without watching his hand, he sheathed the knife in a single, smooth movement.

I suddenly realised that he knew how to use that thing. They knew how to look after themselves, these kids did.

But they were still children, even if they did look a little strange. They asked all the questions children would find important: Are those your clothes? Why do you wear so many? What are those things on your feet? Do you have any food? Do you have cubs? What are they like?

It was a peculiar tableau that greeted Tahr when she returned a few hours later. A trio of Sathé cubs, a laughing little girl lost in the folds of my jacket perched high on my shoulders while the older boys chased and squabbled over the boomerang I'd carved for them.

Tahr perched herself precariously on the window ledge watching the evening activity along the wharves: fishing boats being tied, cargo being unloaded, sails being reefed and mended. I leaned against the wall beside her and watched and learned as she pointed out objects and named them.

As the day gradually wound down, fewer and fewer passerbys wandered the quayside below our window. The cool breeze picked up and waves lapped against the worn stone of the dockside.

"It has been a long time since I last through this way," Tahr abruptly said. "I was little more than a cub. My father brought me here." She laughed in an abstracted way. "I remember he brought me a top. A top. . . it is a small toy that spins quickly without falling over. Ahhh, I wonder where that is now." She leaned back against the window sill and slowly, lazily her ears twitched in a smile. She had happy memories to treasure.

"Your father. . . he is still alive?" I asked.

"The last news I heard he was," she said. "He is waiting at Mainport. Saaa! It will be good to see him again."

"How long have you been away?" I asked.

"Eight years."

"Eight years?! And you have not seen him in all this time?"

"Oh, a few times," she was suddenly more subdued. "I sometimes wonder if it was all worth it. Eight years of learning. . ." she trailed off with a wrinkle of her muzzle. I stepped aside as she stood and padded across to the bed. The wooden frame creaked and settled as she sank down into the middle of the bowl.

I took a final look out the window. Nothing was happening out there, the sun going through its daily death. "I see the sun, and I say, it's all right," I murmured to myself.

"What was that?"

"Not important," I told her and closed the shutters. With the window blocked the twilight inside the room became a deeper gloom in which Tahr was a shadow against the lighter brown of the sheets. I stripped down to my Calvin Kleins and sat down crosslegged on my pallet, rubbing at my stubble.

"Did you know them?" Tahr suddenly asked from the concealment of her bed. "Who?"

"Your parents. Did you know them?"

"No," I shook my head. "I was not even two. They had left me with friends while they went away for several days to another city with their parents. There was a. . . the vehicle they were traveling in crashed. They died along with thirty others. No, I never really knew them, but I do have. . . had some pictures. Do not know why I kept them, I just hung onto the over the years. It is not often. . ." I was babbling. I shut up.

"I am sorry," Tahr said after a few pause. "I suppose I should not

have started it. . . "

"No. Not your fault. I am not usually so sensitive. It is just. . . talking to you. . . " I started trembling, clenched my hands together. "Tahr. . . "

"We will speak no more of that tonight," she said with finality. "Did you enjoy yourself this day?"

I forced myself away from the bout of xenophobia, forced myself to think about her question. "I. . . Yeah I did." A memory of the little girl in a coat eight times too large for her in the heat of the afternoon sun. I grinned. "Your cubs are. . . cute."

Tahr laughed. "They are also impossible. I suspect they were avoiding their chores."

"Not a whole lot of difference there," I grinned as I lay back. She chuckled again and for a time all was quiet.

Then:

"K'hy?"

"Hmmm? What?"

"Did you have. . . cubs?"

I sighed and stared at the rafters. A spider was lurking in the silver ghost of its web in a corner. "No," I replied. "No."

I wished she hadn't asked me that. I felt a pang and quickly sidetracked her:

"By the way, what were you doing today?"

Sheets rustled as Tahr stretched out on her bed. "I found passage for us to Mainport aboard a ship." She waved an obscure hand toward the window and the harbor. "We leave the day after tomorrow."

Her smooth body was hot, like a fire inside, lips finding mine, pressed hard, crushing them, biting at my lower lip. My hands rubbed the small of her back then worked down over her buttocks. I could feel hot skin moving silkily against my own. A delicate nose nuzzled my ear and warm breath whispered:

"Kelly."

"Kelly."

"K'hy!"

Someone was shaking me. "K'hy, wake. Please wake."

I struggled and woke, heart racing, sweating, looking into a pair of concerned goldflecked green eyes, vertical pupils. "You were making noises in your sleep. You are all right?"

I looked down at myself. The groundsheet was around my ankles. My erection peeked out of the top of my underwear. Tahr looked down at the bulge in my jockey shorts. Her nostrils flared.

"Damn it! Get away from me!" I snapped, yanking the blanket up. She drew away from me, looked hurt. "I was just trying to help."

"You were. . . Shit." I shook my head, shifting my legs. "Sorry."

"You were calling out." She looked around at the walls, up at the ceiling, at me. "I hope you did not waken anyone."

I closed my eyes and held my hands over my face, rubbed my eyes. Then turned to the barely-visible slivers of night sky through the tiny slits in the shutters: anything to escape her questioning gaze. "What was I saying?"

"I could not understand. It was in your way of speaking. . . but your noises, just the way you were. . . it was obvious enough. K'hy, I worry about you."

I didn't say anything. She continued:

"You are very like our males in some ways." Her eyes flickered as she gathered her thoughts. "I know. . . I know that a Sathé. . . I do not think a Sathé could live properly without. . . another. A male completely alone." Then softly: "I think I would fear for his sanity."

She rubbed her muzzle, then stared at me. "Are you the same?"

I sat up, wrapping my arms about my knees and resting my chin on them. How to answer that? Did I know? How did I feel as each day passed and home was no closer?

Alone. That I can handle, but knowing it's going to be the same day after day, year on year, for the rest of my life, that thought clutched at my guts with a cold hand.

"Yeah," I muttered. "I could be."

"K'hy, what are you going to do?"

I hesitated. "Try to find a way home."

"And if you cannot?"

I looked in her eyes: Deep, feline, beautiful. . . and felt a knot of fear clutch at my guts. "I do not know, Tahr. I do not know."

She put an arm around my bare shoulders and hugged me close, a familiar gesture I could understand, one that filled and empty space deep inside me. Her fur was warm, with a close, musty scent: like sun-dried straw. "I will help you," she said. "I will do all I can."

There was silence.

She got to her feet and made her way back to her bed. "Try to sleep, we may not get many more nights on land for a while. Ships are not the best places to close your eyes."

I sat in silence. For how long I don't know. Finally I rolled over and managed to get to sleep.

Thank God, I didn't dream.

The next day passed slowly. I spent it in our room cleaning my equipment, preparing for a long sea voyage, and doing my best to shave while outside a light rain fell from leaden skies. Tahr catnapped for most of the day, in the late afternoon she went out into the drizzle. I waited, then fell asleep.

I groggily lifted my head as Tahr was closing the door behind her. The open window showed only night sky and my watch said 22:32. So, I must have been asleep for hours.

"Come on, get up," she urged me as she pushed my gear under the bed, so with luck anyone glancing in the door would miss it. No locks on the doors in these hotels. Pulling on my jacket I asked her, "Where are we going?"

"To get you some proper clothes."

Thanks a lot. That explains everything.

The streets were dark and all but deserted; we only saw two figures off in the distance in the dim streets. The drizzle had tapered off to a damp mist hanging in the air.

Tahr's pads were silent on the damp paving stones, but my boots made a muted scuffing sound as I walked. Dim lights shone through the shutters on a few of the houses while others were as dark as abandoned buildings. Without electric lighting most folks rose and went to bed with the sun. So much for cats being nocturnal.

Tahr led us to the door of a shop on one of the smaller streets. She didn't knock, instead scratched with her claws on the rough wood. A few seconds passed before it opened a crack, spilling a strip of orange-tinted light onto the street.

"Only me," Tahr said.

The elderly Sathe behind the door hissed, then bade her, "Come in," as he released a chain on the other side. His facial fur was graying and wiry, one ear was torn and ragged and his left foot was twisted, looking crushed. But that didn't stop him from jumping back in alarm the instant he laid eyes on me.

"It is all right, good sir," soothed Tahr. "This is the one I ordered the item for."

He stared at me. "That?! What in the name of my Ancestors IS it?"

Tahr gave a sigh through her nostrils. "The tale is too long. It would take all night to tell, but I can assure you, he is friendly. I would not be walking around these streets at night with him if he were not."

The old one looked me up and down with an intensely critical eye, as though I was something he'd found stuck in his fur. "All right," he grudgingly conceded. "Come in."

Well, if he wasn't a tailor I was Michael Jordan. Clothing and scraps of cloth in various stages of construction and repair hung from hooks and covered spare surfaces. Knives of all shapes and sizes hung on racks and lay on tables, whetstones handy. Bobbins and spools of thread hung from racks of wooden pegs. A small loom squatted in a corner and there wasn't a sign of any sewing machines. All work must have been done painstakingly, by hand.

The elderly tailor walked over to a bench and picked up a parcel of folded darkgreen cloth. "This is what you asked for." He looked at me critically and muttered, "I can see why you were vague about the sizes."

I almost said something, but Tahr's look made me be content with sulking to myself. The tailor unfurled the object. Holding it up at arms length, he managed to keep the edges of the cloak from dragging on the ground.

Tahr took the cloak from him and handed it to me. "Put it on."

I settled the cloak and fastened the neck clasp. The weight of the fabric was heavy on my shoulders; heavy and warm. There was a thin cotton lining and the weave was coarse wool. Weights had been sewn into the hem to stop it blowing around too much. My first piece of Sathé clothing. . . Obi-wan, eat your heart out. I felt like an idiot.

"It is a little short around the hood," the tailor mused, picking up a pincushion lacerated with needles and thread, also choosing a thin knife. I hastily turned to watch him when he tried to get behind me. One thing I'm still not that fond of is an armed Sathé behind me. I've already got a few too many scars.

"K'hy," Tahr reprimanded me. "Let him work." The tailor bobbed his head at her and I stood still while he scurried behind me and hands started tugging at the fabric around my shoulders, shifting the hood. I could feel him fixing the seam with one of those oversized needles. Finally there was a snap of thread being cut and he said, "That will hold."

"Good." Tahr nodded approvingly.

"Ow!" Something stuck in my arm. I pulled out a ridiculously long pin that had been holding a seam together. I rubbed my arm and handed the near nail-sized sliver of metal to the tailor who took it dubiously.

Tahr looked me up and down, took a couple of steps backward to squint at me, then turned to the tailor. "I will take it," she said, fishing in the canvas belt pouch she was using as a purse and crossed his palm with silver: "Here is the cost of your time." She tossed over another gold piece, "And that should cover the cost of your silence."

He grabbed at the silver and gold. "I know it is none of my business, but why clothes for an animal?"

Tahr paused in the doorway. "You are right, it is none of your business. Farewell." Out on the street: "Why do I need this anyway?" I asked, fingering the coarse weave. "I feel ridiculous."

"It may be wise if you are. . . ah. . . less conspicuous at times. And it looks better than those strange things you wear."

"Yeah? Well, at least they do not itch."

She twitched her ears and we walked. It'd started drizzling again and a trickle of water wound its way down the center of the street.

A disguise? Well it might work, in dim light and at a distance - say two kilometers. At least it kept the drizzle off my neck. But why would she want me to wear a disguise? Damnation, I didn't want to get involved in any of the politics here. I thought we'd made an agreement, however long ago that was; I'd help her get where she was going, then. . .

"K'hy." Tahr caught my arm, pulling me up short. "Wait."

"Hey. . . "

"No, wait." She cocked her head to one side and hissed, "Listen!"

Her hearing was better than mine. "I cannot hear anything. I. . . Hey! wait!" But then she was off, ducking down a side alley, a dark blur. I followed, cursing as my boots slipped on the slime coating the wet cobblestones, dodging around piles of garbage, well into the alleyway before I heard the sounds: Muffled squeals and yelps, Sathes curses, grunts, snarling. .

"Damnation! Is this any of our business?"

I rounded a corner and drew up short, hugging the shadows while I blinked and tried to see just what the hell was going on.

Shadows changed, sliding over the cul-de-sac as the moon tried to peep through the clouds. Among a pile of trash in the dead end five figures were clustered around one on the ground, four held it down while another. . .

"Hai!" Tahr snarled, going down into a crouch. "Get away from her!" she literally spat the words out.

The five figures jumped to their feet while the one on the ground gathered the remains of its. . . her cloak around herself and scrambled for the illusion of protection offered by the shadows.

"Let her go!" Tahr hissed, not a trace of humour in that sound. "Then get out of here!"

"Hah! It is only one more female," one of the others observed, his words slurred. He growled something to his friends and they began moving to circle Tahr, blocking her retreat.

"You are drunk," she snarled, moving to try and watch all of them. "Get out of here. Now. Before you get hurt."

"Saaa, don't worry about us," one of them said. "We will be very careful. "There was hissing laughter.

Damnation Tahr!

So we WERE involved now, and this type, human or non, was a sort I held little love for. The nearest of the drunks heard something and turned just as I reached him and grabbed him by his collar, swung him around and half-threw him across the alley where his head hit a rain barrel with a solid thunk and left him sprawled on the ground, moaning and clutching at his face.

One down. . .

But for the mewling of the female in the shadows there was no sound as the drunken Sathe stared at me. In that dimness, with my hood up against the drizzle, they probably had trouble understanding just what they were seeing

"Saaa!" The one who seemed to have some sway over the others hissed. "He is only one. Who wants to kill him?"

"All right," I tossed back my hood to give them a better look, "Who wants to try first? Come on, do not be shy."

One of the Sathes broke and stumbled away, swearing off drink forever. The leader gave a bit of ground, then held firm and grinned back; large, white fangs and rain-damped fur gleaming in the dim light. He was too pissed or too stupid to be scared. "Uhhh, Creshr," one of the others ventured. "Do you not think it is. . . " "I can handle it," he snarled, waving them back.

"Listen to your friends and get out of here before I kill you," I said, surprised to find I meant it.

His ears went back and his pupils went to pinpricks, then he yowled and threw himself at me.

Even drunk he was fast and strong. His claws slashed at my arm, catching and tearing through two layers of thick cloth to scratch my skin. He danced back a step and looked at my hands. "Saaa! No claws! You have no claws!"

Then he rushed me again and claws raked for my face.

This time I caught his right arm and twisted. He yowled and doubled over as I pulled it straight out and kept twisting, then he screamed in pain as I kicked his elbow. There was an audible snap. I kicked him again in the stomach and his scream turned to a choking gurgle.

I dropped him retching into a puddle and turned back to the other thugs. The one I had flattened first was only just starting to stir. He vomited loudly.

"Who is next?" I hissed.

They scattered into the night.

I picked the moaning Sathe with the broken arm up by the scruff of his neck and slammed him face-first up against a wall, his feet a couple of inches off the ground, his arm dangling uselessly by his side and whispered in his pointed ear, "Try this again, and I will come back. I will rip out your heart. I will show it to you before I eat it. Do you understand?"

"Yes! Yes!" His hoarse answer was a bit muffled by the fact his face was being flattened by the wall.

"Bastard!" I spat then carried him to the mouth of the alley and threw him on his face. I waited until he'd hauled himself to his feet and staggered off into the dark streets, then dusted off my hands and went over to join Tahr who was comforting the victim.

She was young; probably attractive. Her soft facial fur was marred by blood trickling from one nostril and she had claw marks on her arms, chest, and stomach. More wetness glistened on her thighs and between her legs where Tahr was examining her. Not pretty.

My foot bumped against a tattered pair of breeches lying on the cobbles. I picked them up, wringing water out, then offering them to Tahr. "Is she all right?"

The trembling young Sathe shrank back, her claws sliding out. Tahr put her hands over the young female's and stroked her temples, avoiding the scratches across her muzzle. "It is all right, he will not hurt you," Tahr assured her. "He did save your life. Here, your breeches."

The female didn't take her eyes off me, wincing when Tahr pulled the tattered and ripped breeches up, tying the drawstring around her waist. "There. Do you want to tell me your name?" Tahr coaxed.

The female hesitated, then said, "Heama."

"All right, Heama, I will take you home. K'hy, I think you should. . . Ai! You are hurt!"

I glanced at the blood on my arm. "It is nothing, just a scratch," I assured her.

"If you are sure," she frowned, the wet fur of her forehead twisting. "All right. Why do you not go back to the Reptile. You are getting her fur on. . . I mean: she is not comfortable with you around."

I nodded. "Okay. . . I will wait for you there. Are you going to be all right? She can walk?"

"I can walk," Heama mumbled.

"I think we can manage. Thank you," Tahr smiled at me and I watched as she helped the young Sathe from the alley, then gathered up my cloak against the drizzle and made my way back to The Reptile.

The inn was dark, the front door shut and locked. My pounding on the door roused the landlady from her sweet dreams. Surprised was a mild word for her reaction when she opened the door and I pushed past her and bumped my way through a room lit only by the feeble glow of embers in the grate. She poked her head out to look around. "So where is your mistress?" A rhetorical question. She locked the door again and went back to her quarters muttering something about stray animals.

I negotiated the railless stairs and dark corridor without too much injury to my person, and managed to fumble the wooden latch open. I shook the water off my cloak before hanging it on a convenient peg in the wall then settled down on my pallet and waited. I never noticed when I dozed off, certainly it was before Tahr got back.

I woke late.

The sun was already well over the hills on the far side of the bay onto Bay Town and residents were busy going about their business on what promised to be a warm, muggy day.

Tahr snuffled from where she was curled up in middle of the round bed. Her nose twitched, then she sneezed and opened her eyes and lay there, blinking contentedly in the morning light.

"What happened last night?" I asked

She rolled over onto her back and draped her head over the side of the bed, looking at me upside-down. "Good morning and waking to you too," she smiled.

"She was all right?"

"We met her mate who was just setting out to look for her. We took her to a physician who said she was sore and bruised and there was some damage to her [vagina], but nothing that rest would not cure. All we could do was take her home and set her to bed."

Again she rolled over to sprawl on her stomach. It was rather disconcerting as she was naked, but it was also fascinating: she was supple as a . . . well, as a big cat, her movements and muscles flowing like quicksilver. I realised I was staring and tore my attention away from her body and back to the window, listening with half an ear to her narrative of the way she spent the previous night.

It seems that Heama's husband had repaid Tahr with both coin and in a way that would not be considered proper back home. As a result, Tahr was in an exceptionally good mood this morning. At least she could get some when she wanted it.

After breakfast (scones, meat, and water), we put our gear into my pack which I had the honour of carrying. Tahr took her sword and my M-16. The crossbow was strapped to the pack with my newly acquired cloak, then I followed her downstairs.

"I thank you for your [hospitality]," she bade our hostess goodbye. "Here is the rest of the money we owe you."

The landlady took the coin and put it in a purse hanging from her belt. "Journey well, good madam. You know you shouldn't let your animal wander at night. It came in last night, scared the breath out of me. You were lucky, you could have lost it for good."

Tahr showed amusement. "He knows where his next meal comes from and he will stay around me to make sure that he gets it. I thank you for your hospitality. Farewell."

Just before I ducked out the door, I couldn't help whispering, "Thank you." I left her with her jaw hanging open. Gracious, a talking monkey. . . imagine that.

The docks stretched the width of the town, from wall to wall, a cobbled waterfront avenue with two wharves jutting out into the bay, embraced by the arms of the breakwater. Warehouses and shops were dotted around the edge of the open yard.

Tahr led the way to one of the larger warehouses, on the opposite side of the square from the place Char had unloaded. I waited just outside the door as Tahr went inside, down an isle lined with floor-to-ceiling stacks of barrels, bales, crates, and sacks of goods. There was a counter at the end where she had to yell several times to catch someone's attention. I couldn't hear the conversation, but the harassed looking Sathe behind the counter handed her a scrap of paper then pointed out to the wharf, to where a certain boat was moored.

I found out that the boat had no name. No Sathe ship did. When talking about a ship, one would say Tom's ship or Bob's ship or whoever happened to own the thing. Tahr found the fact that we named our ships very amusing.

Thinking about it, perhaps she's right; It is a weird thing to do.

But then one of the qualities that sets the human race apart from Sathe is the weird, strange, stupid, and outright crazy things we do just for the hell of it. Things like religion, the amount we spend on sports: we find

reasons to justify these things while Sathes don't go for them at all.

I took in the details of the boat as we approached: twin masts, the triangular sails rigged fore and aft, the small shelter mounted on the aft cabin for the helmsman, the high prow, and the small dingy hanging off the back. A dangerously narrow-looking gangplank from the wharf to the ship rose and fell gently as the boat moved. A Sathes sailor working on the rigging noticed us. A shout caused other faces to swing toward us.

The Sathes that met us at the top of the gangplank was swarthily built and dressed in stained grey breeches that matched the greyish fur around his eyes, giving him the appearance of wearing spectacles. He stared at us - at me rather - then exclaimed, "My Ancestors. Not another one."

No matter how you twisted the word, our quarters were not what could be called 'comfortable'. They were cramped, hot, and smelled of fish and something indefinable.

I sat on the lower bunk built into the wall of our tiny box and stared at the article of clothing I held in my hand. The green flight suit jacket had a name stitched onto the breast pocket.

"Lieutenant D. Laurence." I murmured out loud.

Tahr sat at the head of the bunk sifting through the contents of a wooden chest reinforced with iron bars: the classic pirate treasure chest. But the treasure was not of Sathes manufacture. . . Human articles of clothing and personal effects.

Boots, socks, pants, underclothing, the jacket. A set of dogtags confirmed that D. Laurence had indeed been a marine helicopter pilot off the USS FORRESTAL. Also a day-glo yellow life jacket, a plastic very pistol and flares - both cartridges for the pistol and sticks for the life jacket, a small packet of food concentrates, a useless locator beacon and pack of dye, and a harmonica. The last item I picked out and stared at.

Pewter and pearl. There was an engraving on the slightly tarnished metal. I rubbed it hard against my pants to clean it and read:

Daniel. Make music and think of me. Love forever, Clara.

Corny, but it left me feeling terrible.

Captain Hafair leaned against the far wall. "We found him drifting much further south than we are now, near the islands, about half a year ago. He was clinging to a piece of wreckage of some kind and was unconscious. He would have drowned if not for his floating device." He pointed at the worn marine life jacket.

"We took him and on board and searched the area for hours, we found nothing but pieces of metal and other strange materials. We did our best to help him, but he was coughing blood. He woke only once, he saw me and made sounds, then passed out again. He died an hour later. We disposed of the body overboard."

Of course they would have to. With no freezer or anything, the corpse would quickly turn foul.

He had heard my story, Tahr and I had told it to him in turns. He believed it. Of course he would have to after what he had seen.

"K'hy, look at this." Tahr was holding an open water-stained leather wallet in one hand, in the other was a piece of laminated white, glossy paper; a photograph. "The purse is like the one that you carried, but what is this?"

I looked at the picture. An attractive young woman stood smiling at the camera. Around her shoulder rested the arm of a clean shaven man in jeans, Eagles T-shirt, and baseball cap. Maybe in his late twenties-early thirties, he held a boy of about seven on his shoulders.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "His family. They will never know what happened to him. Missing in action. "

I looked again at the inscription on the harmonica again. His epitaph?

Hafair took the picture in his hands and rubbed it with a fingertip. "I

have never seen a painting so fine, so lifelike. Was it done by others of your kind?"

"Yes." I didn't feel like getting into a discussion about cameras and photography and everything else that would entail.

"You have incredibly skilled artisans," Hafair marveled. "It is almost as if it is a window looking upon the scene. If your kind are ever willing to open trading, I know many Sathes who would pay handsomely for a portrait of that quality."

I just shrugged and pulled three flare cartridges out of a pocket on the lifevest. He cocked his head to one side and stared at me through deep green eyes. "I must see to my crew. We will be sailing with the tide."

Stopping at the door of the cabin, he turned and pointed at the harmonica. "I am curious: what is that thing for?"

"It is a musical instrument." I raised it to my lips and blew a C sharp. The sharp taste of salt and alkaline was tangy on my lips.

He stared, then blinked and left.

Shortly we heard him shouting out orders on deck. Tahr vaulted up into the top bunk then poked her head out of the narrow gap between the edges of the concave bunk and the ceiling and cocked her head quizzically. "You are quiet."

"He had a family," I said in way of explanation, "a female who loved him."

"The h'man?"

"We can love, we can hate," I replied. "I was thinking of his family, what they must be feeling."

"Yes, I am sorry." A few seconds later she said, "Before that time you . . . spoke of your family, I had never thought of you having parents. I was not even sure that others like you existed."

"And now?"

"Quite sure."

I nodded and ran my finger over the inscription in the harmonica. For several seconds I just stared at it, then wrapped it in a scrap of leather and slipped it into my pack.

Perhaps some day I would be able to return it to his family.

Days after Bay Town was lost among the hills of the coastline the novelty of shipboard life began to pall very quickly. As a passenger whose knowledge of sailing could be engraved on the head of a pin with room left over for a chorus line of angels, there was very little for me to do but watch the shore scroll by like some patchwork quilt gone wild.

There were only ten crew members (not including captain Hafair and Tahr): six male and four females. Sathes seafarers believed in recruiting a mixed crew and I doubted it was for religious reasons. I had seen no sign of any belief in gods or deities in the Sathes society, not even of vague superstitions. I guess that the reason for it was for crew satisfaction and morale on long voyages. Later observations confirmed that hypothesis.

The ship was on the last leg of its journey, heading back to Mainport from Bay Town after a long sojourn around the Florida peninsula and the settlements of the Gulf Realm. Their annual trade route headed south during the early summer, then looped back north again with their goods as winter approached. During those cold months of storms and ice, ships were harbored against the full fury of the Atlantic's elements and overhauled.

The crew worked on a rotational basis with a couple of them eating, sleeping, or playing some obscure dice game while the others worked in the rigging or patching sails or any other of the multitude of mundane shipboard duties they could pull.

They were friendly enough. All of them had seen the human pilot they had pulled from the water so I was not a totally new experience. However a

couple of them were not convinced that I was much more than an animal. When you're stuck on a floating cigar box with things with attitudes like that, it gets very annoying very fast.

During the day we sailed with the prevailing northerly, the small vessel cutting through the water at a steady clip. Flying clouds of spray from the bow wave made the wooden planking on the deck slippery as it drifted across the boat. A couple of times dolphins flashed alongside, playing beneath the bowsprit, their buzzing, chattering, and razzing audible through the hull.

I laughed as I watched them leaping through the waves. Even here they still performed their aquabatics: their somersaults and tailstands. If they were surprised to see me, it didn't show through their perpetual smiles as they lined up to splash water at me.

We sat at rest in a small bay as we did every night. Traveling close to shore in the dark in a boat without radar, sonar, satellite navigation systems or other hit-tech gear is plain suicide. Especially in a boat that can have the bottom torn open by drifting log.

The night was cool to my skin but perfectly acceptable to the Sathe with their natural fur coats. The only light was from the moon and stars: quite enough to see by on clear nights.

It was peaceful: the waves slapping against the hull, the ocean aglow with cold, blue phosphorescence - almost a net of glittering cyan and light. Surrealistic, beautiful. And the soft hissing of Sathe voices could be mistaken for waves on a distant shore.

The crew would sit on the deck in the still and darkness of the late evening and tell stories and jokes: the latest tales they had heard in the last port, or something they had made up themselves.

". . . then found they were supposed to be there when half the farm washed way in the next rains."

Sathe laughter hissed around the deck and Tahmihr, the storyteller, took this as his due and sat down again, taking a deep pull from his mug.

Everyone had been drinking; some more than others. As silence settled, Chmiha - one of the females - got up and pulled an equally tipsy Shatimae to his feet. Together they lurched off belowdecks. I stared after them, aware of what they were probably going to get up to. Nobody else seemed to give a damn.

A Sathe sitting beside me swallowed a lump of dried meat, belched, then asked me, "What do things like you do for entertainment?"

Others heard him and he was quickly backed up by a chorus of voices demanding me to do something, including a laughing Tahr. Jokes were out: I didn't know what they found funny. I was unable to think of a story on the spur of the moment.

"What about that instrument?" Tahr suggested and before I had a chance to protest she dived below-decks to get it. Well, she seemed to be feeling better; the last couple of days had seen her a little green around the gills, several times making an offering of the contents of her stomach to the gods of the sea.

Within a minute she was back, handing me the little leather bundle. Silver glittered when I unrolled it.

It was an instrument I could play, probably the one I was best at. Living in barracks meant that you either got good at playing something quickly, or someone would ram it down your throat.

Sitting in the dark on a wooden coaster with an audience of drunk cats, I began to play. A couple of bars of Home on the Range to warm up with. I followed that with Led Zep's The Immigrant Song, then The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, Stairway to Heaven, The Devil Went Down to Georgia, Rough Boy and other pieces, both old and new, mixing lively tunes with more sedate ones.

The sounds of the harmonica were alien here, wailing across the night-cloaked waters. I looked around over my cupped hands at the dim faces of the Sathe, shadows strong and their eyes seeming to glow. There was no sound from them as they listened, no sign of derision. I took heart from that and smiled to myself as I returned my complete attention to the music.

I played for about an hour, doing the pieces I was best at. The moon was high before I finished, and only two of the Sathe had left during my solo performance. Well. . . I couldn't expect them all to be music lovers.

When I finally ran out of breath they showed their approval by laughing (hissing all round) and passing me a drink. That I could use: my mouth tasted of dry metal from the harmonica. The ale was strange, like beer in a vague way, but weaker, flat and sweet with the distinct taste of honey.

A few mugfulls of the ale was enough to trace a warm path through my insides and as the crew drifted off to their berths, Tahr had to help me down the pitch-black companionway and corridor to our box of a cabin. She found it extremely amusing when I missed a step and skidded down on my posterior.

I couldn't see her, but I could feel Tahr's eyes on me as I stripped off in the dark and climbed into bed. The coarse sheets were irritating, but they were all there were and at least it was a bed. Wood creaked as Tahr clambered into the upper bunk, then came the thunk as she hit her head against the low ceiling.

"You all right?" I called up.

She snarled out a few choice curses. "Yes, I am fine. . . Saaa!"

That paid her back for my indignation in the corridor. I laughed and rolled over, pulling the thin sheet up, wishing that I had a pelt like her's: the nights were definitely getting cooler as we moved north.

. . . She was warm under me, hair fanned out on the pillow in a dark web, her eyes closed in ecstasy and she was warm as we moved together. I buried my head in her shoulder and rubbed my cheek against the smooth skin. She shuddered under me; tensing and relaxing, again and again. I lifted myself with my arms and looked at her face. She opened her eyes.

Impossibly large green eyes; green with flecks of gold swimming deep inside. . . inhuman eyes.

I snapped awake with a gasping cry, the sheets twisted around my legs and clammy with cooling sweat. There was no sound from the bunk above.

We were at anchor in a bay somewhere around near where Atlantic city should be. The crew were lowering the dingy from the back of the sloop, the ropes creaking under the weight of the small boat loaded with empty water barrels.

That was the reason for us stopping. Tahr told me such a small ship does not have a lot of room for carrying supplies such as food and water. Since the ship was a coaster and never far from the shore it was more practical to stop - either at a port or somewhere along the coast - than carry provisions needed for several weeks journey.

Tahr and I stood watching them prepare the dingy. "It will be good to walk on solid ground again," she sighed.

I had to agree with her. Going on an Atlantic cruise may be fun to some people, but not when the boat rises and falls with the tiniest swell and the head is a bucket.

Four of the crew clambered down to the boat and took up oars. With the barrels there was only room for one more. Captain Hafair saw the situation.

"They will have to make two trips."

That was something the rowers didn't want to hear. They muttered among themselves.

"No need," I said. "Tahr, you go. . . take these." I gave her the M-16, then stripped down to my shorts, bundled all my clothes up in my jacket and handed her the package. The crew stared at my body with a mixture of amusement and disgust. I heard whispers pertaining to my lack of fur and guesses at other physiological arrangements.

Tahr looked at the water with distaste. "You can swim that far?"

"Sure. It is not that far." It was only about sixty meters, no sweat. Sathe aren't very good swimmers: Not only the fact that their fur became

waterlogged, but they were just natural sinkers. Too much muscle to float I guess. "Race you."

She wiggled her ears and tossed my clothes down into the boat, slung the rifle over her shoulder and swarmed down the horizontal slats on the hull that served as a ladder. I stepped over the hemp railings and balanced on the edge of the boat for a second. The water suddenly seemed a lot further down. Oh well. . . With some attention to style I launched myself into a swan dive and broke the water cleanly.

I came up gasping. The Atlantic was damned COLD! I looked around for the rowboat and saw they had already started, putting their backs into it. I hitched up my shorts and struck out for shore, bodysurfing the mediocre waves.

The beach was just a small spit of gritty sand, carried down from inland by a narrow stream. The rest of the shoreline was rock, worn smooth from the constant action of the waves. As yet the trees around the bay hadn't begun to lose their leaves, but it wouldn't be long before they turned russet red-gold.

Puffing and blowing like a seal I hauled myself out of the water, adjusting my shorts while I grinned at the dingy still several meters out and riding the waves in. I waded out again and gave them a hand by dragging the boat up to the watermark.

"Show off," Tahr chastised me as she leaped out onto dry sand.

"Hey," I grinned back at her while splashing ashore. "I am allowed some fun in life."

She spat in mock disgust, then laughed and tossed my bundle of clothes at me. I caught it and began to sort my clothes out.

"So, did you enjoy your swim?" Tahr asked.

"Very pleasant," I grinned, then nearly fell over trying to get my legs into my pants. Solid ground felt strange after a heaving deck.

While the crew filled the water flasks and drew straws for the hunting detail, Tahr and I struck off on our own, following the stream inland through the utterly deserted forest. Not a sign of Sathé habitation anywhere, only birdsong. The sky was clear with only a trace of clouds, small animals scuttled through the undergrowth doing whatever it is that small animals that live in the undergrowth do.

"It is beautiful here," I said.

"What?" she gave me the Sathé version of a blank stare.

"I forget, you grew up with this."

As a New Yorker myself, I only recently started seeing anything of the great outdoors, and even then nothing as outdoor as this. "You should be grateful, there is not a lot of untouched countryside left in my world."

She looked around. "Your world sounds like a very strange place. How could anyone destroy land? It is. . . always. There is just so much of it."

"It is not that hard to do, believe me."

She was silent for a while, looking at me, studying me. "You have changed, strange one."

"Huh?"

"Your skin. . . It is much darker, and the fur on your face is thicker."

I looked down at myself. I don't tan easily, but all those days outdoors had weathered me, and given me restless nights suffering from sunburn. Using a knife to shave is a very uncomfortable experience. The last time I'd tried it was well over a week ago in The Reptile and by now my beard was quite distinctive. Patchy, yes, but distinctive.

"I think I had better cut it back again."

Tahr craned around to look. "No, do not. You look better with it on."

"You think so?" I scratched at the bristles.

She bobbed her head in an exaggerated nod. "It hides your. . . baldness." Then she added, almost as an afterthought, "And it is a nice color."

I laughed: "Flattery will get you everywhere."

"Another saying from your world?"

"Sort of."

The source of the stream was a small lake about two kilometers inland. Not very large, just enough to hold the water that drained from the local land. It was picturesque: a small valley between four hills covered in a canopy of greenery: oak, ash, beech, birch, as well as a spattering of pine.

We had settled under a tree in a small glade near the lake, me leaning against the trunk and Tahr lying sprawled out on her cloak near my feet in that relaxed attitude that only cats can adopt, her fur blending in with the golden grasses around us.

I took a swing of water out of my canteen then offered her some. She accepted it and I watched as she put it to her almost non-existent black lips and tilted her head back, dribbling water down her chin and chest. Her mouth really was not built to drink out of a vessel shaped like that. Sathe canteens are flexible leather bags with long, flattened necks. . . much like botas.

"Tahr, what happens when we get to Mainport?"

She wiped a trickle of water off her chin and tossed the canteen back to me. "Ssaaa. . . You mean what happens to you?"

"Uh," I ducked my head somewhat sheepishly, "Yes. . . You are my only friend here. I know very little of your customs and I am not skilled in the crafts that your people value. There are none of my own kind. I am a. . . a stranger in a strange land."

"Very poetic, K'hy." She reached out and patted my leg. "Do not worry. You forget; I am not a figure of unimportance there. I will make sure that you are looked after. Also our scholars will be fascinated in you, your devices, and your knowledge."

I slowly shook my head. "That was not really what I meant. Tahr, you are a friend, but still you are Sathe. You are all Sathe. It gets. . . lonely."

She plucked a blade of grass, twisting it in her hands. "You pine after others like yourself? There was that other. . . h'man. If both you and he came here there may be others. What do you think the chances are?"

I shook my head, "I would not have the faintest idea. People - my kind of people - disappear all the time, but I doubt it is quite the same thing."

There were all those legends and stories of people and machines who vanished without trace. The tales of the ancient civilizations of Atlantis, Eldorado, and Vilcabamba and the more contemporary Bermuda Triangle, the Marie Celeste.

Would Tenny and I be included with these? Nah, I doubted it. We'd just go down in a government computer somewhere, along with that ever-growing list of missing persons. How many of them had suffered this same fate. . . or worse. If this was another Earth that had just taken a different turnpike somewhere in time, then how many others could there be? an infinite number? every major and minor decision in history causing another branching with an alternate Earth? or just periodic breaches along the way.

Hell, I could count my blessings. I could have ended up on an earth that had never developed an atmosphere!

How many could that have happened to?

"Tahr, perhaps a few of my kind have come here before, but as you said, there is a lot of land. Also, they may have not wished to be found by your people."

"What? Why?"

"Think about it."

"Oh. . ." She touched her face. "Our appearance?"

I nodded and she tried to look indignant. "You remember that when I first saw you I did not wait around for introductions. I very nearly left you in that river."

"But it was my personality that won you over, ah?" She laughed and ran a clawtip along the strip on her side where no fur grew, then rolled on her

back, spread eagle. "Am I really that hideous?" she smiled at the sun - her earring glittering as her ear flickered - and stretched. I cleared my throat. From where I was sitting her position was rather. . . revealing.

She stretched a tawny leg out and ran her bare foot up the inside of my calf, as far as the knee.

"Ahh. . . no, I would definitely not call you hideous."

She grinned and rolled again to end up on her stomach, resting her head on her laced fingers; her expression growing serious once more. "K'hy, the last few nights your sleep has been. . . restless. You have been having those dreams again?"

So, so, so. She had noticed. For a couple of seconds I stared at her, then sighed and said, "I was hoping you had not noticed. Why now?"

"A boat is not the most private of places, and you are. . . touchy about this. Is it the same dream?"

I shrugged. "Sort of."

"Ah. . . what was this dream?"

"Look, Doctor Ruth!" I was starting to feel flustered and threatened by her line of questioning. "Why do you keep prying into my affairs?!"

"I do not understand," she said; genuinely puzzled. "I just want to help. It can help to discuss your problems with a friend." She gave me her most endearing human-style smile, exposing pointed white teeth.

It still startled me. Tahr saw me flinch and her face straightened, almost looked hurt. Damnation, she was for real, caring about my problem. I swallowed and relaxed a little. So, now she's a psychiatrist, okay. Haltingly, embarrassed, I told her about the dream. Nightmare. Whatever.

Afterwards she was silent, looking at me with those eyes the liquid green of ocean depths.

I stared back, all too aware of that gulf between us. So different, she with her fur and claws and teeth and predator's manners. Her kind used to prey upon mine.

"Tahr," I choked. "What am I? I mean, when you look at me, what do you see?"

She pondered over that. "A friend, I think," she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps a tall, clumsy, bald, half-blind and deaf friend, but you are a friend nevertheless. Beside, you have cute fur."

Cute. . . I flushed. "What I said before. . . I hope I did not offend."

She smiled. "It offends me far less than it embarrasses you, K'hy. Dreams can say a lot about a person: what they are thinking, what they want. . . Saaa, K'hy." She cocked her head and asked, "And what am I to you?"

Oh Jeeze! "I. . . Ah. . . I have known many females, but you are unique."

She gave a small snort.

I continued, trying to explain. "You are stronger inside. You are. . . There is an animal my people often used to represent grace, power, cunning, and beauty: you strongly resemble this creature."

"Are you calling me an animal!" she bristled.

"No, no. . . I. . . er. . . that was a. . . a. . ." Damn, I didn't know the words. It wasn't necessary.

Her anger evaporated into laughter. She moved over and squatted down beside me. A claw lightly traced long my jawbone. "I know what you meant." Then she shifted and there was warm breath on my neck and a second later I almost screamed when she bit me lightly on the shoulder, teeth closing, then releasing again.

"Jesus," I gasped when my heart settled down again. "What was THAT for?!"

She scratched her own neck and looked bewildered. "It shows. . . affection. Do you not have such a gesture?"

"Uh. . . yes. It is. . . uh. . ." I didn't know how to say it.

Impulsively I leaned over, placing my lips against her cheek. Just a touch. Her fur was warm from the sun, with that now-familiar musty scent. I hesitated, then impulsively shifted and bit her lightly on her right shoulder; she trembled slightly, then relaxed.

"That touch," she felt her cheek. "Is that it?"

"A kiss," I said, embarrassed. "There is more to it, but you. . . you are not. . . I do not think it would work."

Ha! The metal picture of getting into a serious mouth match with a Sathe was both ludicrous and faintly repellent.

"A chiss. . . We both have a lot to learn," she murmured; then, more loudly. "Come on. I think it is time we went back."

I lagged a few steps behind her, discreetly trying to get fur out of my mouth.

But for the rowboat, the beach was deserted.

Waves lapped around the dingy where it lay in the surf. Water casks lay upended on the beach with their contents spilled back to the sea. There were also dark stains on the white sand: small droplets and larger patches of a sticky, reddish liquid already drying. Fifty meters out on the ship we could see the crew waving their arms and shouting something swallowed by the distance.

Tahr grabbed me, pushing me back toward the trees, hissing, "Out of here! Move!" Sathe were waiting with loaded crossbows leveled.

I grabbed for my rifle but Tahr caught my arm and stopped me, "No! K'hy!"

"Submit! Now!" A Sathe snarled. "Do it!"

I hesitated, looked at Tahr in confusion. It almost got me shot: a crossbow bolt whirred past my head. I froze rigid.

"You!" the Sathe growled at Tahr. "Get that thing under control!"

"Like this," Tahr hissed at me. She hung her arms loosely away from her side and looked up at the sky, exposing her throat. I imitated her example.

Hands grabbed my hair, yanking my head back even further while claws rested at my throat; I broke out in a cold sweat. Others took my gun and tied my hands behind my back: tightly. Tahr was tied likewise, then we were led at crossbow-point into the forest. The crewmembers were there: stripped bodies dumped behind bushes. Well enough hidden so we'd missed them on the way in. Guards pushed me past the corpses, stumbling at a grueling pace through the trees, then uphill. On a windswept hilltop overlooking the bay, I looked back to see the ship still lying at anchor. It looked like a toy. That was how the Sathe had known we were there: they had probably watched the ship sailing in and the rest was easy. How many crew were left? Could they get help? I doubted it.

Wagons and llamas waited on the other side of the hill. In short order Tahr and I were stripped of our clothing, had our ropes replaced by manacles, and were left lying like a couple of sacks of meal in the back of a cart. Right in front of my nose a canvass blanket covered a lumpy pile. A corner had shifted and I caught a glimpse of armour hidden underneath: blood red and coal black.

Tahr glared at the back of wagoner, then went back to staring at her bonds: two small stocks, one for the wrists and another for the ankles, chained together and secured with a crude but efficient lock: like wooden handcuffs. She had limited movement, but me they were taking no chances with.

They'd crammed my hands into the same kind of manacles - too small for my wrists - also they'd hog-tied me: linking my wrist and ankle restraints behind my back with rope, then running another loop of cord up to my neck. If I so much as twitched my hands the noose began to bite into my windpipe.

Perhaps I could've coped with that, but the sheer terror when one of

the bastards - a female - had jabbed me with a dagger, then held it between my legs and debated amongst her comrades whether or not she should take a trophy was like nothing I've ever felt before.

They thought it was hilarious.

Tahr was snarling and spitting in helpless fury as the laughing Sathe poked and prodded and jabbed at me until an officer dispersed them, snarling they didn't want me damaged too badly.

Now several hours later - cuts and scratches stinging and oozing, my muscles aching from lying on hard wood in the back of the cart, shaking uncontrollably - I wondered what they had in mind for us and why it was every time we moved, someone jumped on us. Tahr must be really important to someone.

The Sathe on the llama behind the wagon had grown tired of jeering at us; laughing at me and making proposals to Tahr, who stolidly ignored them. However, they still kept a close eye on us.

Toward evening we left the road and started through the trees. The jolting while the cart was on the road was bad enough; offroad it was unbelievable. Black and blue, I was almost relieved when we rolled into a campsite. Several small fires were crackling away and shelters were slung between trees. Some were tent shaped, others just a heavy sheet with one end tied to a rope and the other pegged to the ground.

Two Sathe climbed into the back of the cart, two more stood at guard on the ground. One of them cautiously untied my ropes, then gestured to Tahr with sword drawn. "Out." He looked at me: "That too."

I got to my feet, my joints popping from being locked in the same position for hours on end, and waited while our captors removed our hobbles. They led us at swordpoint to one of the larger pavilions where our leg shackles were replaced and chained to a stake driven deep into the ground. Guards waited outside.

I looked around. Shabby, water-stained canvass draped over a rope. There were a couple of blankets on the trampled grass, but besides that; nothing.

"They are Gulf Realm?" I asked Tahr.

Unable to sign the affirmative with her hands she nodded human style instead. "Yes, Gulf Realm," she almost spat. "Warriors of Hraasa, that impotent, fatherless, son-of-a. . ."

"Talking about others when they are not present. Where ARE your manners?"

The mild voice broke Tahr off in mid-curse. We both looked to where a male Sathe was watching us through the pavilion's flaps. The newcomer laid his ears back in a smile that held little warmth. "A pleasant catch. Tahr ai Shirai herself. Almost too much to hope for. I've heard many promising things about you, and I am pleased to see they are true." He settled himself opposite her, his nostrils flaring.

"Who are you!" Tahr snarled. "And what is this outrage! Gulf troops violating all the conventions and interfering with a Candidate and her entourage. The assembly shall demand a tribunal of inquiry."

"Entourage?" the other smirked. "THIS?" he stared at me, "is your entourage? You are in a bad way, Tahr."

"Who are you!"

"Ah, my manners! I suppose I should introduce myself: I am Tarsha."

This Tarsha was hefty for a Sathe: about five foot three. His fur was dark gold in the fading sunlight, lighter stripes running down his muzzle. He wore a kilt of black leather outlined with red trim, his black cloak was decorated likewise.

He moved closer to her; his clean features and her ragged fur were silhouetted against the light filtering through the tent fabric. When he combed a claw through her mane she snapped at it, but his hand was already out of reach.

"Huh. . . Yes, you are the one all right. I think I shall find you very enjoyable tonight."

"Fuck off. . . Get your paws off her you mother-copulator!" I lunged forward, straining at the wooden stocks. They creaked, but unfortunately held.

Tarsha turned his attention to me. "It DOES talk! You do find some strange friends Tahr. Strange and ugly."

"The best part of you ran down your father's leg!" I snarled at him. Tahr hissed.

Tarsha looked surprised, then his eyes narrowed. He stepped towards me and crouched down. With a single quick movement he grabbed my hair and forced my head back. A black claw traced up and down the curve of my throat, pausing to circle the soft hollow below my adams apple. I swallowed. "Tahr, does it not know that it is not nice to say things like that. What is it, Tahr? Some friend of yours perhaps?"

The claw meandered down to my chest, then started to apply pressure. I winced, then ground my teeth. Sweat and blood started to flow. I was all too aware of how easy it would be for him to gut me with a single slash.

"Stop, Tarsha," Tahr sounded weary. "Don't hurt him."

"Huh." He drew back, suddenly thoughtful. "Compassion for something like this? Interesting. I wonder why?" He withdrew his claw from the small furrow it had made in my chest and brushed his fingers across my forehead, frowning at the moisture on his fingertips. "You hear her, Creature? She cares for you." He released his hold on my hair and signaled for a guard. "Get it out of here."

"Where do you want it, High One?"

He sighed, like he didn't really care. "I do not know. Take it and chain it to a tree or something. Make sure it is well guarded."

They did. Chain me to a tree. Without clothing, neither beneath shelter nor near a fire. A guard sat like a furry idol under a nearby bivouac, a sword and cocked crossbow close at hand. A half-hearted tug at the chain that bound me to the tree only earned me a kick in the side of the head.

Day fled and nighttime stole across the camp, broken only by the oasis of light around the campfires. None of the Sathes around them reacted much when the snarls of protest came from that one tent; turning to sounds of pain and struggle.

"BASTARD!" I started screaming also, struggling against my chains while Tahr cried out. Several guards finally used the butts of their crossbows to shut me up.

The morning arrived to find me soaking wet, shaking, miserable, and sick as a dog. It'd been a long, cold night with the moon lost behind clouds and a persistent drizzle soaking me. Water dripped from the tree. After shivering all night I was exhausted, hungry, bruised, possibly concussed and - almost unbelievably - thirsty. What water had pooled in nearby leaves wasn't enough to ease the burning in my swollen throat. My breath rasped in my throat and deeper, right in my lungs.

My guard had been changed, and the Sathes watching me were still vigilant, if bored. The camp quickly roused itself, the sodden remains of fires were turned and dry wood set alight. They must have been very confident in themselves to risk someone spotting the smoke, little as there was. Altogether there must have been about fifteen of them, of mixed sexes. Breakfast was set to cooking, sending a smell of roasting meat and grain wafting that started my mouth watering and stomach churning. When was the last time I had eaten? I huddled up and watched them eat. They ignored me. Not feeding time.

"I heard it speak, I tell you. It insulted the commander."

Three of the red and black clad Sathes, all males, were standing over me. I curled up, put my knees up against my chest and tried to stop shivering.

"How could THAT speak." Another batted at the first speaker's head,

playfully. Their way of speaking, the inflections on the words were different from the other Sathe I had heard in the towns I noted dully; a different accent?

The first one bent down beside me and grabbed my bound hands. "Look, no claws," he observed, then extended the talon on his index finger and ran it down the side of my face, from ear to jaw, scratching bruised skin. "But it can talk. SAY something!" He emphasized that with a jab at my cheek. A small noise escaped me and I felt something warm start to flow down the side of my face.

"Get bent," I mumbled in Sathe, then broke down in a hacking cough.

"You were right, it can talk, sort of. . . but what is it? and what is wrong with it," puzzled Number Two.

I managed to stop coughing and was taking rasping breaths.

Number Three spoke for the first time. "It is ill. Look, it has no fur and you can see how thin its skin is. It must have frozen last night."

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore them; that got me a kick in the ribs.

"No, don't go to sleep now, tell us about yourself." That was Number One again. He yanked my head back by the hair and that triggered another spasm of coughing and gasping.

"I do not think it is feeling very talkative," another observed.

"A." The first agreed and tugged on my hair a few more times. "Give me a knife."

Number Two handed one across. "What are you doing?"

"Look at this stuff." Another yank on my hair. "I would not mind a belt this color."

"Are you sure . . ."

He was. The knife slashed and cut, painfully as he hacked away handfuls of hair, bunching them in his fist and sawing the knife across. When he was finished he let me drop and stuffed his trophies into a pouch on his belt. "Might be worth something."

Number three bent down to peer into my face. "You know, I think it is really sick. Perhaps the [captain] should know. He does not want it dead."

"Ah, you worry too much," one of the others laughed. They poked me a few more times before losing interest and stalking off.

For half the day I lay there. The sky remained overcast and the air chill. I curled into a small ball wracked with shivering and coughing. If I'm lucky, it's only a bad cold. God, don't let it be pneumonia.

Sometime in the late morning, a pair of arms raised my head: "Drink this." A wooden bowl was pressed against my lips and water dribbled over my face. I choked, managed to drink, then I was dropped and left again.

About midday I was given water again, then unchained and half-dragged by a bevy of guards to Tarsha's tent. I wasn't expecting a friendly chat, and I didn't have one.

"Tahr, what is the matter with your . . . friend?"

She looked at me huddled and shivering violently, hovering on the edge of hypothermia. "Has it not seeped into your tiny mind, he is ill!" she snarled. "What have you DONE to him?!"

She was still chained. Bruises were visible through her fur, one eye was half closed, and there were small scratches along her side. My stomach turned when I saw the spatters of blood on her thighs.

But she had at least gotten in a few of her own. Tarsha sported a beautiful slash along the side of his face, from below his left eye to the top of his nose, and there was a crescent of small punctures on his arm; about the right shape for a jaw full of sharp teeth.

He bared his own at her, V-shaped wrinkles forming up the bridge of his muzzle. "Be careful how you choose your words. You could easily find yourself regretting them. We might be able to help your companion."

Tahr's eyes flickered from him to me. "Why can you not leave him alone!"

"But I thought that you would want us to help. . . him. You see? He

does seem to be suffering, does he not? I can ensure that he is treated well."

God, Tahr! No!

"Across the other side," Tarsha continued, "I can also make things very unpleasant for him if you do not co-operate. Now are you willing to talk with me? or do you want a demonstration?" He waited for her to respond.

Tahr gave me an agonized look, started to speak, then hung her head and was silent.

The Gulf Sathé waved a curt signal to the warriors.

Tahr still didn't speak, but that look on her face spoke volumes as four guards laid hands on me, dragging me outside. I struggled, for all the good it did; there were enough of them to hold me still.

A rope was tied to my manacles, the other end thrown through a high fork in a tree. I gasped in pain as they hauled me up, my back to the tree, the cramped muscles in my arms and back screaming their protest and my skin being scraped raw against the bark. My feet - a foot off the ground - were tied so I couldn't kick out and I hung there, fighting to breathe.

Tahr tried to reach me, snapping at her guard, but a vicious cuff about the ears staggered and silenced her.

"Now. . ." Tarsha strolled around to stand in front of me, contemplating me like someone might study a picture on the wall. He reached up, a finger tracing the scab of the wound he had given me the previous day, "I have some questions to ask of you, Tahr."

Tahr glared at him sullenly.

The Sathé's claw came out and slashed downward, cutting through skin and muscle. The shock of the pain was like a kick in the stomach and I gagged on the agony that ripped through my stretched pectorals. Again Tarsha's claws cut into my skin, slicing methodically, tracing a red rectangle on my chest. Then he caught one end and started peeling the strip of skin off.

You wouldn't believe the pain. I couldn't help it; I screamed, bucking and thrashing enough to almost dislocate my shoulder and knock myself silly against the tree.

"Stop."

Tarsha calmly raised his hand and sniffed at the blood that stained the fur of his fingers, gazing coolly up at me while I tried to focus through watering eyes. "Tahr, you do surprise me," he turned to face her. "I had thought you would be stronger than this."

Tahr snarled helplessly, looking haggard, tired. "If you kill him, you are the greater fool," she hissed. "You do not know what he is! what he means for all Sathé!"

"Really?" Tarsha purred. "I must confess I had been curious. Maybe there will be time for that later. Now, the other Born Rulers: what routes will they be following to Mainport?"

"What? I do not know that!"

Again I twisted as Tarsha's claws slipped under my skin and began skinning another strip. The strange noises I was hearing I only later realised came from my own mouth.

"STOP!" Tahr screamed. "I DO NOT KNOW! I do not know. You know I cannot!"

Tarsha grinned up at me. "Yes, you are right. I know." He wiped a finger through the blood streaming down my front, then methodically licked it clean. "Have you ever wondered what your pet would taste like? Maybe filleted?"

Tahr yowled incoherently at him.

Tarsha laughed, then continued while Tahr was still seething; half-furious, half-terrified. "My superiors have long been curious about the strength of the garrison at River Plain. What is its strength? Are there any plans to reinforce it?" His claw flexed again, I felt its hard curve tracing a pattern in my blood.

Tahr hesitated, then answered. A Gulf trooper scribbled notes.

"Good, Tahr," Tarsha smiled. "I may tame you yet."

She gaped her mouth and hissed.

Tarsha asked more and more questions, scattering his demands for information with things he already knew. Every time he caught Tahr lying, he made me scream. Even when she was simply unsure of an answer, a claw slowly ripped through my skin.

It seemed like an eternity I was up there. The world blurred out of focus, my ears rang. Time became meaningless; all that existed was the pain, then even that started to blur into the distance. I never really noticed when Tarsha had finished and Tahr was being dragged off, yowling.

They left me up there until I started choking.

Through the haze I saw soldiers approaching, a sword being drawn. They moved around behind the tree, then the rope went slack and the ground smashed up.

The cool, damp cloth on my forehead felt good, a sensation beside the constant pain across my chest and through my joints. I just lay there with my eyes shut, shivering.

"K'hy, are you awake? Can you hear me?"

Fuck off! Leave me alone!

The voice was familiar, and persistent.

I forced my eyes open and blinked to focus. Tahr was leaning over me. Several guards lurked just outside the shelter: a sheet of canvass draped over a rope. I tried to speak, but nothing came out, my throat felt as if it were swollen to twice its normal size and lined with sandpaper.

"Try to drink," Tahr coaxed. Her wrist manacles had been removed but her ankle restraints still rattled. With one arm around my shoulders she helped me sit up. I nearly passed out again as muscles and skin moved on my lacerated chest. Tahr held a small cup to my lips so I could drink. The water was wonderful, but she pulled it away after only a few sips.

She looked at me mournfully, at the raw wounds on my chest still oozing blood and clear lymphatic fluid. So, I hadn't been out for very long: I was absolutely covered in clotting blood, dust and dirt.

Then I went into paroxysms of uncontrollable shuddering and coughing.

Tahr grabbed my head and a rough hand touched my nose, my cheeks, then my forehead. For a couple of seconds she studied me. "What have they done to you," she murmured, then called the guard: "For pity's sake, get him some clothes, a covering! Please!"

The guard turned and bent to stare in at us, then waggled a hand in a shrug. "Not my responsibility."

"Then get Tarsha!"

The soldier grinned at her, "I would have thought you would have enough of talking with him."

Tahr snarled incoherently, then spat, "If he dies, your hide will be nailed to a tree for the crows!"

This time the guard's grin lack conviction. She backed out, leaving another warrior staring in at us.

Tahr ignored them.

"I am sorry, K'hy," she lamented, touching the sticky blood that coated my arm.

Don't be. Not your fault. I couldn't speak it, I just started coughing again and the pain from that movement brought tears to my eyes; I ground my teeth. Tahr gave me more water and that eased the raging fires in my throat a little and for a while I lay quietly, looking up at her. She stroked my forehead, glancing up at the guards outside the tent occasionally, tension drawing muscles in her neck into sharp relief, fatigue and fear matting her coat.

"He. . . hurt you?" I grated in what could pass for a voice.

"Hurt ME?!" She looked surprised, then leaned back and met my eye,

abruptly cold and pragmatic. "Yes, he raped me."

Oh.

I was feeling very weary. Ill and injured in a primitive world with beings who looked and thought alien: another world, time, and morality. After what had happened to her she was steady on the outside, but one look at her face, at the burning in her eyes, chilled me.

Someone was going to be paying.

Tarsha pushed into the opening at the end of the bivvy followed by the guard who handed a bulky sack to her commander and left. The large red and black clad Sathe loomed over me, stooping a bit under the low cloth roof of the shelter.

Tahr turned and the anger burned brighter.

"What do you want, Tahr ai mine?" He half smiled, half grinned; a predator's grin. Then he glanced at me. "I see your pet is awake. How are you feeling? A? Still full of words?"

Her nostril flared. "He is seriously ill. I think he is dying. He needs warmth and his wounds need tending."

"Perhaps you would like me to send for a physician," Tarsha snarled sarcastically. He sneered at me lying chained on the floor: "For all his size he has a very delicate hide. I had considered skinning him to make breeches out it, but the stuff might be too fragile for that."

Tahr flinched and put a hand on my shoulder. "You. . . you said you would help him if I cooperated!"

"That is true," he shrugged. "Ah well, I suppose that we really do not want him dying upon us. I suspect that you might most uncooperative if he was not here to help. . . persuade you."

Tahr's ears plastered down flat against her skull and she trembled as Tarsha's hand caressed her mane. Her eyes slitted, but she bore it with restraint.

The Gulf officer smiled at her, at her subservience: "Good, my Tahr. Very good."

Then abruptly he pushed her away: hard, so Tahr sprawled backwards on the ground. "Here," he said laconically and drew a blanket from the bag and threw it in her face, "For your friend."

Tahr yanked the blanket off with extruded claws and a snarl, then turned her back on the officer and tried to be as gentle as possible as she wrapped me in the blanket. I shivered beneath the rough cloth while Tarsha sorted out the other contents of the sack.

Merry Christmas I thought inanely.

My clothes. My watch, my ball-point pen, notebook, cigarette lighter, my boots and my M-16 lay in the jumbled pile. Mute testimony of a society I might never see again. Tarsha picked up my watch and waved it under Tahr's nose.

"What are these things? Your friend was wearing this and carrying all that other stuff. What is it? What makes these marks behind the glass move?"

Tahr hesitated; looked at me.

"Tahr, do you really want me to have to persuade you to answer again?" Tarsha warned, his claws resting on my leg. I couldn't help wincing as they dug in. "Your friend's fingers DO look fragile. I am sure that they break easily."

Tahr growled; her lips parting in a snarl that showed her teeth. "Very well."

"Excellent," Tarsha smiled. "I just knew you would cooperate."

"It is a time-piece," Tahr choked the words out. "To be worn on the wrist."

"A clock? Do not lie to me, Tahr."

"I am not lying," she muttered tersely. "It is a clock. You can believe me or not, but it is the truth."

Tarsha studied her, then snorted and turned his attentions to the watch, pressing the button on the side, ears flinching as it beeped. He stared at

the watch for a while, pressing the mode button over and over and watching the crystal characters flicker from one display to another. "What makes the patterns change? What is that noise it makes," he asked. "How do you make something like this?"

"I do not know. I DO NOT KNOW!" she shouted it as Tarsha's claw pressed harder. He looked at her, then grunted and retracted his claw. Blood welled.

He dropped the watch and selected another item; the lighter. The small rectangle of silver metal clicked against his claws as he flipped the lid open, the electric spark igniting the gas in a blue flame that wavered in a draught.

"A fire starter. But again: how does it work?" He removed his thumb and the flame died. He turned the lighter over in his hands, tracing out my initials with his finger. "Your people of the east could not have made these, nor - I admit - could mine. There are materials I have never seen or heard of in these," he held up the notebook and pen. "The paper is so smooth and this writing instrument; I can see how it works, but the craftsmanship is impossibly fine."

He dropped the pen and notebook. "Where did you get these?"

"They are his," Tahr spat, jerking her head at me.

Of course he didn't believe her.

"Huh. . ." Tarsha grinned at her. "Well, that does not matter right now, I will find out. . . later."

He picked up the M-16. "And this thing? What is this for?"

Without looking at me Tahr sullenly said, "Hunting."

"How does it work?"

"May I show you?" Tahr was being very casual, maybe too casual - Tarsha looked thoughtful.

"I think not, Tahr," he said. "Something has already killed too many of my people." He looked at me, "Although I cannot believe THAT pitiful creature did it.

"No, Shirai, you will tell me how to use it." He experimentally hefted three and a half kilograms of armalite then wrapped his hand around the grip, flexing his dark fingers.

Tahr licked her thin, black lips and said nothing.

"Tahr," Tarsha reminded her mildly, "your friend. . ."

Tahr looked at me.

No, Tahr, don't do it!

"There is a small knob on the side there. Pull it backwards until it clicks and let it go again," she said. "All right, now push that little thing there forward."

Holding the rifle casually in one hand Tarsha did as she said. "Now what?" he asked.

Tahr sighed, looking about as threatening as a dandelion. "Just pull that lever underneath."

Confident in our helplessness, Tarsha pulled the trigger.

The gun rattled out a short, wild burst, the noise and recoil taking the Sathé completely by surprise. He instinctively spun around and threw up his arm to protect his face as the recoil kicked the weapon from his grasp and bullets stitched blackened holes through the fabric of the shelter.

Tahr had the gun before it hit the ground

The Sathé didn't have time to react before Tahr had assault rifle aimed at the two guards behind Tarsha. The gun burped and the small shelter was filled with the acrid smell of propellant and burned leather, fur, and flesh. The guards were kicked backwards by an invisible mule, the first one's chest imploded and the next one's head whipped around in a spray of pink; she had not accounted for the muzzle kick and hit the second one higher than she had intended.

Tarsha had only just begun to move, turning in time to receive the butt of the gun in his face as Tahr turned to face the other two guards. Tarsha

swayed indecisively then toppled at my feet.

The other two guards had hesitated a second before drawing their swords. That cost them their lives. One fell spasming on the ground with a sucking hole through her chest, the other had three holes up the torso as Tahr 'walked' the shots up his body. She missed with two rounds.

She started searching Tarsha; for the key to the manacles I guessed, then kicked him aside and aimed the rifle at the wooden stocks. Two shots in quick succession tore the wood into splinters that she kicked away and fumbled through Tarsha's sack, coming up with another magazine then darted from the shelter, out of my sight. Shouts and cries came from outside, many cut off abruptly with the sharp crack of rifle fire. A crossbow quarrel tore through the canvas near the top of the shelter, in one side and out the other. The M-16 clattered, short bursts mixed with screaming. A long rattle of gunfire, then single shots, then there was silence.

"Tahr!" I croaked past the burning in my throat. Long seconds passed before Tahr pushed her way into the bivvy, stepping over the bodies lying outside. She was over the edge of a berserker rage: every hair upon her body seemed to be standing upright while her ears were plastered down tight, almost lost in her mane. Those greenstone eyes were black pools, the iris dilated until the green of her pupils was all but obliterated. The sound of her breathing was a hoarse rasping as she gulped air.

"Tahr. . . ?" She dropped to her knees and the gun fell aside with a clatter, then my face was buried in her mane as she hugged me, her cheek pressed close against mine.

I couldn't believe the whimper came from my own throat. It hurt like hell as Tahr wiped the steaming-hot cloth across the mess of blood on my chest, clearing it away so my skin and the scratches themselves were visible. A couple of them began slowly weeping blood again as soon as they were bared to the air. Kneeling over me she inspected the cuts, then sat back until she was resting on her ankles. Judging by her expression it was not good.

Tahr confirmed my fears: "They are deep, and there are so many of them. K'hy. . . It is not good."

There was a groan from the still-unconscious form of Tarsha lying there in the restraints that until recently I'd been wearing. Tahr looked at him and gaped her mouth in a hiss of pure malice.

I sagged back and stared at the mottled, off-white fabric of the tent roof. Trees outside cast a hypnotic pattern of moving leaves and branches it: a shifting pattern swaying back and forth.

Tahr spoke again, giving me something to focus on, "Is there nothing that you can do?"

I slowly shook my head. My medical kit was in my pack and that was on the boat and God only knew where that was now. What would Rambo do? I thought numbly to myself: Sew himself up with fish gut and a six-inch nail and not give a damn about infection. I had to give a damn about it. I was already running a fever and there was no way that my body could cope with both.

Was there anything I could do? I knew that you made penicillin from molds, but I wasn't about to wait around for a few weeks for an orange to turn green. Besides, once you've got a moldy orange, what the hell do you DO with it?

I remembered the clean, antiseptic smell of hospitals, the hint of alcohol in the atmosphere. . .

Bingo. Alcohol.

"Tahr, how do you make ale?"

"What?" her muzzle wrinkled up in confusion.

"Please, how?"

She scratched her muzzle and thought for a second. "Uhhh. . . grain or

corn is left until it starts to grow, then it is cooked and mixed with water. I think it is then left until a foam appears on the surface. It is flavored with honey or spices."

I pawed at her and she trailed off. It was all I needed to know and everything I wanted to hear. "Is there any ale here?"

"Thirsty? I can bring you water. . . "

"No, no. Please, just see if they have any."

With a bob of her head she was gone from the shelter to return in a few minutes with the news that there were two kegs of the liquor in the supplies of the Gulf troops.

"This had better work," I muttered to myself. "Help me up. I have work to do," I held out my arm to her.

"No. Hold. You are not moving," Tahr pushed me back down. "Tell me what to do." I protested, but she remained firm. No amount of arguing on my part was going to sway her. Finally I had to acquiesce and tell her what to do.

"Boil ale and catch the vapors?" she wrinkled her muzzle in puzzlement. "I do not understand."

"Please." I was so tired. I just wanted to sleep. "Just do it."

"Very well."

She batted my face gently and then was gone again. Outside I could hear the clattering of ironmongery.

Tarsha stirred, turning over.

My chest ached, sharps pangs lancing through it as I reached for the M-16's strap, took it up. I really have no idea if there were any rounds left in it.

I rested the trembling weapon across my lap, muzzle toward the unconscious Gulf officer.

His muzzle was covered with blood, as was the surrounding fur. A bluish lump was starting to show through the fur. Red-tinged spittle drooled from the corner of his mouth: I wouldn't have been surprised if he had lost a tooth or two as a result of Tahr's work with the gun butt.

As I watched him, he groaned and tried to raise his hands to his face; the chain from his wrist to his ankle manacles stopped him. Then he opened his eyes and looked up at me with an expression of undisguised horror.

Really, he had no reason to be scared of me. Not of me. Of Tahr, now that was something else altogether.

Tahr squeezed the cloth and a single drop of liquid seemed to burn a hole through my tongue, the smell tearing a passage through my sinuses. I gasped and coughed. "Goddamn!" To Tahr's bewildered face I said, "Good."

"What do I do?" she asked.

"My belt." She passed it to me. With trembling fingers I doubled it over. "Just pour it on," I said and jammed the tough webbing of the belt between my teeth.

She hesitated. "This will hurt you?"

I nodded and growled, "G'on wi't!"

Even the diluted liquid was icy-cold against my skin for a second, then it seemed as if tongues of fire were raging through my nerves, burning slashes on my chest reaching inside me and searing to the core. I squeezed my eyes shut and my teeth clenched hard on the rough nylon in my mouth.

Slowly it faded as Tahr paused, then she moved again and a strangled whimper escaped my throat, sweat breaking out as she wiped the cloth across my wounds. I think I passed out for a few seconds.

Cool finger-pads were patting my cheek, then slapping. I groaned and felt the belt slip from between my teeth. "K'hy?"

"Uhhh.

"I have finished. If you can sit up, I will put the bandages on." There

was the sound of claws clicking together, then: "It will hurt."

It did, but it was nothing compared to the cold searing of the alcohol. I sucked in air through my teeth as she put pads of hot cloth on my chest then wrapped hot bandages around my torso, covering the still bleeding cuts. When she finished, I was covered in mismatched cloth from nipples to navel.

Tahr surveyed her work and was apparently satisfied. She let me rest for a brief while before waking me. "K'hy, we have to leave this place. Can you walk?"

"Don't know," I croaked, but tried: lurching to my feet, trying unsuccessfully to ignore the sheet of pain across my chest. Then my knees buckled and Tahr only just managed to catch me.

"Obviously not. Here," she slipped a shoulder under my arm and together we staggered outside. "My Ancestors, do you have to weigh so much?"

It was like the aftermath on a battlefield. All around the campsite Sathe bodies lay in various poses, some still clutching weapons, several had holes in the forehead; mercy shots. Amongst the treeline lay more shapes, the marks on their backs showed they had not been trying to fight. Already black carrion birds were squabbling in branches overhead and they would not wait long.

There was a small, four-wheeled wagon with two llamas already hitched to the tongue. Tahr boosted me up into the wagonbed, laid me back and pulled a pile of blankets across, swaddling me in cloth that quickly warmed to my body heat. I was tired, my skin burning. I wanted to throw the blankets off to cool down.

Tahr squatted at the tailgate and sniffed her shoulder where I had leaned on her. "It is time you had another bath," she smiled.

As a joke it fell a bit flat. "You killed them all," I grated.

She looked around, "Not all of them, some got away. You worry about them? My ancestors, K'hy, they would have killed us." She looked back at the tent. "And it is not over yet."

She walked back to the tent, stooping to pry a sword from a dead soldier's fingers before disappearing inside. I closed my eyes when the screaming started, but I couldn't close my ears.

The fever grew worse: a debilitating, strength-sapping heat and shivering that dragged me under, burning at my skin and keeping me floating in and out of sleep, babbling at Tahr in a patchwork of English and Sathe as she nursed me.

My memory of what happened after we left the Gulf encampment behind us is pretty hazy. I slept for hours on end, drifting in and out of dimly remembered dreams. At times, when Tahr roused me and did her best to feed and water me I would wake confused and disoriented, the Sathe terrifying me as I mixed her with the nightmares in my deliriums. I fought her. I can remember that, struggling against her, then just a picture of her holding me, stroking my face and hair, murmuring, crooning something soft and incomprehensible and reassuring.

I've never spoken to her about that. How did she feel knowing she was a thing of nightmares and horror for me? Were there times she felt the same way about me?

We traveled west: inland, towards the setting sun. Sometimes it rained and I would wake in humid darkness, the sound of water drumming against cloth. Tahr's fur was warm as she lay beside me under the canvass covering us.

Days later the fever broke, shortly after Tahr got us onto a road that took us northwards, towards Mainport. There was no doubting her relief. I rose from the fever to find her tired and haggard - actually shedding - after driving day and night as well as trying to tend to me. Another two days passed before I was strong enough to sit up and take my turn on the bench. When I insisted on doing my shift, she handed over the reins with only token

resistance.

Hours later I turned around to see how my passenger was faring, the scars across my chest pulling uncomfortably. She was sprawled on her back in the sun, one leg propped up on the side of the wagon, head back, mouth open, and snoring like a chainsaw.

There are many times I've missed having a camera.

It was only later that I had a chance to talk to her. She had sacrificed a lot because of me. Looking back, I realise how blind I had been in reading her true feelings for me. Perhaps I should have realised that there was more than friendship there when she almost betrayed her people for my sake.

"You play dangerous games, Tahr."

"How so?" she inquired blandly with a twitch on the reins.

The knife in my hands slipped when the wagon hit a rut, nicking a rogue gouge from the piece of wood I was absently whittling down to a toothpick. I frowned at the mar, then tossed the wood away into the grass verge. "I think you know. Why did you try so hard to protect me? If you had not been so sure that you could get your hands upon the gun would you have played such games with them?"

Tahr's ears flickered up and down; as though someone had just blown into them. "I was protecting my own interests just as much as yours. As I told Tarsha, he did not realise just what you mean to our people. Your knowledge is more valuable than anything I could have offered him." She gestured at my chest. "The trick you performed with the ale, it seems to have worked wonders."

"There was a lot of luck there," I said, wiping the blade of my knife on my shirt. There was sap stuck to the gleaming steel and something made me want to polish the blade until there was not a trace of imperfection upon it. The sap was reluctant to come off, but I was in no hurry.

"Perhaps, but you can save many lives with that stuff."

"Yeah, it also makes a rather nice drink among other things," I said, then realised what she was doing.

"But you are pulling me off the subject again!" I fumed and she threw back her head and hissed at the sky and at me. "You risked you home and your people for me! I do not understand you!"

She stopped laughing and looked at her hands, then at me: "Would you have not done the same for me?"

I opened my mouth to say something, and then closed it again. Would I have done the same. . . ?

Tahr saw my indecision and simply smiled into the sun. "It did work out though. Did it not?"

"Well, yes," I admitted.

"Then why worry?"

I shook my head in hopeless disgust. A few minutes later I asked. "What did you do to him?"

Tahr's head whipped around and her unmoving green eyes locked on me.

Slowly, her ears went down, "Ahhh, that is why you bring this up. . . Do you really want to know?"

I remembered the noises from the tent and gave a mental shudder. "No," I said: subdued, "I do not think I do."

"Why are you so upset about his death? Did you want to bring him with us after what he did to you?"

Shit, she was right, I shouldn't be concerned about him. He had raped her and tortured me. The bastard'd had it coming.

But what had she done with that sword? . . . I shuddered again.

"Why does it worry you so much? You have killed before: Many times."

"Tahr. . ." I didn't quite know how to say it. "Before I came here I had never even seen a death. I certainly had never really expected I would have to kill. It. . ." I broke off with a dismissive wave of my hand.

She was amazed. "But a warrior. . . how could you not consider the

possibility that someday you may have to fight? to kill?!"

"I had considered it, but I never really expected that I would have to." I ran my hand through my hair and rubbed my neck as I wondered how best to explain. "Our ideas of armies are most probably different. You use yours as a . . . deterrent? To make other Realms respect your borders and lands?"

"Yes," Tahr said.

"My people do not rely so much upon their individual warriors for that," I said. "There are . . . agreements between Realms to make sure that no small Realm is abused."

"This does not make much sense," Tahr mused.

"I do not know how to explain it fully," I confessed. "I am not entirely sure that anyone does."

"Politics are the same for your kind, huh?" she smiled. "But what does that have to do with a soldier not being prepared to kill?"

Damnation! There were some things that I really didn't want to talk about. The Damocles Sword of nuclear weapons one of them. Finally I sighed and said, "Our warriors are not. . . always warriors. Most of them are civilians who serve a short time in the military and there are many other skill that are taught besides simply fighting. I was one of those trained among to. . . look after vehicles and distribute supplies. Things like that."

"A [quartermaster]?!" Tahr looked astonished. "I had always thought of you as. . . as being of a higher ranking."

"Sorry," I said, feeling slightly hurt. "We have a large army. Someone has to do the dirty work."

"True," she agreed, still sounding disillusioned. "How large?"

"Around about. . . I think your number is, million?"

Tahr's jaw hit ground floor. "A million? A thousand thousand?!" she squeaked. "K'hy, there are not that many warriors in all the armies in all the Realms!"

"Then you can imagine the difficulty in supplying it."

There were questions flitting across her face like flies over a sheep's carcass. She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times then turned her head to stare out straight ahead. Finally she glanced sidelong at me, "Were you good at your job?"

"It was a living," I said.

Still the questions lurked just beneath the surface, but she choked them back. Instead she said: "Then when you killed, it was the first time in your life - for me. Was it worth it?" I stared back at her then chuckled. It turned into a cough. "I believe so."

Or was it?

Maybe if I had stayed by the truck the Portal would have come back. Maybe I could have stayed up in the hills, away from alien politics and fighting. Maybe. . . There were too many maybe's. I was in it now, in it way over my head. Riding with an exotic, high-ranking alien female, hunted, future uncertain but not looking very good. Tahr said this was the main road from the Bay Town district to Mainport. Well, she called it a road; all I saw was a strip where the grass had two parallel ruts in it, a typical Sath highway. E. T. A. at Mainport: one week, maybe a little longer.

When asked why we weren't going back to the ship, Tahr asked me what I would do if I was a captain on a ship that was running a tight schedule to make port before the Autumn storms set in, and had just lost a quarter or more of its crew. Would you waste time searching for two careless passengers who had gotten themselves captured by bandits after paying half the fare and leaving behind a pack full of unique trinkets worth a small fortune?

Neither would I.

The storm blew up on our fifth day on the road.

These past couple of days Tahr had been restless, with an agitation I

couldn't explain and she denied when I asked her about it. Now with the thunderheads brewing on the horizon she was even more distracted.

"I think we should make camp soon," I suggested, watching the darkening sky. "Huh?.." She looked at me with a glazed stare, then she blinked and her eyes focused. She looked at the sky. "What did you say?"

"I said we should make camp, it is going to urinate down."

"What. . . Oh. . . yes, you are right." Her muzzle wrinkled as she judged the massive thunderheads looming on the horizon like the prows of titanic ships. "If I remember. . . I think there should be a good site a few kilometers ahead. We might make it in time." She squirmed on the seat, scooting her butt across the plank.

"You are twitchy. Are you all right?" I asked.

She looked at me in a funny way. "Yes, I. . . I am fine."

She turned back to the llamas. I thought I heard her muttering something to herself, something about 'it being already', but the wind garbled and tore the words. I shrugged it off.

The wind picked up to the accompaniment of distant thunder and several fat drops of rainwater spattered onto the wooden bed of the cart. I grabbed a sheet of canvass from the back (one of the shelters that the gulf soldiers would no longer be needing. We also had a small armory of 'liberated' swords and crossbows) and went to sit by Tahr, lunging for hand-holds as the cart lurched over the rough track. I felt a twinge in my chest as the scarred skin there moved.

"Move over a bit." I sat beside her and held the heavy material in place over us. It kept the rain off as we kept moving.

Thousands of years ago, two huge slabs of granite had fallen against each other forming an upside down V shape, blocked at one end. Plants had grown atop them, sealing the gap where the two monoliths met. The floor of the resulting cave was covered with a variety of stones, but these had been cleared away by Sathé travelers who made good use of this convenient shelter, leaving clean sand. Fires had been lit at the mouth, always in one ring of fire blackened stones. The walls had been decorated with Sathé graffiti drawn in charcoal: strange Ideographs and hieroglyphics.

It was pissing down when we finally arrived, the canvass soaked and rivulets of mud streaming down into the road. Tahr made for the cave while I unhitched and tethered the llamas, dodging a spray of saliva as one of the bastards spat at me. Let me tell you, until you've smelt wet llama fleece, you haven't smelt anything. I wished I had a wet dog along to freshen the air.

There was a small stack of dry wood and kindling in the cave. Not enough to last the night. The pair of us braved the downpour and dashed out to retrieve more to stack and dry off. We were both soaked to the skin, Tahr dripping and trying to shake herself dry, looking so miserably bedraggled I had to laugh. She favoured me with a sharp white smile, then a playful cuff with a muddy paw. Chuckling, she went to stack the kindling. With some aid from my lighter a bright blaze was soon crackling in the hearth.

"Home sweet home," I said cheerfully, glad to be out of the driving rain. Thunder rolled across the hills outside and the light faded quickly.

Tahr had found herself a warm spot and was just sitting, staring into the sheets of rain. I sat down on the sand beside her. She smelled strange. . . not the usual kind of musky; a distinct, almost-spicy smell just on the edge of detection. Wet fur I guessed.

"Tahr, do you think. . . Tahr? Hey, Earth to Tahr, come in space cadet."

Her head whipped around and those big eyes fixed on me. "Huh?. . . What is it?" "I've been thinking. . . About using a sword. I mean, I am going to have to learn sometime. Can you teach me?"

"You do not know how to use blade?" She sounded incredulous. "No, of course you don't." She rubbed at her face, smearing her hands across her cheeks.

"I never thought that I would need to know how to use one. They are not

very popular in my world."

"You have told me before," she sighed. "Yes, I shall be happy to teach you."

"Great! Shall we get started?" There were swords in the back of the cart, I started to get up.

"No, K'hy, no." She gave me a sidelong glance then flicked her gaze back to the rain. "I . . . not now. You choose your moments! Can you not be patient?!" She almost snapped out the last words. Then looked surprised, then chagrined. "I am sorry," she mumbled. "I think I need to sleep."

Was she trembling? or was it just the flickering light? I didn't say anything as she stiffly climbed to her feet and moved further back into the cave to where we had laid bedrolls on the soft sand, out of the reach of any streams of water that might find their way inside.

A fork of lightning seared the clouds outside. I stared at it long after it had vanished, the after-image imprinted on my retina. It reminded me of the Portal that had brought me . . . us here. I thought about Tenny Dalton for the first time in a long while.

A night out on the town during leave, visiting the nightclubs. Sometimes there were girls, and they. . .

Nooo! No more girls. No more women! Nothing!

I shuddered.

And Tahr was pissed at me for some reason.

Thunder cracked and rolled.

If the weather cleared up during the night, we could get an early start in the morning. Perhaps things would look better then. I kicked a log into the fire; it lay sputtering, flames licking around it as I stripped off my boots, fatigue pants, and jacket, left them lying in a pile and wrapped myself in sheets of canvass: uncomfortable, but warm.

Tahr was lump under her cloak. I could tell she was still awake, and tense.

"Tahr?"

She didn't answer.

"What is wrong? Is it something I said? What?"

When she rolled over, her eyes reflected firelight: two shimmering green points of liquid emerald. For a few seconds she stared at me, then sat up, gathered her cloak about her shoulders and came over to me, kneeling less than a meter away, watching me. The musky smell about her was strong. Now I realised it wasn't wet fur. "K'hy, I . . . I did not expect my Time to come so soon."

What the hell was she talking about? Time? The way she said that. . . was she ill? "Tahr, what. . . I do not understand."

She squirmed uncomfortably and explained. "It is the season for my Time. I am ready for mating."

My wheels spun for a full second before that clicked. "You are. . . Holy shit ! You are in. . . estrus?"

She saw the confusion on my face and moved back slightly, surprised herself. "You do not. . . Oh. Your females. . . Do not tell me: they do not have Times, do they?"

I shook my head.

"Oh," is a good transliteration of her next noise. Then: "No wonder you are so. . . It is all new to you. I am sorry if I hurt or offend you. . . you do not know what it is like."

"There is nothing I can do?"

She glanced sharply at me, then tipped her hands in a shrugged. "I do not think so. It. . . It is a hard thing to describe. Sometimes hot, craving, siskrtch; An emptiness, a. . . a. . ." She hunted for words, her hands writhing about each other.

"An itch you cannot scratch," I suggested. I had a feeling that I did understand. "Yes, that is. . . it." Her eyes started to lose their focus again and she shook her head wildly, sending her mane whipping about her face.

"Uhhnn. . . If I am impatient with you, please try and understand."

"I will remember. Good night, Tahr." I rolled over, away from her. After a few seconds her voice murmured:

"Good sleeping, K'hy."

Tahr twitched violently in her sleep, like a dog chasing something in its dreams, the small mewls and snarls she voiced reminiscent of a wild animal.

I leant over her, touched her shoulder and gently shook her then tried to duck as she swung wildly, backhanded, catching me across the ear and I went over backward with my head swimming. When my vision cleared, Tahr was kneeling over me, her hands fluttering with indecision.

"Ow, Goddamn, you've got a good left." I sat up rubbing my temple. Lucky she hadn't had her claws out.

"Saaa! Scthe n'sert ctsre a'n kreths . . ." she started off in a babble I couldn't follow at all, then abruptly buried her face in her hands and looked up again. "I am sorry, K'hy, I could not stop myself!" she raked claws through facial fur and mane. "This is the first Time I have been through with no-one around. I cannot. . ."

"All right," I tried to soothe her. "Do not worry about it."

She flowed to her feet and paced, tossing her head back and forth. A bolt of lightning flashed outside, illuminating her in relief and she froze to stare at the flash like a possum caught in a car's headlights. I could hear her murmur, "You do not know what it is like, alone. . ." she broke off and turned to stare at me. My jaws twitched in a tight little smile and I saw her ears wilt as she realized that she was talking to a being who was one of a kind in her world.

Yeah, Tahr. I know. I understand. I had known it these past months. I had lived with it; More alone than she would ever be, could ever imagine.

"Oh, K'hy. . . strange one. If this is what it is like for you every day. . ." She let it hang and was silent. In the darkness her eyes were shadows trying to read my brown ones.

There was nothing I could say. I just looked down at my hands, feeling so awkward. Rain hissed outside, drowning the sound of her footsteps on sand, but I heard fur rustle as she sat down beside me on the soft sand, leaning against me, and I instinctively put an arm around her, feeling her warmth and solidity in the dim firelight. Her musky scent hung heavy on the damp air; it brought back memories of hot nights back home, women.

Tahr was motionless against me, breathing softly, her head leaning on my shoulder. I tensed when I felt her move, kneeling beside me. Fur brushed against my arm, hands moving, looping around in a warm embrace, a warm breath against my ear, then sharp teeth bit gently into the juncture of shoulder and neck, just hard enough to be felt, a rough tongue rasped after.

"Tahr," my voice cracked. This was. . . It was leading. . . I knew where it was leading and it set emotions into conflict: fear and something else.. "Please. . . think."

"I have," she rumbled in my ear, her voice deep; almost a purr. "I have thought most carefully."

"But we are not. . . I mean. . . You are a Sathe. . ."

"And you are not. I had noticed." Hands stroked my hair. Thunder rolled outside. The rain picked up and the fire flickered as a cool wind blew through. She moved, looking up into my face. A single rough finger pad stroked down my cheek. "H'man. I know what you are."

The wind blew again. I shivered violently and hung my head. "I. . . I do not want to hurt you. . ."

I think she smiled then: "I know," she whispered, soft tones like the moving of air. "You could never hurt me."

Again I shivered. It was the cold, I told myself, not that knot of agony inside. . . how could I lie to myself? "I am afraid."

And now she cupped my face in her hands, holding me when I flinched, bent my face toward her muzzle. Delicately she licked my eyes with the tip of her rough tongue. That felt strange: tickling, oddly comforting.

"Tahr. . ." I suddenly needed more air.

A furred finger crossed my lips to hush me.

Her hands lowered, sliding down my neck and across my chest, then hooking my shirt and sliding it off. Confused, I didn't resist. That familiar tension inside kept me trembling, uncertain, not knowing whether to run or reciprocate, a shiver when she nuzzled gently at the hollow of my neck. Seemingly of their own accord my arms went around her, holding her close, feeling her heartbeat, her breathing, my face to the dusty sunlight of her mane. She made a low noise: not a purr, not quite a growl and I released a shuddering breath into the encompassing warmth of her fur.

Then her hands were in my waistband and - somehow - my shorts were lying on the sand and we were kneeling before the fire; touching, exploring each other in ways infinitely more intimate than we had ever done before, in ways I'd never dreamed of. Her fur was so slightly coarse and exquisitely pleasurable as she moved closer and wriggled against me, warm, muscular, embracing me as I hugged her close, claws digging into my back. My fingers combed through her fur, across her back, her breath hot past my ear. As sensitive as a woman. . . No, she was a woman. . . No. . . I. . .

We tried. And it was confusing. I didn't know what I wanted, I didn't know what she wanted. For what seemed like breathless years we were writhing on the sand, gasping and yelping and fumbling, fur twining between my fingers and her claws nicking my back. Like the first time I'd ever been with a woman all over again: that same clumsiness and uncontrollable excitement that sets your heart pounding with an intensity even running for your life can't match. But there hadn't been the fur then, nor the claws or teeth nipping at my chest and arms.

Hugging her, her back arched, spine hard against my chest, arms around her rubbing across her chest and the bumps of her leathery nipples, her hands caught at mine, head twisting to nuzzle my neck and then she knelt beneath me, down-covered rump raised and wriggling. I hesitated, unsure, then she was there to guide me, into alien heat. I heaved a shuddering breath and she gave a yelp of what could have been surprise. Warmth and silken, strong, and strange muscle enveloped me. She shifted to and fro beneath me and I was moving also, through a chaos of darkness, flickering firelight and flashbulbs of lightning and familiar sensations that were still like nothing I'd felt before. Eyes closed and hands clenched in fur. The scent in my nose was heavy and musky: the smell of sex and there were moments of heat, of slipping, clenching hands in fur, warm moving encompassing everything.

When everything became a blur of pleasure that turned to an explosion of heat - the culmination - Tahr's cry of release rose, echoing in competition with the storm outside.

We lay spooned together for a time, my sweat forming a sheen on my bare skin, fur adhering in sticky clumps. Tahr stirred against me, twisting to nuzzle my chin and lick my neck. "Hai? K'hy?"

"Hmmm?"

"Again?" she murmured, reaching back to rake her claws lightly up my hip.

"Hnnn? Already?"

"A," She rolled over, hooking arms behind my neck and drawing me closer. I could feel her breath on my cheek, rough tongue lathing my chin: "Please?"

I hesitated, responding already, then wrapped my arms around her, drawing her still closer.

Slower, this time. Slower, more feeling, teaching her a thing or two.

By morning the storm had eased. I awoke to fragmented beams of sunlight streaming into the cave, the sounds of birdsong. Tahr was nestled against me, her head in the crook of my arm.

I just lay there for a while, watching the sunbeams crawling along the floor of the cave, up our legs. Tahr's fur scattering the light into smaller beams, like prisms. I could see how her fur changed from place to place across her body: light on the inside of her thighs, on her stomach and face. Growing heavier on the outside of her legs, her crotch, up her spine, her mane. Highlights, a corona of white and gold where that sun stroked across the landscape of her torso. Her ribs moving as she breathed, teeth glinting through partly opened black lips. . .

Beautiful. . .

And by the light of day she was unutterably, indisputably alien.

My God! What've I done ?!

We walked the cart down to the road where the mud was steaming; fighting a slow, losing battle with the morning sun. In places the ruts were ankle-deep in an ooze that clung to the spokes on the wheels and splattered us. Breakfast was eaten on the move, the cold remains of a deer shot with a crossbow the other day. I ate little, my mind wandering back to the previous night.

Of all the things I'd ever done, I'd never felt such a . . . a lust, a loss of control. It scared me. I couldn't justify it, but I also couldn't forget it.

Despite the minor scratches and bite marks she'd left me with, she'd been gentle; in her own, feline way. She'd told me she was experienced, but the one description that came to mind when recalling her lovemaking was naive. Energetic; yes, very, but naive.

She only knew a single position: submissive, with the male mounting from behind, and nothing at all about playing, spinning the pleasure out. . . I'd learned I didn't have the recuperative power of their males, but in that one night I'd shown her more tricks than she had learned in a lifetime! Sathé just didn't experiment when it came to their primal urges. It probably had something to do with their males: when they get a whiff of a female in season they get that glassy-eyed look, then the only way to hold them back is to nail them down.

I'd shown her new moves, opened new horizons for her, and she, in turn, had given me both a new experience and shown me there was somebody there for me.

But she wasn't even human !

Not on the outside, but what about inside ?

Not there, either.

I didn't understand this. Last night riding on the crest of lust it had all seemed so natural, so right. Now this guilt trip. She wasn't human, but she wasn't an animal. . . or was I just looking for an excuse to justify myself.

"You are very quiet this morning. Share your thoughts?"

I'd been staring off at nothing. I blinked and focused on Tahr.

"Last night?" she asked.

That hit. I nodded.

"Do you regret what happened?"

"I don't know," I said then hesitated before I added, "My people would consider what we did as wrong."

"Why?"

"You are not even human!" I blurted it out then looked at my feet.

"Well," she said dryly, "it was me or the llamas."

"Not funny."

"K'hy, what could be shameful about giving comfort and pleasure? We are

different, I will grant you that, but not so far apart. I know you are very like a Sathe in many of your ways. Also, you are not in your world any longer. This is mine. I think my people are not as. . . ah. . . fussy as your own when it comes to mating." Her sharp eyes caught the slight flush around my ears and her ears flickered in amusement. "You are still uncomfortable talking about matters of sex."

I swallowed, but plunged on, "Are all your. . . uh. . . Times so short?"

She kept a straight face when she answered, but those green and gold eyes laughed at me, sensing my discomfort. "It varies. Sometimes for days, sometimes for only a few hours." She was silent for a few seconds. Then:

"I remember my first time, it was one of the most frightening moments of my life. I was still in the Citadel at Mainport, still a student. It was spring and I woke with sensations I'd never had before. In an academic way I knew what was happening to me, but was still afraid of the feelings I had no control over, the yearnings." Her ears flickered in the ghost of a smile.

"Ah, the fluster of my male friends when they first scented me. I think they were even more confused than I. Even so, they helped me. They chose one. He stayed with me for those nights. Did you have a female back on your world?"

There she goes again, changing tack more often than a sailing ship into a blustering headwind. Well, yes, I had known women, but I wasn't what you could call a casanova. There had been affairs - a few - but they had faded: I hadn't been ready for the commitment.

"Do you still fear it?" she asked.

"It was not fear," I said, trying to recall why I had been so reluctant. "I supposed I thought of females as a. . . almost a burden," I realised how that must have sounded and laughed at myself.

"And now?"

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "And now it is something I regret most deeply." Tahr didn't press the subject.

The days passed slowly, the temperature and weather changing all the time; sometimes warmer, sometimes colder. The air grew crisper as we traveled: less muggy and sedentary.

As we progressed north we came across other traffic: carts, wagons, and individual riders on their llamas. Most of the time they were going the other way, but once we overtook a lumbering procession of wagons laden with barrels and boxes and casks of various types also northbound.

Gawping Sathe stared at us for a long time as we passed them, until they passed from sight.

There were several small settlements along the way: towns the size of Traders Meet built at river crossings and crossroads, small villages along the road, tiny hamlets and farms half-hidden among the trees. The largest of these settlements - First Step South - was a proper town, similar in size to Baytown. Tahr told me that it was the first settlement built outside the traditional clan grounds, the last town before the ancient walls of Mainport.

THE HUMAN MEMOIRS
PART II

It's no fun
Being an illegal alien

GENESIS

I'm a New Yorker, born and bred.

Well, maybe not born. Jersey's where I spent the first few years of my life. I was too young to remember anything but vague impressions of that time, and just a few years later when I was four, there was that accident.

The friends who adopted me were a young couple living across the waters in New York, in Brooklyn Heights, in an established neighbourhood near the old Plymouth Church. That's a time I do remember, quite fondly: the house was a big old place, built from old wood, crowned with a steep shingled roof, crestings, and defunct chimneys. Birds roosted in the gables and in the huge old trees around the property. Over the near-century it had been standing, additions and extensions had sprung up, some of them seemingly spontaneous or whimsical. You could walk from a nineteenth-century study into a living room added in the nineteen twenties and furnished in rococo. In some places there were two floors, in others three. I had one friend compare it with the Adams' place. Still, the place took money to keep and maintain, so with more rooms than we could ever use it only made sense to take in lodgers.

Until I could legally change it back to my given name, my surname was Jerald. Not that I had anything against my foster parents, they were as good a parents any kid could wish for, but I just wanted the name I was born with. They both worked, my father owning a bookshop and my mother in a boutique over in Manhattan. Still, even though they were away a lot of the time, the house wasn't a dull place by a long shot. There were always the lodgers. We were careful who we took in, generally preferring students, artists, trampers, young couples, people who looked like they could be trusted. My parents were pretty good judges of character, and we only had a few incidents. It was a sort of word-of-mouth institution, and believe me, we got some classics through there. It seems strange to say it, but I became closer to some of those people than I did to my own parents. They taught me odds and ends: playing the guitar, harmonica, keyboard, also to draw and paint. From an ex-bikie I learned to strip down a Harlie blindfolded and I could rewire a house by the time I was fourteen. And they talked; I heard stories of all kinds from all over the country, so eventually I decided to see some of these places for myself. Well, the army gave me a chance to do that. Sort of.

As something I grew up with, the Manhattan Island skyline was mundane, simply a spectacle I could see every day if I wished. When I did sign up for my time, some of the more rural postings came as a bit of culture shock. Still, I'd had more contact with 'the great outdoors' than a lot of New Yorkers. Town or country; either way, it was a lifestyle far removed from anything any Sathe could imagine.

As far removed as the life I was living now was from anything I could have imagined: On the road with an over-evolved cat, riding a rickety wooden wagon as it crested a final hill and I was looking at Mainport, lying peacefully under leaden afternoon skies.

There were no towering skyscraper or glass-faced condos - I hadn't expected any - but still the city was impressive. I guess it's comparable with the feeling you get when exploring an ancient human city or medieval castle: compared with modern constructs they're not much, but you can't help but be impressed with the strength and solidity of these edifices that have endured for generations.

By Sathe reckoning Mainport was a large city. Built on the north-western tip of what I knew as Staten Island with the kill to the north, The Narrows to the east. Covering an area of maybe sixteen square kays, it was a huge, bustling metropolis to them. However to me, faced with what continued to be my prospective home, it was far less glamorous. But I had to admit the

Citadel itself was something else again.

Towering over the city proper, the Citadel was a gigantic mass of battlements, walls, towers, and buttresses lying on the crest of the hill like some massive reptile sunning itself upon a rock.

Once, long ago - it was only later I would learn just how long ago - I supposed the central keep had stood alone on that hilltop, just a small settlement. As time passed the Citadel had grown, spreading like granite ivy on a gargantuan scale down upon the town below where buildings been razed to make way for the encroaching walls. Against the backdrop of grey skies, the sight was impressive and - strangely - depressing.

I had lived here in this place that had once been my home and now threatened to be my home again. I thought I recognized various marks in the landscape: Hills, ridges, gullies. Probably my imagination. The geography wasn't that exact: the Arthur Kill that normally separates Staten Island from the mainland didn't exist here. Also, New York was built upon a foundation engineered by humans; if nature's design didn't fit in with what was on their drawing boards and computer terminals, it was removed, so the landscape I knew was probably not even natural.

God, the polluted grandeur of New York, the sky-climbing dreams and schemes of human beings, the sound of traffic, television, music, hot showers, toilet paper, Oreos. All those little things that make life worth living, all those things I had take to be inalienable, gone.

Tahr tapped my shoulder and clambered over the back of the seat to sit beside me. The wooden plank that had weathered so much protested under the extra load. "Why have you stopped?" she asked, then saw my face. "Your eyes. . . What is wrong?"

I blinked back tears and muttered, "Nothing. I was just thinking."

"That wetness is a sign of grief. . . is it not?" she inquired with head cocked to one side. "Why? We are safe here. We are home."

I stared at her. Home?

"Oh. . ." Understanding flashed behind her eyes, subdued her, "I forgot. My home, not yours."

I didn't say anything.

From there I could see wisps of smoke rising from chimneys, could hear the faint cries of gulls. At last Tahr's voice was a slow, measured rumble: lower than any human woman's could be. She was trying to be gentle but still businesslike: "I think it would be for the best if I drove the rest of the way."

"Are we doing the animal act?"

"No," she said. "Not here. Just do not do or say anything until I tell you, yes?"

"Yes." Resignedly, I nodded.

She flicked the reins and the llamas started plodding down the hill, toward the city.

The fields surrounding the town were many and varied, containing crops and livestock: goats, llama, bison, some even held deer behind high split log fences. From the air the land would have looked like a jigsaw of angular green and brown shapes.

The fields and the houses held Sathé, living out their lives as they must have done for generations. Some of them saw us and paused at their chores, resting behind their ploughs or looking up from butter churns and gardens. It was a well-travelled road so they would be accustomed to strangers, but I was a stranger a few notches of strange above the rest.

I was so busy rubbernecking back at them that the sudden change in the sound of the wagon's wheels startled me. Tahr hissed at my surprise and proudly pointed out that the road was paved and drained. It was also much wider, in places becoming two laned!

Necessary. The nearer we got to the city, the more traffic. It was like every Sathé from miles around decided to tag along with us. Gawking at me.

"Market day," Tahr explained.

The wall surrounding the city was imposing, reaching up five stories and constructed of huge blocks of stone - each about a metre high and two metres in length - set with a precision to turn an Inca green with envy. As we drew up to the barbican a disparity in the age of the blocks became obvious. Some stones looked old; ancient. Edges and corners rounded and weathered from countless years exposure to the elements while other blocks of granite still bore the chisel marks from the stonemasons who shaped them.

The gatehouse and barbican were built from the newer stonework. The massive supports around the gate were elaborately decorated with Sathé script and carvings. Strange to see aliens as the main theme of a carving; where you expect to see humans there are bipedal cats in their stead.

Sathé guards were everywhere: on the walls, below the walls, around the gates, watching the steady stream of carts and wagons that went past them and looking bored. Occasionally they would stop one that caught their attention and examine the cargo.

And of course we caught their attention.

Three Sathé troopers in leather armour trimmed with blue and silver moved out to catch the llamas' reigns and lead us off to one side of the gate; watching us warily. They were young, probably younger than Tahr, but even so, they all carried scars and nicks from past fights. And they all had one hand draped - almost casually - over the pommel of their scimitars.

"What is your business in Mainport?"

The one who spoke wore three small gold crescents on his cuirass. If they were badges of rank, he was superior to the others: they had only one apiece.

"I have business at the Citadel," replied Tahr, looking perplexed. "What is this? Why all the security?"

The guard waved his hand in a shrug and continued in a conversational manner. "I am not sure. There have been growlings about trouble with the Gulf Realm. More guard duties have been assigned and we have orders to search all strangers entering the city." He scratched under his armour, then peered at Tahr again. "The Citadel you say. Is there any reason they should be expecting you? What is your name? Business?"

Tahr considered for a second before saying, "My name is Tahr ai Shirai. My business is my own."

"Tahr ai Shirai? THE Tahr ai Shirai?"

"Is there another?"

His muzzle wrinkled. "Ahh. . . Of course, and I am a Clan Lord in my off-shift. Is that intended to be a joke?"

"No."

Uncertain, he hesitated, then his fur began to bristle; standing up as if electrified. "You think that is amusing?! Start laughing, shave you! I could drag you in for a claim like that!"

Tahr also began to seethe. "And I could have you demoted so fast your head will spin! I am serious!"

"Then where is your entourage! Where are your guards! You look like a goatherd and you smell like. . . I wonder the llamas can stand it!" He waved at his subordinates: "All right, check that wagon out from ears to toes! And as for you. . ." he levelled a finger at Tahr.

His troops were moving around to start searching the wagon and found themselves staring up at me. "Uh-uh, guys," I said, then slowly grinned.

"Ah. . . Sir?"

"What?!" he snarled irritably and stepped around to see what their trouble was. He stopped and gaped at me, his ears drooping like wet facecloths.

"Is. . ." he swallowed: hard, "Is it dangerous?" he squeaked.

"Very," she hissed.

"Get it out of the wagon. Now!" he yelled at her reluctance. "You too! Down!"

Snarling furiously she waved for me to get down and dismounted herself.

I took up my rifle as I dropped to the ground. She saw me cock the weapon and shook her head in a gesture I could understand. I frowned, but left the safety on.

The Sathe looked all the more apprehensive when they saw my size and kept a respectful distance as they inspected the cart.

Three Star watched me, keeping himself at a safe distance holding the llamas' reigns. Tahr cast a glance over her shoulder at the guard searching the wagonbed, then turned back to their commander. "You! I want your name and that of your superior."

At that moment, one of the guards chose to point out the fact that we had weapons in the back.

Holding the sword by pommel and blade, Three Star scrutinized the blade just below the cross guard where Sathe pictoglyphs were engraved. He looked up at Tahr, his ears slowly flattening back on his skull. "Weapons. . . Gulf weapons. And what were you going to be doing with these?"

Tahr had just started to open her mouth when a voice bellowed from the ramparts atop the gatehouse:

"TAHR!"

Everyone in earshot looked up at a soldier leaning over the wall, in serious danger of teetering over. "You!" he pointed in our direction. "Wait there! Don't move!" He pulled back out of our sight.

The guards had their swords drawn. If we had wanted to move it would have become bloody. I think I could have taken them, but the archers on the walls would probably get me. We all waited in a nervous tableau, the Sathe shifting and sniffing at me. There was a racket in the tunnel, a sprinting Sathe - in all likelihood the guy who was on the wall - dodged around the noses of a team of bison, prompting curses from the driver. He slowed as he crossed that sharp line dividing sunlight and shadow, his flapping cloak turning from black to grey and settling around his ankles. He was staring at Tahr.

"By my Ancestors, Tahr! It is you!"

"S'sahr?" Tahr squinted in the sunlight and dust, shifting uncertainly, her ears going back. Twitching. She was expecting something. I shifted the rifle uneasily, unsure of what to do.

The one named S'sahr laughed, that hissing Sathe laugh: "Himself. You can relax, young one. Those days are past."

Tahr relaxed only a little, and the cloaked Sathe came nearer.

I stared. The scar ran from where S'sahr's right ear used to be, down between his eyes, and ending up on the left side of his mouth. A three centimeter wide strip of puckered, furless skin. None of the others seemed startled by it.

However the officer was thunder-struck, more by his words than appearance.

"You. . . You ARE Tahr ai Shirai?. . . I did not know. . ." If he could have blanched he would have gone whiter than bleach. He looked back and forth from S'sahr to Tahr, the captured Gulf sword forgotten in his hands, visualizing his career slipping down the tubes.

S'shar strode forward until he was eye to eye with the hapless guard. "Yes, saf! Tahr ai Shirai." He whispered this, then bellowed, "YOU DID NOT KNOW?!"

"Sir," the guard squeaked, cringing before the scarred veteran's fury.

"S'shar," Tahr held out a hand to forestall his anger. "Leave him. I am too tired for that now."

The grizzled Sathe dismissed the guard with a disgusted hiss and a swat across the ears that tore the fragile membrane. Blood welled and the guard yelped and scurried back a few steps. One of his subordinates was tactless enough to hiss amusement and he in turn had his ears slashed.

"Young one," S'shar reached out to clap Tahr on the shoulder. "Or would High One be more appropriate?"

As if she was about to embrace him, Tahr stepped forward, but stopped

and hugged her arms about herself. "No, no. You have known me too long for that." She looked around at the watching Sathes. We were beginning to attract attention. "Perhaps we should continue this later," Tahr suggested, then glared at the guard: "May I pass now?"

The guard hastily backed away, bleeding ears twitching nervously. "Saaa. . . yes, of course."

"May I have the honour of escorting you?" S'shar asked. Coming from the torn old Sathes, the courtesy was a little out of place.

Tahr smiled: "I think that I will be able to tolerate that."

She climbed up onto the drivers bench. S'shar leapt up and settled beside her. He turned and stared at me in surprise when I vaulted up onto the bed of the cart. "What is that. . . ." he started to say.

"Hai!" Tahr barked and cracked the reins, getting the llamas moving.

Through the main gate was a broad plaza, paved, surrounded by buildings and shops. A road main avenue followed a winding path up to where a switchback road climbed the steep hillside up to the Citadel. I was surprised to see ancient trees overhanging the road, their roots buckling the cobbles in some places. I hadn't expected a fortress city to waste space on extraneous objects like trees. Still, they looked good.

If Baytown had been busy, this place exceeded it by a factor of ten. Shops and stalls lined both side of the main street while vendors roamed, hawking their wares, selling everything from adze and abaci to zinc ore and zaxs. The buildings the shops were in were usually two stories high; a ground floor store and the first floor a living area. A few buildings were only one floor and I didn't see anything above three. Lines criss-crossed the street from the first floors. Not power lines: washing. Alien laundry drying in the cool sea breeze above the streets.

Despite the small size of the buildings, Mainport was an unbelievable busy place. Close on one hundred thousand Sathes lived there and they all seemed to be on the streets at the same time, all of them as varied as those I'd seen elsewhere in the Realm. As I ogled at them, many stared back at me and excited chatter started up behind us.

"If you wanted to be unobtrusive then bringing your pet along was not such a wise move. What is it anyway?" S'sahr was staring at me in bemusement. "I thought I was quite knowledgeable when it came to wildlife, but this thing. . . Some kind of freak bear?"

Tahr looked back at me - a warning glance - then told S'shar, "Ah. . . There are a few things I will have to explain, at the Citadel. My. . . pet is one of them."

Yeah, didn't want him falling out of the cart in shock. Being a freak to every new Sathes I met was getting pretty tiresome. It was something I was going to have to get used to, no matter how it irked me.

As the Citadel drew closer, Tahr hung a right, taking us down a side street that wasn't half as spacious as the main avenue, but was still every bit as busy.

"You have business at the docks?" S'sahr asked.

"Yes. There is a ship I have to find. I have some cargo due me."

On the docks she stopped to study a large board with dozens of smaller painted tags hanging from it. Some kind of directory. She quickly scanned it.

"Captain Hafair. . . building five."

Of course the docks were bigger and busier than Baytown's wooden wharves. These were solid stone, with an artificial breakwater surrounding the harbour. The dock had slipways cut into it, for hauling boats into and out of the water. Above it all, the walls of the Citadel had vantages commanding the whole bay.

During the storms of winter ships in the harbour were drydocked for repairs and refitting. Already there were six vessels sitting high and dry on the quayside. Many more were still waiting at anchor out in the harbour, sheltered by the embrace of the harbour walls. I thought I recognized

Hafair's command out in the forest of masts. No, perhaps not.

Tahr was reading what had to be numbers painted in faded black paint on boards on the fronts of waterside buildings. Finally she reined in the llamas outside one particular structure. "This is it."

"Here?" S'sahr wrinkled his nose. "What kind of cargo?"

"Just something I have to collect for a friend," Tahr said. "This should not take long. Wait here."

"Hold," S'sahr stalled her. "Tahr, this thing," he jabbed a finger in my direction, "Is it dangerous?"

Tahr flashed a scintillating grin and smile at the same time and replied, "Only when provoked." Then she pushed her way through a knot of Sathes outside the front door of the warehouse and was gone.

"Only when provoked," S'shar muttered staring after her, then rubbed absently at the remains of his right ear. "Ah, she has changed. . . dragging pets around." He sighed and turned to face me. "You have got to be the weirdest thing I have ever seen! Where did she dig up something like you from?"

I took it to be a rhetorical question.

He noticed the bulky tarpaulin behind the drivers bench and picked up a corner, then threw it aside revealing the pile of Gulf weaponry: scimitars, daggers, crossbows, and bolts.

"One sword I could understand, but all this. . . " His eyes lit upon the M-16 and he reached out a furry paw to pick it up. I also grabbed at it and a brief tug-of-war ensued, ending when I deliberately bared my teeth and gave him a low growl. He hastily released the rifle and went for his sword. I sat still and he hesitated with the sword half-drawn, then looked around at the pedestrians who'd stopped and were in turn watching him. He blinked, then sheathed the weapon and sat studying me.

It's amazing. Even when faced with something that walks like a Sathes, wears cloths and has hands, he didn't even consider the possibility that it might be more than a dumb animal. Most Sathes wouldn't consider it intelligent unless it could actually persuade them it is. They had never explored the possibility of other intelligences in the universe.

Well. . . give them some more time and someone would've hit upon the concept. Until after the industrial revolution and men had more leisure time, humans never considered it. All they had was themselves and the Gods. The Sathes did not even have those, they only really lived for the present, and each clan was fiercely proud of being self sufficient.

We both waited for Tahr to return. She took her time.

The gates of the Citadel were even more impressive close up. Three sets of huge wooden doors - each reinforced with iron and covered with bronze sheets beaten onto astonishingly detailed mosaics - hung beneath the barbican that had been hewn from large blocks of solid granite. It is hard to describe just how MASSIVE the whole place was. Built to last for a thousand generations.

The Citadel guards moved toward us, but took one look at S'shar and waved us on. There were two more gatehouses inside. The Citadel was built like an onion, layer within layer, all with their own guardposts.

Tahr had collected my pack. While the wagon rolled through the streets I'd sorted through it, making sure that nothing was missing. Everything seemed to be in order and even my customised cloak was still there. I wish I could have seen Hafair's expression when she walked in on him.

We couldn't take the wagon all the way into the Citadel. I guess they also had their security, or perhaps just problems with traffic. The only traffic going through were goods wagons. S'shar pointed out to Tahr that she had the right to take the wagon all the way to the Keep, but she declined, saying she was just as capable of walking as any other. After the third

barbican we had to leave the cart in a dark stable that reeked of animals and rotting hay. A stablehand - still a cub - had the monotony of his day broken. Tahr, still chatting away with S'shar, tossed the reins to the cub who was staring at me. They slapped across his chest; his reflexive grab missed. I stooped, picked them up and handed them to him with a smile. He stared at me, then at the straps in my hand, but didn't move to take them. I sighed, pressed them into his hand and patted his shoulder, then took off after the others.

I was rubbernecking like a country rube fresh to the big city as I crossed the yard to where S'shar led the way up a narrow staircase into a postern gate. We walked through narrow passages and dark corridors, occasionally being stopped by guards. S'shar got us past these. An old veteran supervising three younger guards at a gateway recognized Tahr and bowed to her. After a moments hesitation, the others followed suit.

"Excuse me highness, but should you be taking that," he eyed me, "into the Keep?"

"It is all right," she reassured him. "He goes where I go."

The old 'sergeant' bowed his head again, then muttered something to one of the soldiers who took off ahead of us with a spattering of claws on worn stone.

"You may pass, High Ones." That was a change, being addressed with respect instead of scorn. From rags to riches. Ah, the whims of fortune.

Tahr and S'shar led, chatting amicably between themselves, swapping tidbits of news. I trailed after them, occasionally lagging behind to crane my head around an open doorway or peer into a cavernous gallery. This place was humongous!

But as we went deeper into the Citadel I began to stick closer to the Sathes' heels. Hunters' vision had an affect on Sathe architecture. This far inside the walls of the citadel windows were impossible, but the Sathe didn't compensate by adding more artificial lighting. They didn't need to. What lamps existed were dim, widely spaced oil lamps that left most of the corridors in near-blackness. Tahr and S'shar had no trouble: their night vision was superb. However in the worst of these places I could hardly see my hand in front of my face, and I sure as hell couldn't see those steps going down.

While Tahr collected the M-16, I leaned against the wall and tested my right wrist that had take the brunt of my fall. Thankfully it didn't seem broken, just damn sore.

I jumped as something patted my shoulder. "K'hy, it is me," Tahr's voice spoke into my ears. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. All I could really see of them were vague solid shapes in the dark, their eyes catching and reflecting what little light there was.

"What?" That was S'shar. "Who are you. . . You are not talking to that. . . ?"

Tahr ignored him. "What happened?" she asked me.

"My fault," I said. "I cannot see my hand in front of my face."

There was a hissing sound as S'shar sucked air.

"Oh, I keep forgetting." There was a rustling sound, then a small metal cylinder was pushed into my hand. I gratefully flicked the anglehead on.

Tahr squinted and threw up her hand to shield her eyes when the white light lit upon her. I moved the beam and spotlighted S'shar standing plastered against the far wall of the corridor, his single ear down hard against his skull and eyes wide. "It can. . . talk?" he sputtered.

"Amazing," I muttered with a shake of my head, " what powers of observation."

"K'hy, hush!" Tahr warned me.

"Tahr," S'shar almost growled. "Enough is enough. What IS that thing!?"

"His name is K'hy, something-unpronounceable, and he is a male H'man. That is the nearest I can pronounce his titles. Do not worry, he will not

hurt you."

"That would be difficult, he has the teeth and claws." I held up my fingers and wiggled them: longer than a Sathes', but of course without the claws. It did little to reassure the veteran. When we made it to a better lit section I saw that he did indeed have his own claws out.

The passage traveled up and down more flights of stairs and along corridors flanked on either side by open doorways. The rooms beyond were obviously living quarters; equally obviously deserted for a long time. Judging by what I'd seen so far they looked plush, with tapestries, carved wood and stone panels, and furniture, all crumbling, mildewed, and generally dilapidated.

"Why is this place so empty?" I finally asked. "All these empty rooms. You redecorating?"

Both S'shar and Tahr looked around as though noticing the abandoned chambers for the first time.

"These were once servants quarters," Tahr explained. "As the Citadel is expanded they move to the new areas, where they are needed. These are abandoned. They might be used again as the population grows."

"How long will that take?"

She didn't answer immediately. "A long time."

"Then why build all this if you have no real use for it?"

S'shar answered that. "There is always work being done on the Citadel. There are plans for a sixth wall outside the town. . . ." he wound down as though suddenly realizing what he was talking to.

"K'hy, h'mans also build all the time, do they not? You have told me about your cities. Is that not the same?"

"Ah. . . well, I do not think it is exactly the same thing." I replied.

"Cities?" S'shar stopped in his tracks, then hurried to catch up. "Do you mean there are more of these? They have cities?!"

"Yes, it is difficult to explain, but there is a whole world of them."

S'shar went quiet, his ear wilting.

We passed another guard post, the sentries there expecting us. They stiffened to attention as we passed, but I felt eyes on my back. A small postern beyond the guard room opened into bright sunlight and a vast expanse of cobbled court. I stepped out into the glare, blinking. The Sathes' slit pupils snapped to pinpricks. Despite the pervading odor of animal shit the air was nowhere near as oppressive as the dark, heavy atmosphere of the corridors beneath the walls.

My first glimpse of the Citadel's Keep: I was rubbernecking like a tourist.

It was big, really big: the equivalent of three or four football fields at least, encircled by three-story high walls on the outside, the mountain of the Keep offset at the northern end. A large gate stood open in the easternmost wall, admitting the heavy traffic. To get into this courtyard the llama drawn vehicles would have had to have entered the main gates, then gone right, following the curve of the wall around, then through another set of gates, followed the wall further - uphill all the way - then that final gate. Any hostile forces trying the same maneuver would have found themselves under fire from the battlements all the way.

As we started across the cobbled space I saw that it was already dotted with Sathes: in groups and alone, carrying barrels or boxes, cutting wood. There were buildings up against the outer wall: small wooden structures with tile roofs. Smoke trickled from the chimney of what looked like a blacksmith's shop, other places must have stables and sheds for wagons. Anything you wouldn't want to keep inside. Off to my right I saw clusters of Sathes in armour standing watching a pair sparring. Swords flashed and the noises rang off the walls. A row of archers fired a volley at straw buttes strung up against a wall; I didn't see any miss.

The doors to the central Keep - The Circle the guard had called it -

were hanging open. I got a sudden insight as to the scale of the place when a small group emerged, a central individual surrounded by others. They were dwarfed by the portals. What were the hinges made of?!

"Rehr is waiting," S'shar informed Tahr. All I could see was an indistinct individual in rust red robes. "You remember him?"

"Of course. How could I forget? Has he changed much?"

"About as much as the Circle."

Tahr smiled at that, then spoke to me. "K'hy, stay behind us and whatever you do, make no sudden moves. I think you will make them nervous." I slowed down so that she and S'shar were a few paces ahead of me as we approached the entrance.

The huge metal-bound doors hung open at the top of a short flight of steps. All around the portal were carvings of Sathe in various poses and activities. Above these towered the walls, leaning slightly away from us. That must be Rehr waiting at the top of the steps.

He was an old Sathe. His fawn pelt was peppered with white and grey, especially around his nose and ears and he was wearing red robes, things something like a monk's cassock. Escorting him were over a dozen armed Sathe in blue and silver leather armour, their crossbow not quite aimed at us, but too many of them were eyeing me and flexing their grips on their weapons.

The elder said, "Thank you, S'shar."

S'shar ducked his head and stepped back into the small ring of curious Sathe who had gathered to watch.

"Tahr, your arrival was. . . unexpected."

She bowed before answering, "I wished to keep it that way. There were. . . complications."

Rehr looked her up and down for a second, taking in her worn and soiled kilt, her matted and tangled mane.

"Please, this way." He turned and swept through the gates.

"Follow," she hissed to me, following him.

Totally lost, I did as she bade me. . . Only to freeze in my tracks when about twenty crossbows suddenly came to bear on me.

"Let him pass!" Tahr snapped.

The soldiers hesitated then lowered their bows and we were inside.

The interior of the Keep was dimly lit, but enough light came in through the open doors and from oil lamps to let me see.

A lacquered wooden floor - the polish marred by scratches from careless claws - gleamed in the light. Columns supporting the roof were inlaid with elaborate, seemingly aimless designs; tantalizingly intricate, almost gaudy. Balconies with carved railings looked out over the floor. Tapestries the size of swimming pools covered bare stone walls. There were stained-glass panels concealed above the door, throwing a rose of tinted light across the hall. I followed the Sathe on automatic, staring at everything as Rehr led us up a staircase and along passages that twisted and turned, through chambers and galleries where fires and torches blazed, illuminating mind-twisting frescoes and carvings of Sathe: playing instruments, dancing, fighting, mating. . .

I did a double take. Mating: those were quite explicit. That was how they did it! Like a cat. Figures.

There was no doubting this section of the Citadel was occupied. Sathe bustled everywhere: guards, others carrying bundles of cloth or wood, others dressed in expensive finery. They all stood aside as we approached. I could feel their eyes on my back, but there was too much else to look at. The corridors were well lit and clean with sculptures every few meters. One that caught my eye seemed to be a mass of bubbles in blown glass. I wasn't quite sure whether it was meant to be abstract or representational. Other artifacts were made out of boned wood, polished stone, and dark metal.

Down a cul de sac a guard opened an inconspicuous door and stepped aside as Rehr entered. Tahr and I followed. The guards behind us started to follow, but he waved them back.

"No, wait outside."

"But, Sir," one protested. "What of that?" she nodded at me.

Rehr glanced at Tahr who made an obscure little gesture with her hands. The red-robed elder studied me, then dismissed the guards. They bowed and stepped back, closing the door behind them.

He led the way down a short hall that terminated in a room full of what had to be a lifetime of assorted knick-knacks. A massive desk of dark wood sat in front of a pair of large mullioned windows. The tinted glass let the light in, but the view through them was rather distorted. Shelves and racks along the walls held dozens of scrolls, leather bound books, polished rocks, small carvings, combs and brushes, small widgets made of sticks and string and other things I couldn't name. Beside the desk stood a crude spyglass made out of brass and decorated with elaborate scrollwork. A polished copper oil lamp with three wicks hung from the ceiling above the desk and, astonishingly, a globe on carved wooden stand stood nearby although only a fraction of the surface had been charted, the rest decorated with fanciful. Dark-red carpets were soft underfoot and several small tables and chairs were scattered around.

A faint but distinct cloying scent hung in the air. I rubbed my nose. Staleness? No, not quite. Over by the windows a pair of globe-shaped ceramic bowls with perforated lids smoked gently: some kind of incense. Whatever it was it smelled sickly sweet, something like pot. A whiff gave me a lightheaded feeling: I snorted softly to try and clear the smell. Neither of the Sathe seemed to notice.

Settling into the chair behind the desk, Rehr linked his fingers together on the desk in front of him and stared at Tahr out of impassive green eyes while I waited quietly in the background.

"Tahr, you look terrible."

Indeed, in contrast to Rehr - clean and well groomed - sitting in his study, Tahr did look terrible. Her once gleaming coat was matted, torn, and smeared with the dirt of days on the road. The scar across her ribs was very visible. I probably wasn't any better off.

"Yes, High One," Tahr ducked her head.

Rehr snorted. "Enough of that, young one. I have known you since you were a cub and you may soon be my superior. There is no need for the formalities." He leaned back in the chair. "Did you know that you are only the third heir to arrive."

Tahr was startled. "But I left the manor months ago! I was sure I would be among the last to arrive."

"Saaa, we will continue to wait, but there is not much time left," he said, then gestured at me. "I take it you had a good reason for bringing this along. Tell me, why is it wearing clothing. Is it cold?"

"Rehr, he is intelligent."

He blinked. "Intelligent? You did say 'intelligent'?"

"Yes, Rehr. It is quite a story. We have been traveling together for some time and been through a lot. He has kept my hide intact several times."

"She has been able to return the favour," I added.

Rehr stared.

"Rehr, this is K'hy, a h'man. K'hy, this is Rehr, Adviser to the Born-To-Rule, to the Shirai."

I bowed: "I am honoured to meet you." Straightening, pink floaters flashed in my eyes. I was feeling strange. The atmosphere seemed stifling, the sweet, sickly smell in the air was unbearable. I blinked and took a deep breath. It didn't help.

"Tahr, where did you find such a . . . person."

I listened as well as I could while Tahr once again went over the story of how we had met. As she went on it got harder to concentrate. Her voice, a low, steady susuruss that began to merge with the pulse of blood in my ears. Listening, but not hearing, not feeling anything. As though through a heavy sheet I heard my voice.

"Tahr? . . . I think I am. . . "

And the room reeled. I felt myself hit the floor. Not pain, just the

pressure, a dull thud through my bones. Then I was sprawled on cold wood, Sathé feet - all toes - in front of my face. I was rolled over and Sathé, ten kilometers high, loomed over me. I was choking in that smell, smothered in pollen.

If someone was trying to speak to me, I didn't hear it. I wasn't even aware when it went dark.

It was dark.

I opened my eyes.

It was still dark and there was a heavy metal concert going into a drum solo behind my eyes. For a while I just lay quietly, breathing lightly to stop my head exploding and it was a few minutes before I felt like taking stock. I was lying in my shorts in the dark on a bed, a real one: bowl-shaped, but with a real mattress and soft sheets. Sitting up made my head pound. I groaned and clutched my throbbing skull. Something had died on my tongue.

There was moonlight enough to let me see as I lurched to my feet and half-walk, half-stagger across the wooden floor to the open window, almost tripping on the edge of a rug in the process.

I clung to the windowsill and breathed deeply of the cool, clear night air. That helped to clear my spinning head a bit. I could see that I was in one of the highest points of the Citadel, looking down on all of Mainport.

The clouds that had blocked the sun during the day had dissipated, scattered by the winds to reveal the stars sprawled in all their glory across the sky. Beneath me, bathed in a bluish moonlight, lay the dark streets of Mainport. The harbour was still, the waters reflecting the moon in the heavens and the occasional lantern on the dockside.

I didn't hear the latch lift, nor the door swing open. It was the pool of light spilling through from the other room that startled me. Turning too quickly and the room wallowed like a ship's deck. I just managed to catch myself on the window sill before I hit the floor again.

"K'hy!" Tahr hissed. She moved to help me off my knees and back to the bed where I sagged down. She sat down beside me and stroked my brow. "I am glad to see you are up. You are feeling better?"

"Uhnn," I croaked. My throat hurt. I worked my jaw to get some saliva flowing. "W. . . What the fuck happened?"

She pressed a damp cloth to my forehead, wiped my face with it. "I am not sure. We think it was the thamil."

"Huh? Hamil?"

"Thamil," she enunciated. "Rehr was burning it in his study. It is just a scent. . . usually." I could see her eyes glowing in the starlight. "It seemed to have a more adverse effect on you."

I groaned and rubbed my face. My head felt as though it was full of guncotton. "You can say that again. Please, is there any water?"

Tahr lifted the cloth away and padded across to a chest beside the door. There was the gurgling of liquid being poured. She returned and pressed the mug into my hands: "Here." It was water: cool and wet.

A minute later I felt ready to make another effort to stand upright. "No, I am all right," I protested, shrugging off Tahr's hands. I made it back to the window on my own, "Where am I?"

"Safe now." Tahr stood beside me at the window, ready to catch me if I collapsed again. "These are your chambers now. You are officially my guest here."

I didn't know what to say. I hedged around it: "It is beautiful out there."

Her head moved to look, a slight breeze ruffling the fur of her mane.

"Thank you for everything, Tahr, but I do not know how long I will be able to stay."

There was a second's silence.

"You want to find other H'mans."

I nodded, aware of how hopeless that sounded; "If possible." I turned back to the window.

"They must be out there, they've got to be."

There was more silence, then needle sharp claws caught my shoulder, squeezed gently. When they released me I slipped my arm around the warm figure beside me.

We stayed like that for about a minute, then she disengaged from my arm and silently padded over to the door.

"Will you be all right?"

I nodded.

"Then you should sleep now. Good night, K'hy."

As the door closed behind her, I smiled slightly. 'Good night'. She'd picked that off me. I stared at the mug in my hand, then tossed back the final mouthful of water and clambered back onto the bed.

I ignored the hand that was gently shaking me until claws started to dig into my shoulder. "Ouch! Christ!" I rolled and squinted into the sunlight streaming in through the window.

"Good morning," Tahr smiled down at me. "Are you feeling better?"

I began to answer, then squinted at the Sathe, not quite so sure. "Tahr?"

It was her. The bedraggled young Sathe from Rehr's study had washed and brushed her fur until it shone with a glossy sheen I'd never seen before, turned to a silver nimbus by a sunbeam that touched her. Her breeches were immaculate: green with intricate gold trim. In the months I had known her I'd never seen her looking like this. She looked like. . . royalty.

She preened, pretending to examine a claw. "You like?" she asked.

"I like," I confirmed.

She batted a hand against my cheek, then stood and went to stare out the window, her back to me. From the slant of the sun I guessed it was about nine o'clock. I glanced at my wrist; my watch was gone. "You were talking in your sleep last night," Tahr said. "Your noises."

"Oh," I said. I didn't remember anything.

She turned to lean against the window sill. "Do you feel like walking?" she asked. "There is someone who wants to see us."

Again: "Oh? Who?"

She smiled then, blinking peacefully in happy reminiscence, "Someone special. Someone I have not seen in a long time."

"Ah, for you I think I can manage that." I unfolded myself from the bowl-shaped bed, muscles unused to sleeping on such a shape and softness protesting.

The room was not as small as it had seemed the previous night. The bed was the largest piece of furniture in the room and stood against the south wall, opposite the door. The window in the east wall admitted both light and cold air. Woolen rugs in subdued earthy shades lay across the wooden floor. A large metal-bound chest stood near the door.

"Where are my clothes?"

Tahr opened the chest and drew out a pair of blue Sathe breeches and my customised cloak. "Wear these."

That didn't really answer my question. The breeches were too short in the legs and the crotch and the cloak hung open, exposing my scarred chest. I had to hold it shut with one hand.

"I feel ridiculous," I muttered.

Tahr looked me up and down. "You will need some more clothes made for you. Those do not exactly flatter you."

"Understatement of the year."

She smiled. "Hurry, or we will be late."

Through the door was another room; a study. A desk stood in front of a window in the east wall and there were empty shelves along the far wall. A fireplace with a stone slab hearth stood in the northeast corner, a small pile of wood beside it. A door in the west wall led to the corridor. I walked beside Tahr as she stalked along the passage with feline grace. She pointed out another door down the hall. "My chambers," she told me.

We moved deeper into the maze of the Keep's corridors, meeting Sathe everywhere. Most greeted Tahr and gave me dubious looks. Carved slabs of stone, reaching from floor to ceiling, decorated the halls. Like the passages in the outer walls, some stones looked new while others were obviously ancient. In one particularly ancient carving, something seemed strange about the worn Sathe figures etched into it, but we passed before I could make out exactly what.

There were more stairs, then a guardroom. A Sathe was there waiting for us; a servant decked out in simple brown breeches. "High One," he greeted Tahr. "Please, follow me."

Weird. He hardly spared me a second glance.

Beyond that the halls changed. The walls were paneled in wood, the floor covered in carpets decorated with curlicues to rival any Persian rug. Heavy, metal-reinforced doors stood every few meters, with guards posted alternately, like statues in blue and silver armour, sheathed swords in hand, their heads turning to follow us as we passed by. Halfway down our guide stopped us, directing us through a doorway.

"Here?" Tahr sounded surprised. "What about the royal chambers?"

The servant ducked his head. "They have not been used for some time."

"Why?"

"The Lord has not had need of them."

I saw the wrinkles across Tahr's brow. Something was puzzling her.

These might not have been the royal chambers, but they were plush enough, and big. Paintings hung from the walls and blown glass sculptures decorated shelves. A large map of the eastern States - the Eastern Realm I should say - hung from a wall behind a desk. The entire floor was covered by a huge rug woven in complex geometric patterns and curtains partitioned off other areas of the chambers. Something made from moving metal parts, wood, and water dripped away in a corner. A clock? I whistled softly. Whoever lived here would have to be a real bigwig. The Lord, the servant had called him.

"Please, wait," the servant bowed, then disappeared through the curtains.

"The Lord?" I whispered to Tahr.

"The Born Ruler," She smiled. "My Ancestors, it has been a long time."

The curtains rustled and Rehr stood there, still wearing the red robes. Tahr bowed to him, and I imitated her.

"High one." He bowed to Tahr, then studied me, up and down. "I hope you are feeling better. I never thought thamil would have such an effect on anyone." He turned and parted the drapes. "Please, he is waiting for both of you."

I followed Tahr through the curtains. It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. Some light filtered through the drapes that had been pulled across the window and I saw the room was dominated by the typical bowl-bed favoured by Sathe.

"That would be Tahr."

I heard her hiss of breath, then she was kneeling by the bed, clasping the hand of the shriveled and grey-furred Sathe lying there, her ears canted sideways and a mournful expression on her face. With his free hand, the old Sathe on the bed reached out and gently felt her face; the sides of her muzzle, her ears and the silver ring there. I realized with a start that he was blind.

"Father! . . . I did not. . . When did this happen to you?"

Father!?

The torn ears twitched in a smile.

"Months ago. An attempt on my life."

She hung her head. "I never heard."

"I did not want you to know." He sank back on the cushions with a sigh that seemed to come from his bones. "I was afraid it might affect your studies."

She lifted one hand and oh so softly batted the side of his face. He smiled up at her. "You are well?"

"I am fine."

"How is Saerae?"

Pushing the subject away from himself, trying to spare her thinking about it. But of all the things on the face of the planet, why did he have to ask about Saerae?

Tahr flinched back; in shock, perhaps in memory. "You knew?"

"Saaa, daughter. You think I would not know when you chose the one to sire your young?"

I slowly shook my head. Oh, Tahr.

"But you did not know that he is dead."

The Shirai was silent, his milk-white eyes closed. "No. . . I did not know. I am so, so sorry. How. . ."

"On our way here, Gulf mercenaries. . . They knew Father! They knew. It was only through coincidence that I escaped."

"Yes, I have heard about your 'Coincidence'," he murmured.

Tahr laid her head on his shoulder and was silent. I felt like an interloper. As quietly as I could, I pushed back through the heavy draperies.

Rehr was at his desk, scratching away with a quill pen. He looked up as I left the room, but said nothing.

God, she was daughter to the old king or whatever he was. She had never told me. That word they used to describe her position 'candidates'. I thought she was just a nominee running for the position of Shirai.

Shirai: not just a title but a name. I hadn't known that either. I had a recollection of the dark-furred Hymath, and the questions she asked me about Tahr, about her clan name. I hadn't realised.

And for a homecoming, to find her father dying. Christ! How many of those closest to her had she already lost? How many more? Why? There were circumstances beyond my control, and they'd already drawn me in out of my depth. How much further could I go?

We'd had an agreement, Tahr and I. There was that afternoon on the hill above Traders Meet when I'd agreed to help her get to Mainport. Now my part of that agreement had been fulfilled and things were still changing. There was something happening here I didn't understand. Someone was trying to kill her, had tried to kill her father, had perhaps killed the other Candidates.

Would she still need me?

In my mind I recalled what we'd been through, how we met, some of those early summer days when it had almost seemed a game to learn about one another. It had changed. We had grown from that simple childhood state. My life back home - if I could call it home - now seemed like something far removed. It had been real, I had lived it, but somehow it was starting to feel like nothing more than an elaborate memory. And this. . . this craziness, this was reality.

Shit. You could drive yourself mad thinking like that.

I wandered across to the room to stand and study that tapestry covering a wall: an ornate, pictorial representation of the Eastern Realm. The brilliant colours, idiographic text, and seemingly abstract designs that meandered their way across the fabric never obscured the actual land that was being portrayed.

And I knew that land. I'd been staring at pictorial renditions of that land throughout high school and college. Perhaps I'd had some doubts when Tahr scratched her crude map in the dirt, but now. . . I couldn't doubt any longer.

There was the east coastline, Florida, and the area around the Gulf of

Mexico. There were graphics representing cities and towns, mostly scattered up and down the east coast, around the northern area of the Gulf, and around the Gulf of Saint Lawrence where Canada should be; There were hardly any settlements in Florida.

That was all there was - the east seaboard of the states and Canada, the Florida peninsula, and the Gulf of Mexico - the rest of the map was a blank. Terra Incognita.

Exactly what had happened to me was a mystery I was sure I was never going to unravel. This WAS earth, but yet it wasn't. This WAS America, yet again it wasn't. An alternate earth where the big cats of the Americas had ascended well beyond the threshold of simple animal awareness.

They were well the equal of any evolved ape.

On that subject, what had happened to the apes over in Africa? What had they been doing while the Sathe were busy evolving?

I didn't have the answer to that either. Well, the Sathe would definitely be interested in sending ships east across the Atlantic. A whole new world over there to explore, with new produces, animals, and deposits of precious metals. That would be bait enough to tempt the most skeptical soul.

An alternate earth, as if every time a choice, a decision, was made, a new reality was created. If I were to flip a coin, would that create universes in which it landed heads, tails, perhaps even a universe where it landed on edge?

Could an action as frivolous, as inconsequential, as tossing a coin create worlds?

Or perhaps it took an event that could change a world, such as a pseudo-cat overcoming its fear of a lightning-struck fire, using it for warmth on a cold night, learning to feed the flames to keep it alive.

"You are not going to collapse again?"

I wheeled at the voice. Rehr was hovering beside his desk, dithering between perhaps helping me or making for the door. He gestured towards me: "You do not need help?"

"No," I shook my head. "Thank you, but I will be all right."

"You have been standing there for some time. . . You are familiar with maps?"

"Yes," I nodded and gestured at the illuminated tapestry. "My people use them. Same things. Ah. . . How old is this one?"

"That particular one," Rehr nodded at the illuminated tapestry, "was woven by Methres ai Ch'athr, not four years ago."

"I can see you have still got a lot to explore."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "I have seen maps that are more. . . complete."

"Of our lands? Tahr told me you said you came from another world. 'One that is ours but not ours'. I cannot quite comprehend that. You mean your world's geography is identical to ours?"

"Very similar," I said. "I can look out the window in my room and see the area where I was raised, but it is not the same place at all."

"A strange idea."

"Yes."

Rehr was quiet for a second, ears twitching in thought.

"Is there anything out there?" he finally asked me.

I looked at where his claw had jabbed the map, about where England would be.

"Well, if it is consistent, there should be lands to the south of this one, below the Gulf Realm, a continent bigger than this one over to the east, and another one down here somewhere. Also on the top and bottom of the word." I pointed them out as I spoke. "The world is a big place."

Some time later Rehr was still staring at the map when Tahr laid a hand on my shoulder. I hadn't heard her come out.

"He wishes to. . . see you," she said.

"Why did you not tell me he was your father."

She gave me a small, sad smile. "You never asked. Go now, quickly."

I pushed the drapes aside as I stepped back into the dim room and stood for a second, blinking.

"You must be Ka. . . K'hy," said the gruff voice.

"Yes, High One."

There was a slight pause.

"She said you are not Sathe. You sound different."

He was sitting propped up against his cushions. His rheumy eyes were wandering sightlessly, but his ears were locked on me and twitching.

"I am. . . different. Quite different."

"Please, come here." A hand patted the left side of the bed. I went and knelt down beside him.

He reached to touch me and I pulled back a little, forestalling him.

"Sir, you are sure that you want to do that?" I asked, for some reason worried he might have a heart condition. "I am not Sathe. You may be. . . startled."

"Tahr told me what to expect," he assured me.

He touched my hand and in that instant his pads touched me, I saw him flinch, then relax again. For a while he just touched my skin, then he began mapping the shape of my hand, examining the fingertips and nails, which way my fingers bent. He ran his fingers up my arm, feeling the light hair that grew there, the pads on the undersides of his fingers cool and dry and slightly rough against my skin.

I managed not to flinch when he reached my face and explored that; feeling the bone structure, my nose and lips. He followed the contours of my ears and felt the bristles of my beard. He finally ran his fingers through my hair, feeling the shape of my skull.

"I would never have believed it," he murmured and sank back against the cushions.

"I suppose I do take some getting used to," I said.

"Huh! Hearing about you is one thing. Actually seeing you. . . " he smiled then, "So to speak, it is something else altogether. You are truly from another world?"

"In a way; yes I am."

"Yes, Tahr did try to explain," the old Shirai sighed and turned those blank eyes my way. "I wish I could see you. She told me so much. . . For what you have done for my daughter I will be forever grateful."

"High One. . . " I started but he cut me off with a wave of his hand.

"I know the sacrifices that you have made for her; willingly and otherwise. I do not care what you look like: you have the heart of a Sathe."

"I. . . " Shit! I didn't know how to put it into words. "I thank you, High One."

"You have known Tahr for several months; have traveled with her, fought with her. You would know, better than I. . . "

"Know what?"

He gave a small smile. "I am not going to deny I am dying, but it would make it easier if I knew. . . Would Tahr make a good successor?"

Dumbstruck, I floundered for a response. "I. . . ah. . . I do not think that I can be the judge of that. I am not sure that I know what abilities a Sathe ruler must have, High one."

He snorted faintly. "Just tell me what you know of her, what you have seen in her."

"Sir. . . I can honestly say that I have never known anybody like her. Being able to call her a friend is something I can take pride in. She is warm, caring, loyal, intelligent, and brave. If those are qualities you value, I think that she would be a worthy heir."

"Thank you," he murmured and was still for a time. Then: "Do you feel the same way about her as she does about you?"

"I do not understand," I said, although I already had a glimmering of what he was getting at.

"She has told me about her Time and I am curious to know how you found it."

"Uh. . . You. . ." I stammered to halt and swallowed hard.

The Shirai's blind eyes closed and he hissed in amusement. "My Ancestors! She was right: you are shy!"

I felt the flush crawling up my neck.

"No," he calmed down again. "Do not worry about that. Tell me: what do you think her feelings for you are?"

I floundered for words: embarrassed. "I. . . I know that she does not hate or fear the way I look, but as for what happened. . . she could not help herself then. . . could she? There is no way that she can think of me as a Sathe."

"She cares for you a great deal, Strange One," the old Shirai was staring sightlessly at the low ceilings with its massive rafters. "She knows that she can never have you as a mate, but still she cares for you. You have her friendship, and her love."

I shook my head. I had believed that night in the cave was more. . . hormones than anything else. I tossed things over in my head; The times I had woken up from dreams and she was there, the times she cared for me when I was ill and no-one else would, the time in the sun-warmed grass when she had bitten me.

"Well?" he asked. "Am I wrong?"

"No." I bit my lip; unable to deny it. "I think not."

He smiled: "Good."

"Good?"

"Yes." Those blind eyes turned in my direction. "Sometimes a bitter looking fruit hides a sweet center. She cares for you, a great deal, no matter what you look like on the outside. I know my daughter and she is no fool. I do not know you as well, but from what I have heard she judged correctly. If she can continue to do so well, I think she will make a worthy successor. No?"

I sank back in the hot water with a grateful sigh and closed my eyes as the tendrils of steam wound their way across the surface of the pool. The water I disturbed slapped lazily against the sides before settling back to quiescence.

Whether by luck or design the citadel had been built over natural hot springs and the Sathe were not reluctant to make use of them. Several rooms in the lower levels of the Keep had been built as baths, with receptacles the size of small swimming pools cut into the stone floors and filled with deliciously hot water. Benches hewn into the sides of the pools were worn smooth and clean by water and Sathe behinds. In the center of each of these pools stood a large, dark stone like Sathe's fang with the edges chiseled sharp, a half-meter poking above the water. Decoration? It reminded me of a shark's fin.

The water was clean, with no algae or deuterus. Light came from oil fires burning in niches in the walls. I had one of the rooms for myself and that probably wasn't normal. Had it been cleared for my benefit or the Sathes'?

Whatever. I wasn't going to pass up the chance for the first hot bath in half a year. I dunked my head and held my breath as long as I could while giving my head a good scrubbing, hoping to kill or dislodge any passengers I might have picked up over the last couple of weeks. When I surfaced, Tahr was sitting on the edge of the pool, her feet trailing in the water. Beside her sat my boots.

"They were not happy to give them up," she said.

"Who and what?" I asked.

"Scholars." She stood up and began shucking her breeches, still talking. "Engineers, smiths. They are examining your possessions. . . They have not made much progress."

Her clothes lying in a pile behind her, she slowly descended the steps into the pool. I watched the water slowly climbing her body - her fur billowed out in a ruff at the waterline - until it stopped at her neck. She hissed in pleasure and sank onto one of the benches.

"But do they have to examine my clothes? They are just cloth."

She snorted. "Just cloth! Some of the cloth is recognizable, but most of it is an enigma. The tightness of the weave, the strength. . . They have never seen anything like it."

I slouched lower into the water, staring at the worn stonework on the far side of the pool. In the center of the bath there was that large piece of jagged rock sticking up out of the water, roughly triangular in shape. Sathe have strange artwork, but still it didn't resemble that.

"What is that?" I asked, staring at it.

For an answer, she stood and waded out to the stone. There was an underwater dais around it, bringing the water up to her shoulders. She leant her back against one of the chiseled edges of the monolith and started rubbing against it like a housecat, her eyes closed and her ears back in a smile.

A backscratcher.

"Come, join me." She grinned at me.

I grinned back and waded across the pool and leaned against the rock. The surface was rough behind my back, like sharp-edged pumice. Not unpleasant. I laughed at the sensation.

"Nice. But is this all they're for? Backscratchers?"

"Nice?" Tahr moved around in front of me, mane plastered across her shoulders, bemusement wrinkling her brow. "Is that all it is to you?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked, not understanding.

She kicked my feet out from under me and when I got my head above water again and sneezed the water out of my nose, she was sitting against the side of the pool.

"What was THAT for?" I implored.

"You are impossible. You are just so different. I try to treat you as though you are normal male," she raised her hands and rubbed the side of her muzzle, wetting the fine fur there, "but you do not ACT like a normal male." She dropped her hand and it splashed into the water.

I pushed my way through the pool to sit beside her, silent.

"What did you and my father talk about?" she asked.

"Uh. . . You."

"I thought as much. What about me?"

"He wanted to know if I thought you would make a good successor."

"Do you?"

"Definitely."

She smiled and cocked her head delicately to one side: "I am pleased someone has faith in me. What else did you talk about?"

I felt the corners of my mouth twitch. "I think that you already have an idea."

"Ah," she nodded slowly. "And what did you say about us?"

I leaned my head back against the edge of the pool and stared up at the ceiling. There were things her father had said. . . I wanted to know if they were true. Were her feelings towards me something I could understand, or were they a drive so alien that they could mean the world to her but nothing to me?

"You know," I finally said, "your father cares a great deal for you."

"I know," she said. "And I for him."

"After what you told him about us, he wanted to know how I felt about you: did I feel the same for you as you do for me."

"And do you?"

I lowered my head and spoke to the water's surface: "I. . . cannot say. I do not know. . . what you feel."

Tahr's eyes widened, then her ears danced. "Did that night in the cave not tell you?"

I shrugged, sending ripples right across the pool. "Tahr, you do not

understand me and often I cannot understand you. That night. . . I do not know if you made love to me through want or NEED. You did not seem to be. . . yourself."

She was quiet for a while then she said softly, "Times are difficult for us, but I knew what I wanted. I like that term you used, 'making love'. For me that is what it was."

Oh Jesus!

It went that deep. Damnation, couldn't she see it wouldn't work! How could she have feelings like that for me? We were different species! How could she love me?!

And why was I so hurt by the realization it was impossible?

"K'hy," she touched my arm. "I know that you cannot be everything a Sathem male is: I know that you cannot replace Saerae. But there are other paths of friendship: you are my companion, you have saved my life and you have lived with me and loved with me. K'hy, I love you as a friend."

She leaned against me and I could feel her fur moving in the gentle currents in the water. I felt her breath against the side of my face a split second before she touched her mouth to my cheek in her version of a human kiss.

When she pulled her lithe and dripping form out of the bath, the temperature of the liquid seemed to drop slightly. She dried herself by shaking and rubbing down with a piece of cloth off a pile by the door. I got out soon after she left the room. It's not so much fun by yourself.

That evening I waited for my food to arrive as it had at lunch, delivered by a wide eyed cub who practically dropped the food and ran.

I was sitting on the desk staring out the window at the lights of Mainport and humming disjointed snatches of dimly remembered songs. What Tahr had told me earlier echoed in my head, but the warm feeling that conjured shared rent with a nagging foreboding: could friendship be stretched too far?

When the scratch at the door pulled me from my reverie I went to answer it, getting ready in case he dropped the tray as he had earlier. It wasn't room service.

"Tahr. . ." I broke off and stared.

She was dressed in bright red breeches tied with a cord inlaid with silver thread. Her tan fur had been brushed until it glowed and her mane was strung around her shoulders in artful disarrangement. Around her neck, she wore a necklace of fine silver wire twisted and woven into fine designs. On her right wrist she wore a light bracelet of a similar design, but this had a large blue stone imbedded in it: a single bluebottle trapped in a silver filigree web. Hanging from her left hip was a scabbard made of laminated walnut and inlaid with silver. The protruding scimitar handle was bound with some kind of dark twine with a dark stone mounted on the pommel, set in silver.

I swallowed. "You have outdone yourself."

"Thank you," she smiled and pushed passed me into the room. Tucked under her arm was bundle of green cloth with what looked like a scabbard rolled up in it, she spread the lot out on the desk.

"I am sorry that I have not had time to find a tailor to make you some proper clothes, so these will have to do in their stead." She waved a hand at the undersized breeches I was wearing and said, "Get rid of those and put these on, we have a dinner to attend."

My fatigue pants were there, as well as my shirt, belt, and sheath knife. I was right about the scabbard: it was wood, coated with black lacquer, and definitely contained a sword.

I stripped off the five-sizes-too-small pair of breeches I was wearing and pulled on the trousers. They'd been washed and ironed or pressed, but not starched, so the seams were not as crisp as they could have been; likewise with the shirt. Also, the cleaning couldn't do anything about the faded and worn cloth, nor the repaired tear, but it was a great relief to get into clean, comfortable clothes again.

I buckled on the belt and clipped the knife to it, then hefted the sword gingerly.

"Do I wear this?"

"Yes. Here, on your belt. That is right."

After that came my boots - cleaning them up with a bit of spit and polish. Not exactly parade ground standard, but better than nothing.

Tahr eyed me critically.

"Not too bad. . . sit down." I did so.

She stood behind the chair and began to rake her claws through my hair, straightening it, pulling it back. Another advantage of claws: built in combs.

Sitting with another person combing your hair is strangely relaxing; built-in social grooming habits I guess. I could have easily dozed off, but she finished quickly, and with a final flick of hair, she stood back to examine her work.

"Much better. You look presentable. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Dinner."

"And for that I need a sword?"

"Oh, bring your knife also."

I grabbed the knife and slipped it into a pocket, snuffed out the oil lamp, and followed her out the door, slamming it behind me.

As we marched down the corridor, I patted the scabbard banging against my leg. "What am I supposed to do with this? I do not even know how to use the thing. Would not my rifle be better?"

Tahr waved a 'no'. "There should be no need to use it. The sword in any case is purely ceremonial. Offer it at the door, but keep your knife. Stand against the wall, directly behind my chair. Do not speak unless spoken to directly, and always be courteous."

"Tahr, why am I doing this?"

"I need an escort. You are the only one that I trust enough. The others will have escorts from their personal staff. You are all I have."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"I did not mean it like that."

"Who are these 'others'?"

She smoothed down a bit of fur on her chest. "Why, the returned heirs of course."

We stopped in a small antechamber, opposite a set of heavy wood doors with guards posted. They opened the doors for us.

The room wasn't the grand hall with huge banquet table I'd been half-expecting. A low ceiling was supported by massive wooden beams. Through twin archways in the far wall a balcony commanded a view over the outer Citadel walls towards the forest and farmland to the west. There was a table and at least it wasn't too different from what I'd imagined.

Massively built. Dark wood, polished to a high sheen anchored upon a strangely carved central pedestal. Out of a possible fourteen places five had been set; two on each side and one at the far end. A conical brass candelabra with three tiers of candles sat in the center of the table, providing illumination. Two seats at the table were occupied.

The two Sathes - one male, one female - sitting opposite each other at the table turned to face us as we came in. The looks they gave Tahr were definitely not friendly and the one she gave in return told me there was no love lost between them. When their eyes turned to me it was obvious that they forgot about Tahr there and then. Nostrils and eyes flared wide as neurological hardwiring tensed them against possible threat.

Following Tahr's example I left my sword on a side table covered with a red velvet cloth beside the door. Tahr leisurely selected a place on the right side of the table, opposite the other female. I pulled her chair out and held it while she seated herself, then stepped back into a shadowed niche in the wall, settling into an at-ease stance. Behind each of the other heirs, in

similar niches, were two more Sathe: escorts. All I could see of them in the shadows and dimness was that they were large.

"I am surprised to see you here, Tahr," one of the heirs - the male - said.

"Really? Is there any reason you thought I might not make it?" Tahr asked. "Perhaps you thought I may have an accident."

"Perhaps," the other agreed with the merest twitch of a lip. "There have been a lot of them going around."

Tahr hissed. The male smiled and said, "Control yourself."

"I think you speak too lightly of others' misfortune," Tahr retorted acidly.

"I am afraid she is right, Schai," the female said. "But Tahr, I am curious about your . . . companion. Have you taken to traveling with animals now? It will not foul the floor?"

"He is not. . ." Tahr began, but her retort was interrupted when the door opened and the final heir entered. That was one Sathe I figured I wouldn't have any trouble recognizing in a crowd: his fur was a shocking, almost-metallic silver. His escort was also different from the others. . . Well, perhaps not as different as Tahr's escort, but for a bodyguard she was extremely small. Her eyes would perhaps be level with my chest.

Behind them Rehr flowed in like a red bishop and turned to close the heavy doors.

The Advisor wasn't surprised to see me. He hardly spared me a glance as he swept past on his way to the seat at the head of the table. The other two seemed more startled: they stared for a second before Silver Fur removed his sword and laid it on the table, closely followed by his diminutive consort.

As he took his seat opposite Tahr, he gave her a cordial nod, "Tahr, it has been to long."

"R'rrhaesh." She returned the nod. "You have not changed much."

The other female chose that moment to add her two cents worth. "True. He still refuses to dye his fur!"

Tahr turned and hissed at her with ears down, but R'rrhaesh stopped her.

"Do not trouble yourself, I am quite used to it."

I felt a twinge of sympathy for him, of course I know what it's like being a misfit, but surely the colour of his fur didn't matter that much? Huh! A human should talk! Across the room the glow of candlelight reflected from a pair of eyes caught my attention. The small female who'd had come in with R'rrhaesh was looking at me. No. . . not looking, staring. She was eyeing me from head to foot as though weighing me up. For R'rrhaesh to have chosen her for an escort, he must have had a good reason. Looking at the heavies the other two had brought, she was a striking contrast.

She must have been only about four foot eight. A pleated leather skirt with suspender-like straps criss-crossing her chest was her only clothing, her fur like chocolate with swirls of milk through it. She carried herself with poise - inherent in Sathe - but I got an impression of exceptional grace about her. When our eyes met and locked she huffed, fur bristling, and gave me a stare I could almost feel, daring me to look away first.

I wasn't about to try outstare a Sathe. I flashed her a wink and turned my attention back to the table.

Rehr waited until everyone was settled before standing again. There was no need to call for attention; all eyes went to him.

"Four. Only four." Rehr looked at each of the heirs in turn. "This should be a time for rejoicing. The youth, the offspring of the realm's Lords, the best of their Clans, returning to demonstrate their prowess and ability in the final Challenge, choosing from among the best the one who is to rule our lands. Instead, there are too many Clans who have been mourning the loss of prized youth."

He sighed and sank back into the chair, looking old.

"To those who are here tonight. Old friends, young friends, I greet you. The Shirai clan greets you. Their food is yours, their drink is yours,

their roof is yours."

As if this was a signal, servants seemed to materialize from the shadows. Platters of veal, spare ribs, corn, bread, and goblets of ale were set on the table and the Sathes set in with a will.

Watching a Sathes dinner party isn't a sight you forget in a hurry. I'd become somewhat immunized to the spectacle of Sathes eating over the past months, but mealtimes made sure that I would not overlook the differences in physiology.

The meat was usually done rare, at the best. Large bones were never wasted, powerful jaws and sharp teeth splintered them then the marrow was fastidiously picked out. Sathes do not have the molars that humans use for masticating their food and it is impossible for them to keep their mouths shut while chewing. Any Sathes meal is accompanied by the sounds of loud chewing, swallowing, and bone crunching. They were eating things they probably considered delicacies, but to me looked suspiciously like internal organs of various animals. One taste treat I found particularly distressing were the rabbits brought in, pinned down on boards, still alive. They actually screamed when the Sathes slit them open for the steaming organs. I saw Tahr use her jaws to crack open a skull and scoop out the brains.

Shit, you think you know someone. . .

Fighting a roiling stomach, I stood there and suffered the twofold punishment of watching them eat, and smelling the aroma of cooked food that filled the room. When Tahr had said that we were going to dinner, I, for some strange reason, got the impression that I might be eating as well. Still, watching them eat pretty much did for my appetite.

As the meal progressed I could see their attitudes toward one another. They all seemed to be mutually distrustful of each other, although Tahr and R'rrhaesh did not seem to be as cautious towards each other as they towards the others. The other two, the male and the female were called, respectively, Schai and Eaher.

Throughout Rehr stayed neutral. In conversation he took care not to become involved with either side, and of course the obvious subject came up; Me.

"Tahr," said R'rrhaesh, "I am curious, where did you find your escort."

"Actually it was he who found me," she replied. "He saved my life after I lost my staff."

I think she said more than she had meant to then.

"So," Eaher put in thoughtfully, "THAT is your entire staff?"

Tahr's ears twitched in annoyance.

"He is quite adequate."

"Exactly what is it?" asked Schai.

"He calls himself a 'h'man'," Tahr replied.

"Really?" Eaher asked in what had to be a sarcastic tone. "Of course, how foolish of me, I should have realized it TALKS." She snorted the word.

Tahr's jaw muscles twitched in a barely restrained hostile grin. "Oh yes, he talks."

Eaher looked at me. "You talk do you? Say something."

I remembered Tahr's warning to be polite, so I bowed my head before saying. "Is there something you would like to hear me say, High One?"

Tahr's ears twitched in a smile as everyone but Rehr expressed various degrees of surprise then rapidly tried to hide it.

"I did tell you he spoke Sathes," she said.

"Why is it. . . he wearing such strange clothing?" R'rrhaesh asked. "Looks like a walking bush."

"That is his own clothing," Tahr replied.

R'rrhaesh, sitting opposite Tahr, lifted his spouted goblet to his mouth and took a swallow, staring at me over the rim.

"Do you know where he is from?"

"No," Tahr plucked something out of the rabbit carcass in front of her and popped it into her mouth, "not really."

"'Not really'," Schai echoed, "Has he not told you?"

"He has told me, but it is difficult to comprehend. Imagine a world that is ours, but not ours."

"You talk in riddles Tahr," said R'rrhaesh. "How can that possibly be?"

Tahr attempted to explain my theory of what had happened. A theory that was only a patchy framework built from what I had seen and experienced. Her audience listened skeptically, taking occasional draughts from their cups. When she finished, there was silence for a few seconds.

"Huh. . . you expect us to believe that," Schai snorted into his ale.

"Believe what you will." Tahr picked a bone off her plate. "He is here, and that is the best way I have heard of explaining his presence." She bit into it with a loud crunch.

"Have you not thought of the fact that he may have come from across the sea?" Eaher asked.

"Yes. . . and I prefer the other explanation. You have not seen some of the devices he has with him, they are far in advance of anything we can produce. He says his people are warlike and I for one would far rather have them on another world than on the other side of a stretch of water," Tahr replied smoothly. She used her tongue to lick the marrow out of the bone.

After the last bone had been split, Rehr leaned back in his chair surrounded by his red robes. He must have been hot in them even though for me it was a cold night.

"You have all been summoned here as the guests of Shirai. He knows that he does not have long to live and so he has ordered that the Ceremony be held whilst he lives. Now, as in ages past, on the eve of the winter [solstice], you shall meet for your final trial, the Challenge to determine who shall rule."

On the delivery of this cheerful note, Rehr rose and brushed out of the room.

Walking alone down the dim corridors was a strange experience. The only light came from the occasional torch in its sconce or the dim glow from under closed doors. My footfalls echoed loudly. Occasionally I would see a Sathe who would hurry past me. I started whistling softly, then hastily stopped as the sound was amplified eerily in the stone halls.

I found what I hoped was the right spiral staircase and came out on what I recognised as my floor. When I arrived at my door I put my hand on the latch, then hesitated.

"Ah. . . what the hell. . ." I sighed.

I knocked on the door just a few steps down the corridor.

"Come in K'hy," Tahr said, her voice muffled by the wood.

Her room must have been one of the first class guest rooms. Wooden furnishings that fairly glowed with age and polish, ample lighting, colourful rugs on the floor.

She sat at her desk, a quill pen in one hand and sheaves of parchment on the desktop in front of her. The jewellery had been removed and her fur was ruffled, as though she had been running her hand through it. She cocked her head to one side as I stuck my head in.

"I will leave if you are busy, it was not important," I said.

She leaned back in her chair. "No. Please, come in. I could use a distraction."

I closed the door behind me and went over and perched on the side of her desk. The parchments were covered with the streamlined scratches of Sathe script.

"Sometime I will have to learn to read," I said.

She looked surprised for a second. "I had forgotten that you cannot. Do you have a written language?"

"Of course."

"Could you show me some of your script?" she asked, and handed me the quill and pushed an inkwell across the desk.

I took up the quill awkwardly. Tahr had to show me the proper way to hold it and dip it in the ink. As neatly as I could, I wrote on a scrap of parchment.

'KILROY WAS HERE'

Tahr eyed the text curiously, but didn't ask what it meant.

"Can you spell my name in your language?"

I spelled her name as well as I could: phonetically. Alongside it, she scratched something in Sathe.

"That is my name."

It looked vaguely like a Pi symbol preceding a trident.

"Tahr, Rehr said that only four heirs have made it. How many were there supposed to be?"

Tahr glanced at me, then gave a body wracking shudder. "K'hy. . . there should have been twelve heirs tonight."

"What do you think happened to them?"

"What nearly happened to us."

"Dead? Eight of them?"

She waved an affirmative miserably. "Eight plus their staffs."

I was silent for a while.

"But they were your rivals. I saw how you did not get along with the others tonight."

"True. They are my rivals, but I grew up with them. I get. . . got along with some of them better than I did with those fools Schai and Eaher. . . K'hy, some were my friends."

I didn't understand it. "But why kill them?" I asked. "Why try to kill you? The Gulf Realm again? What does the Gulf Realm have to gain from that?"

"Confusion," Tahr began to explain. "Perhaps more land. All the heirs hail from the most affluent Clans, the Clan Lords' offspring. On the night of the Choosing only the best will be the High Lord of the Eastern Realm, and their Clan name shall be their title - as Shirai is my Father's." Tahr dipped her quill in the inkwell and wrote a few characters then began absently tapping the nib on the paper.

"Should the Gulf realm succeed in killing us all, the hierarchy that the Eastern Realm is built upon will be undermined for a time. Other Clans, less-reputable clans - undoubtedly some of the southern families sympathetic to Gulf causes - will squabble for the opportunity to send Candidates to Mainport. There would be clashes between clans and the possibility of the Realm itself being fractured, the centre of power being dislodged from Mainport."

Tahr dipped the pen again. "If the Gulf wanted to invade, they could not pick a better time. For a long time the Realm would be staggering around like a headless bird. . . " she left that scenario for me to finish off.

"But they have not killed you all," I said. "What happens now? You know the Gulf Realm is behind what has happened."

"At the best?" her ears drooped. "I do not know. . . At the best I see the Gulf Realm being sanctioned by other Realms until there is a reduction in military forces and then as a goodwill gesture handing us the disputed territories along the Borderline River. Temporary."

"At worst they deny the accusations. They continue to stockpile troops and weapons along the Borderline River while playing for time. When they are ready they will fabricate some excuse and invade anyway, 'to reclaim lands snatched from their ancestors!'" Tahr snorted in disgust and jabbed viciously at the paper. A wonder the quill didn't break.

"What about your army?" I asked. "Allies?"

"Our army cannot compare with theirs!" she spat. "We could perhaps match the numbers with conscripts, but the number of well trained and equipped

personnel would be on their side.

"As for allies. . . Perhaps the Lake Trader coalition. They are an unknown, but as things stand now the Eastern Realm is a warm coat of fur between them and the chill of the Gulf Realm. They would be reluctant to lose us, but how reluctant I do not know." She slammed her hand down on the paper. Now the quill snapped, the feather fluttering to the floor. Tahr's nose wrinkled at the mess of ink-blot she'd made on the paper. "Now look: I have ruined a perfectly good piece of parchment," she said with a strained smile that rapidly vanished. Her head dropped into her hands. "My Ancestors, K'hy! All I see is war! Do I want to be High Lord?"

I didn't know what to say. I got up and stood behind her, putting my hand on her shoulder. Her muscles were bunched up like steel knots under her fur.

"Hey, whatever happens I believe in you."

She leaned forward and moaned softly. I could sympathize. She had come home to find her father blind and dying and most of her childhood friends dead. I couldn't advise her. I felt useless.

"Tahr," I stroked her shoulder, the fur, "there is something my people do to relax. Relieve some tension. And it feels good. I am not sure if it would work on you, but do you want to try?"

She reached up and softly batted my face. "Why not."

"Can we use your bed?"

Her eyes widened. "K'hy. . ."

"No, no," I hastened. "It is not that."

"I should have guessed," she smiled. Sadly?

We moved through to the bedchamber, Tahr starting to light the lamp.

I caught her hand. "I do not think we need that. Just lie down, on your front."

She did so, leaning on her elbows, and I knelt over her, making myself comfortable. I didn't have any oil, besides, her fur would make that messily impractical.

She twitched and yipped in surprise when I took hold of her shoulders and started kneading the muscles.

"Hai! What are you doing?" she yelped at the first pinching.

"Just relax," I reassured her. "It is supposed to hurt a little."

She was tense. Hah! Understatement. Under her fur her muscles were like knots in steel cable. She didn't work out and still had musculature like an athlete. I really had to work at it, but as I continued I could feel the tightness slipping out. She sighed like a deflating balloon, put her arms to her side, and fell lax.

Rubbing steadily, kneading, slowly squeezing muscles between my knuckles, running my fingers along the vertebrae and shoulder blades, pushing folds of skin with the heel of my hand.

Her furry back felt really strange under my hands, the muscles not where I expected them to be. As she relaxed, her skin softened, rolling under my hands in loose folds. I was no professional masseur, but a girl I had once known back home had shown me the basics. No, I was no pro, but I learned as I worked. Her muscles were strange and it took me time, reading the ridges and hollows, making a map in my mind.

Tahr lay there, eyes closed, breathing softly and steadily with a deep burring sounding faintly in her chest. After about twenty minutes or so she stirred herself to say, "I thought you said that this was not to be sexual."

I hesitated. "It is not," I said, confused. Only then did I remember how she had acted in the pool. Rubbing her back got her. . .

"No, don't stop," she murmured in a dozy, slurred voice as I faltered in indecision. A rumbling purr escaped her. "Don't worry, not in the mood. . . " her voice drifted off.

"I think I am glad to hear it," I whispered.

I kept up the massage for another half hour, at the end of which her closed eyes, steady breathing, and gentle purrs told me she was asleep. She

stirred slightly as I eased off her expensive breeches, folded them carefully, and covered her with a thin sheet. Calm again, she didn't stir.

I tiptoed out of her room, pausing in the doorway to look back and wonder what her dreams were like.

A light but steady snow was drifting down outside, covering Mainport and the Citadel in a chill white blanket.

Inside the keep, for the past week or so, it had not seemed any warmer than the air outside. I had taken to wearing my cloak inside and was not pleased when Tahr assured me that it would be getting colder.

We walked down a passage, our breath visible in the chill air as we talked. Central heating was something this place could really use.

Tahr was trying to describe the layout of the Keep and not having a great deal of success. It seemed like the place had been designed by a hundred different architects, all of them having something different in mind and quite possibly more than a few not knowing what they were doing at all. A lot of the place was actually built into the hill itself, like they took a granite crag and chipped away at it to turn the whole thing into the citadel. Actually, that wasn't too far from the truth; and if you think that would've taken a while, you'd be right.

I myself couldn't quite grasp how old the place was. Now Tahr was taking me to a section where some of the original construction remained. It was a place I'd been through before, but now she took me down a side corridor. "Look."

"At what?"

"The carvings. Take a good look."

I did. There was something funny about the Sathes in them. . . .
Goddamn!

"They've got tails!"

Well, stubby, short ones, but they were unmistakably tails. There were other differences as well. The posture, the shape of the head, there were probably more, but the granite was too worn to tell.

"You see now?" she spread her hands. "This was an early part of the Citadel, walled up and only recently uncovered. We do not really know exactly how old it is."

"But. . . but how can the. . . ." I was so flustered, I found myself speaking in English. I tried again. "But this is CARVED into the wall! Sathes must have had tails thousands of years ago. Uh-uh. No way. I do not believe the Citadel is that old."

She hissed in exasperation, then caught my arm. "Come on."

I followed her through the dim corridors deeper in to the Citadel. Deeper than I had ever been before. Tracks had been worn in solid stone by the passage of millions of pairs of feet. The walls were covered with script, some looking fresh, others just faint impressions in the rock. The rooms were smaller and not as well constructed as the ones in the outer areas of the Citadel, more primitive.

We emerged from a doorway into a cloister surrounding a huge open field. The snow had formed a hard crust over the grass that lay underneath. As we walked across it, we left two different sorts of tracks: my bootprints, and Tahr's strange four-toed prints.

The snow drifted down, losing the Citadel walls on the far side of the circle in swirling whiteness. At first the objects in the centre of the circle were similarly masked, slowly becoming clearer as we approached. I felt my jaw begin to sag.

A circle of huge stones stood out in the middle of the white carpet, snow-iced granite slabs about fifteen feet tall and six thick standing on end and joined together, edge to edge, at the very core of the Citadel. Time had worn down edges, leaving the stones ragged, uneven. It would have been like

Stonehenge or one of those places, but for the stones being joined together, making a nearly solid ring, or perhaps a wall. With snow, the silence, there was an air of dreamlike silence - timelessness - about the place.

Tahr touched my hand, beckoning me to follow. Through a gap between the monoliths: a gate. Inside, snow was backed around the inside of the wall, hiding a rampart. There were lumps in the snow: squares and rectangles. Ancient stubs of walls buried, the remains of buildings. A small village, houses gathered around a central gathering place.

I followed Tahr to the centre of the circle. She brushed snow from a buried stone and sat down, flakes settling on her fur. She wore no cloak yet seemed unaffected by the still, cold air.

No sound made it through the curtain of snow, and I stood there in the silence, turning around on the spot, my cloak wrapped around me against the cold. The stones were huge, ghostly shapes in the whiteness. It was a cold, timeless place. A circle of memories and ghosts, none of them human.

"What is this place?" I finally whispered.

"This is the Circle," she replied quietly. "This is the heart of the Citadel, of Mainport, of the Eastern realm."

I cleared the rock beside her. Lichen grew there, hidden under the snow. Beneath that there were indentations in the rock that at one time may have been carvings. I sat, turning to watch her. She continued.

"No one knows just how long ago it was. . . certainly it was before any records were kept, before written language even, when Sathe still had tails. The stones you see here are old, but not as old as the Clan ground we stand on. We were born here, birthed from the womb of time, here we grew and learned. From the forgetfulness of the past to today. Sathe pass, but the land endures.

"Across the Realms, in ages past, Sathe came together to grow. Where they succeeded there are the ancient Clan grounds. Where they failed: nothing but dust and a few fallen stones."

She waved her arm in a gesture encompassing what lay beyond the white wall surrounding us.

"As you can see, the eastern Realm succeeded. We have kept building the Citadel, our heritage, each Born Ruler adding to it so their descendants will always know their Clan was standing over the Realm. It has pushed the town out as the walls moved outwards. Only recently have we started building new settlements."

"How recent is 'recently'?" I asked.

"About three or four hundred years ago." Tahr replied.

I looked around at the time worn rocks.

"Sometimes we find caves," she continued in quiet tones, almost as if she were speaking to herself. "Sometimes tools, sometimes skeletons of. . . we think Sathe, but they have no hands.

"Now do you believe?"

I nodded slowly. "I do not have much choice. You can be very convincing."

She hissed and swatted me on the arm.

"Hang on. . . If you have been building this place for those thousands of years, then why are there not enough Sathe to fill all those empty rooms in the citadel?"

She looked away from, then back at me as though trying to make a decision about something.

"Many families have left for the frontier towns. There are not nearly as many Sathe in Mainport as there were fifty years ago. I am starting to get cold, so you must be frozen. . . yes, you are shivering. I think we should go back now."

It was true I was starting to shiver, but for some reason I her story about families emigrating grated. Why would whole families up and move out? I was sure that there weren't television adds and glossy sales brochures advertising a life of easy riches in the small towns. This is not the kind of

culture where people just move on a whim: where they live is all they know. Adventure is a risk.

She had something she didn't want to tell me. Well, that was her prerogative, I wouldn't push her. . . but I was curious as hell.

Behind us, the stone circle disappeared in the drifting snow.

Back in my room, I banked up the fire until I had a roaring blaze going. Then I pulled the drapes on the evening snowscape outside, stripped, wrapped myself up in a sheet and flopped down before the warm hearth. Standing around in the snow had gotten me soaked. The cloak was not - of course - water resistant, and the melting snow had seeped right through the fabric.

I huddled in front of the fire and prayed that the stuffy feeling in my sinuses wasn't another cold coming on. I could foresee that they would be a irritation all too common here.

I could pay my way in this world I discovered. I didn't have any particular skill, but a little knowledge can go a long way:far better than American Express. Accepted in more places as well.

Those long months ago Tahr had tolerated me because I seemed to be an intelligent animal of some kind - a novelty. As time passed she realised there was more to me than met the eye, had come to understand what I could mean for her people. She had so nearly betrayed the Eastern Realm to protect not only me, but the learning I carried.

Now her gambling could bear some fruit.

Textiles, both linen and llama-wool based cloth, were a major trade item in the Sathé culture, especially in the Eastern Realm where the climate was ideal for cotton plants.

Collected by hand, the wool would be laboriously cleaned then wound by hand onto spindles: a slow, tedious process that produced yarn with patches that were sometimes too thin, sometimes too coarse.

It was only a matter of a week to build spinning wheels and improve on the looms.

With these the weavers and draperers could not only greatly increase their productivity, the yarn and cloth would be of a much higher quality and able to fetch a higher price from the merchants of other Realms.

The success of those projects boosted my confidence and the faith of the Sathé. I asked for - and received - some tools to help me: A draughting board, T-squares, quills and ink, a plentiful supply of paper. Some of the stuff like protractors and compasses I had to design from scratch and I worried about how inaccurate they were.

It's a paradox:how did you build precision machinery without precise measuring equipment? and how do you make precise measuring equipment without precision machinery?

I had trouble with that one when I had to come up with a solution to the problem of putting a regular thread on a lathe to be used for making the threads on screws, bolts, drill-bits, etc. The answer I came up with had to do with heavy weights turning a mechanism that etched a spiral line up a rotating steel rod. . .

But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

There are any number of inventions that can claim to have had a significant effect on my own history: the wheel, gunpowder, the aircraft, television, the microchip - to name a few. And they all did.

They weren't quite what I was after. A couple the Sathé were already familiar with, others were impossible with the materials I had to work with, or I didn't want them. Aircraft: now I thought about balloons for a while, but decided there was something that was perhaps not as impressive, but was simpler, safer, and could have just as much of an impact in the long run. .

Invented in my world by Johannes Gutenberg, the letterpress printing press made mass communication possible, suddenly presenting a way to print

thousands of pamphlets, documents, or books in a fraction of the time it took scribes to write it out by hand. It meant that classical works and teachings - previously only available to the clergy or wealthy - could become available to the man on the street.

It took longer than the spinning wheel, but eventually I had a working printing press based on one of those old mimeograph machines. It was bulky, and the letterheads gave me a headache. I started with a batch made from copper, but they were not an outstanding success: ink just doesn't adhere well to copper and the metal fluctuates too severely under temperature changes. Another batch made from a softer, coarser tin-lead-antimony mixture finally worked.

Some of the other things I came up with were even simpler, but they had their place.

My hair had grown ridiculously long over the past weeks, and I was not entertained by the idea of hacking it off with a knife: it gives a lousy cut and hurts into the bargain. I had taken to wearing it tied back with a headband, but now I was starting to look like a damn hippy.

Well, necessity IS the mother of invention.

I did a trade with one of the blacksmiths in the Keep's smithy: I gave him several tips on producing higher-grade steel and sword blades and in return he helped me make a pair of scissors out of a couple of daggers. He profited all the way in that one, being so impressed by the simplicity of the idea that I had no doubts he would probably start to sell a few on the side.

There was no way that I could cut my hair myself, even if I did have a good mirror, which I didn't. Sathé don't cut their fur - they shed.

So where the hell am I going to find a barber?

Tahr was astonished when I knocked on her door and told her what I needed.

"You would like me to WHAT?!"

I repeated myself: "I need some help cutting my hair, if you could."

She stared at me as though I was crazy.

"But why would you want to cut it?"

I sighed. "My hair does not stop growing while it is short, like your fur. It grows. It becomes uncomfortable." I untied the headband to demonstrate.

"Ah. . . I see what you mean," she said, obviously amused, then gave an overly-dramatic sigh. "I, the Shirai, grooming animals. . ."

"Well, if you don't want to, I could always go down to the stables and ask a groom. . ." I gave her an expectant look.

"Oh, very well," she hissed. "I will cut your fur."

I bowed deeply. "Thank you, High One. I will be forever in your. . ."

"Ah, stop the noise," she playfully cuffed me over the ears, grinning.

"Now, sit down. How do you use these things?"

She worked slowly and carefully at first, then picked up speed, using her claws to rake the hair into position, then trimming it with rapid snips of the scissors. I watched red clumps falling onto my lap.

"Do all h'mans have to do this?" Tahr asked.

"Most of them," I said. "There are humans who specialize in. . . ah. . . cutting hair. That is their job."

She came around front and looked at my face to see if I was joking.

"You are serious. They actually make money just shaving each other?"

"Someone has to do it."

She snorted. "I have said it before and I will say it again: your world sounds strange."

"Yours is rather weird," I retorted, then yelped as she yanked out a few strands of hair with one pull.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she said smugly.

"Sure you are."

She didn't answer, but I could imagine her smirking to herself as she returned to the business of cropping back my hair.

There was quite a pile of copper coloured hair in a ring around the chair when she finished. I checked the result in a small mirror she had.

Interesting style. It resembled a Sathe mane: shorter on top, longer at the back and sides.

"Hey, not bad. . . "

"And not good?" she grinned.

"No, it is good." Well, it was. . . different. "Have you done this before?"

"Well," she looked coy. "I have groomed llamas before; there is not a great deal of difference."

"Thanks a lot."

While I cleared up the strands of hair lying around, Tahr was examining the scissors. "Can these cut other things?" she asked.

"What?" I looked up from my work with the small brush. "Oh, yes. They can cut parchment, cloth. . . better ones can cut metal."

She picked up a sheaf of parchment lying on her desk. The scissors cut through the yellowish material cleanly and easily. "What other devices are you dreaming up?" she asked.

"Well, I left your scholars in the library drooling over a device that can print a document over and over, as many times as is necessary. Humans call it a printing press. There are hundreds of other things that I should be able to think of."

I dropped the hair into the fire, where it sputtered and curled before being consumed by the flames. The chimney was drawing well and the smoke was quickly sucked out of the room.

"Since I groomed your fur, there is something you can do for me," Tahr smiled.

With some trepidation: "What?"

"That thing you did to my back the other night. Could you show me how?"

"Um. . . fair enough."

Despite the chill in her bedroom she stripped off and sprawled on the bed while I settled beside her. She sighed and rumbled softly while I showed her how to rub and pinch flesh between the fingers, how to read the muscles. I'm not even sure she was listening, just lying there, half-dozing while I worked. Her fur was so different from human skin: coarse, dark on the outside, softer, lighter in near her skin. I couldn't use oil, but the fur helped some. Her rump wriggled as I ran my fingers down the side of her spine.

"I must try this on a Sathe male," she murmured after a while, "It will drive him crazy."

I didn't say anything.

"What about you, K'hy?" she suddenly rolled over and arched her back, her fur-tufted crotch thrusting up. "This would not do anything for you, would it?"

I yanked my hands back like she'd turned red hot, unable to tell if she was joking or not. "Umm. . . Look, Tahr, we have been through this before. You are. . . beautiful, but I just cannot. . . " I trailed off.

"You did not seem to find it so difficult back in the cave," she retorted. "I KNOW you enjoyed it as much as I. . . By my Ancestors, why are you not more like us in the mind?" she lounged back and tapped her temple with a claw.

I was flustered, embarrassed, and a bit angry. "You want me to act like a Sathe? Before the unsuspecting Tahr could move, I grabbed her and pinned her arms to the bed. She just stared back at me in surprise. "Is that what you want me to do?" I demanded. "To take you like Tarsha did?"

Her eyes sudden turned big and black and I realized what I had just said.

"Oh God! Tahr, I am. . . I am sorry." I rolled and lay beside her on the bed, covering my face with my arm. "That was. . . I did not mean it like that."

She didn't say anything, but I felt her hand on my chest, her other one

drawing my arm away from my face. "K'hy, your eyes are watering." She reached out and caught a tear on a clawtip as it meandered down my cheek.

"Aw, shit ," I muttered and wiped my sleeve across my face.

"You do want to join, do you not?" she smiled at me: that lackadaisical drooping of her ears. With one hand she toyed with a strand of my hair. Her other hand. . .

"I. . . Tahr, but. . . Jesus! " I was out of the bed, backing away from her. "Tahr, don't. . . " I stumbled out the door, my head swimming in confusion.

She was sitting there staring at me as I fled back to my quarters. How could she be so. . . so blase about it?

She's alien, that's how!

My desk was covered in paper; plans and sketches and ideas. I stood and stared gloomily at them for a while, then one sweep of my arm sent them fluttering to the floor. The inkwell made a satisfying crash as the heavy glass shattered and the contents stained the floorboards.

" WHY ME?!"

I screamed it at the top of my voice. Of course there was no reply.

Mainport shone in the moonlight, the light being reflected from the snow that softened the contours of the landscape. Five floors below me, the snow-covered courtyard surrounding the Keep was almost glowing: black shadows and silver-blue snow dotted with the tracks of the Sathe who had crossed it in the day. A few were still moving around, dark shadows on the pale backdrop.

Five floors down. . . would it be quick?

God! What was I thinking?!

I shook my head and slowly made my way to bed, tugging off my boots and bouncing them off the walls. The bed was cold and empty. I huddled there, knowing it always would be.

Tahr on the wagon fending off shadowy assailants. On both side her comrades and friends were dying on steel blades. The water flowed red, a solid red. The whole river ran blood.

She turned to me, eyes wide with fear, pleading. Blood; her's and her companions' made her fur soggy. She held out a hand.

I slow motion I saw the crossbow bolt hit her in the chest, sinking in. Her head flew back, mouth open in a red tinted scream, before she crumpled out of sight. . .

The M-16 in my hands vanished as I moved forward, toward the figure lying in the mud amidst the corpses. I nudged it over with a boot.

Tahr lay with her ribs laid open, spilling her lifeblood into the earth. Her eyes flickered open, her mouth working in agony and we were on a gravel beach, her blood streaming over the stones to a red sea.

"K'hy? Help me. . . "

"Tahr. . . No! Oh, God,no!"

I turned away. Turned away and started off down a road that stretched over the horizon.

"K'hy. . . "

"No!"

I was walking back down the road. Behind me a dark shape sprawled in the mud, joining the earth and stones in unmovingness.

Death isn't a state of mind - it's a condition. . .

"TAHR!. . . no"

Tahr stood before me in the water, wet fur clinging to her curves, a playful grin on her face.

I continued, walked past her.

Tahr sprawled out on her cloak near my feet in that relaxed attitude that only cats can adopt, her fur blending in well with the golden grasses.

"Dreams can say a lot about one. What are your dreams, K'hy?"

I left her again.

She crouched on the soft sand in a cave, the light of a dying fire flickering across her tan fur. She was naked. Glowing eyes watched me, then she stabbed a sword into the sand between us.

"You can't even accept what you want. Hah! Find yourself, K'hy."

I turned my back and walked on.

"Tahr! No. . . Wait!"

The whole scene grew smaller, dwindling in the distance behind me.

There were flames, heat. Through the roiling inferno I could see a figure writhing: dying. Sometimes human, sometimes not. Then there was a flare of whiteness and everything faded. . .

Like a film looping. Back at the ford, I saw her die again.

"TAHR!"

There was a lurch like falling and I woke up grabbing at sheets, my heart hammering.

The darkness of my room surrounded me like a comforting blanket. My own were in disarray, half on the bed, half on the floor. The whole bed was drenched and chill with sweat.

For a long time I lay there, watching moonlight waxing and waning across the far wall, listening to my heartbeat settling down. The floorboards were rough and cold under my feet when I swung out of bed, crossing the pool of blue light from the window to the water jug by the door. I took a long drink straight out of the pitcher, then dashed a handful across my face and leaned against the chill stones of the wall, clenching and unclenching my white-knuckled hands, shivering.

What was that old poem I'd learned way back? There'd been an old drifter who'd stopped by for lodgings with his ragged hat and scarf, everything he owned in a beat-up pack. He'd been a history professor or some such once and was an encyclopedia of personal observations of the world. There was something he'd told me, original or from some old sonnet, I never knew:

Here we all are, by day; by night we're hurled
By dreams, each one, into sev'ral worlds

I was living a dream. When was dawn due? I sighed down at the jug in my hands. I wanted to wake up.

"K'hy?"

I whirled, banged my shin against the chest. There was the shadowy man/ not man shape of a Sathe standing just inside the door:

"It is me."

Tahr. I opened my mouth, then closed it again, looking away from her.

"The guards summoned me. You were crying out. They were not sure what to do." She paused, then asked, "The dreams again?"

"No. . . not those," I ran my hand through my hair, surprised at the trembling. "Different," I said. "It is nothing."

Her shadow moved: "You were screaming. Nothing?"

"Tahr. . . please."

She came closer. "You are shaking all over. Get back to bed, you will freeze!"

It was then I realized that I was still naked, and so was she, but she grasped my arm firmly and with an almost clinical detachment led me back to the bed where I collapsed on the fine cotton sheets. She drew the heavy fur covers up over me then perched herself on the edge of the bed and studied my face for a while before speaking.

"Not the same?" she asked with wrinkles marching up her muzzle. "Worse?"

I closed my aching eyes and swallowed. "Different."

"Ah."

There was an awkward hesitation, a tension, then she shifted. "You will

be all right?" she asked.

I nodded and she patted my shoulder then stood to leave.

"Tahr." The name caught in my throat.

She stopped and turned, eyes flashing with a titanium shimmer.

I held my hand out to her: "Please, I need a friend tonight."

She stared at my hand, then took it. I pulled her and she fell on me and pinned my arms to the bed: gently, hissing soft laughter.

Something was tickling my nose.

I pulled my head away from Tahr's furry side; snorted. She didn't stir. I reached over to touch her, gently, then lay back and idly ran my fingers through the soft fur on her mane, thinking.

Last night had been. . . good. Bewilderingly strange, but good. I was coming to realise just how much this strange woman meant to me. There'd been none of the fumbling from the first time, more laughing and teasing, biting and careless claws, and this morning there was none of that guilt that had plagued me last time; instead I had a craving for a cigarette.

Outside it was snowing again; fat flakes adhering to the fogged windowpanes like intricate lacework, the clouds looking like lumps of lead against a steel grey background. The air in the room was chill but the bed was as warm as blood.

Tahr stirred against me, rolling over and nestling up against me, still curled up in a small ball. I ran a finger up the top of her broad nose, tracing out the light stripes that pushed over her forehead. She was warm and soft, so was the bed. I dozed for a while.

I opened my eyes when I felt her stir and shift as if to get up.

Tahr blinked down at me. "Oh, I thought you were asleep."

"No." I stretched out and rubbed my eyes then put my arms behind my head and blinked sleepily, "Not really."

She placed splayed fingers on my chest and leaned over to stare down into my face. "Feeling better now?" she asked.

"Much," I smiled back.

"Huh, I too," she grinned at me. "You know some interesting tricks. Last night, it was fun."

"That is the idea."

She shook her head in slow imitation of me. "Fun? So often they climb on and pump away until THEY are satisfied. I have never had a male work to please ME before. I have never been able to look down on the male before, I have never been able to set my own pace. Different. Fun."

"Gee," I scratched my head. "I have been called many things by women, but not usually 'fun'."

Tahr laughed and raked claws lightly down my ribs, then squirmed so she was lying on top of me like a warm, heavy rug. I could feel her breathing, her heartbeat. "You are so strange, my strange one," she murmured, stroking my face. "In your body and your mind and your moods. Your moods, perhaps they are the strangest thing about you. You turn me down so vehemently, then you join with me with such intensity. . . Why did you change your mind?"

I casually laid my arms around her. Her fur was strange against my naked skin, the tough guard hairs and the softer down-like insulating layers beneath. Warm. Erotic in a way.

"I do not really know," I half-lied.

And Tahr watched me with an amused expression. "Huh," she breathed gently. "That nightmare must have been a bad one."

Lying there with her pinning me I couldn't turn away to avoid her eyes. Instead I stared up past her at the ceiling, the wood and the rafters. "Just say it made me realise what you mean to me. I needed a friend; you were there."

"Just a friend?" she dipped her head and rasped a tongue like wet

sandpaper around my nipple, nipping with sharp teeth.

I yelped. "Alright! More than just a friend!"

"Hmmm," she purred.

"You vicious female." I stroked the fur along her spine, lightly tracing the ridges of vertebrae. She gave a stuttering hiss. Ticklish?

"Vicious?" she grinned, carnivore teeth near my face. "Reminds me. You are still interested in using a sword?"

"I . . . Yes."

"This afternoon," she said, "I want to do some sparring. I need the practice. You may want to come along to watch. See how it is done."

"Sure, friend."

She laughed down at me and licked my neck and chin. "Do you feel in the mood again? A? Good! This time I am on top!"

It was in the early afternoon, after a remarkably stimulating morning, that I followed Tahr to the exercise hall.

The hall was in the innermost ring of the citadel, the ring just before the central keep. To get to it we had to cross the central courtyard, ankle deep in drifts, the falling snow cutting visibility way down. The ice on the cobbles made footing treacherous. . . well, treacherous for me anyway; Tahr's claws stopped her feet from going where she didn't want them to. At least my boots kept the cold out. Even the thick pads on Tahr's feet wouldn't be enough to keep out the biting chill; she must have been rather uncomfortable by the time we got across.

In the shelter of a doorway I batted snow off my cloak while Tahr did the same with her fur.

"Jesus. Are winters here usually like this?"

She looked up at the leaden skies. "Not usually. It is rather mild for this time of year."

I followed her up the narrow circular staircase. Sathe coming down stepped aside as we made our way up.

"Mild?! . . . It must be twenty below out there!"

"Twenty below what?"

"Forget it."

Mild! God, we never had it this bad back home, not even during New York winters.

At the top of the stairs a cold stone hallway was flanked by rooms filled with racks and displays of battered armour and weapons. Sathe in the corridor bore arms and armour of various types. I could feel their eyes on my back as we passed. Tahr ignored them.

The size and temperature of the room at the end of the hall took my breath away.

Like the Citadel, it was built on a grand scale. Rectangular in shape, it must have been about the size of a large cathedral, a football field. High around the rim - just below the heavy wooden ceiling - narrow windows let in scattered beams of light. It was rather dim for me, but the Sathe there seemed to be having no trouble. It was also cold, with my breath frosting in the chill air.

Sathe were everywhere: drilling, standing around watching others fighting. The room was echoing to the clashing of metal as soldiers sparred. Others were using wooden swords, much like the ones used in Kendo. Circular mats of woven straw covered the floor and on these hand to hand combat was underway. Unlike human gyms, there was no smell of stale sweat in the air.

"I have to get some equipment," Tahr told me. "You can look around for a while. Just watch at first, see if you learn anything."

"Go ahead," I said to her retreating back.

I wandered around, staying near the wall out of the way of the trainers and trainees. There was a large noisy crowd standing around watching something that I couldn't quite see. Anyway, curiosity got the better of me.

The sathe in the back of the crowd didn't notice me when I came up behind them; they were so absorbed in trying to watch what was going on in

front of them. I was able to see over their heads without too much trouble.

A Sathe soldier was warily circling one of the biggest Sathe I have ever seen. He came very close to matching my five-foot eleven, maybe a couple of inches shorter. His build matched his height; muscles along his arms and across his chest rippled under the dark-cream fur.

Their breath was fast, hanging in glittering clouds in the cold air as they circled each other. Fur was standing on end and their ears were flattened back. Each of them had their hands and feet wrapped in strips of cloth, preventing them from using their claws.

The crowd was obviously divided: Some were supporting the rather worried looking soldier, and the rest the giant. The two circled each other on the straw mats. . . well, the soldier was doing all the circling; the giant just stood there grinning at his opponent.

This continued for about a half a minute before the soldier made his move. He darted in and swung a punch at the giant's head. The giant hardly seemed to move, he swayed back just far enough to avoid the blow and swung his own hand in a blow that sent his opponent staggering back.

The blows had seemed more like slaps: arms swinging wide before striking. I wondered at this before I realised that a Sathe couldn't punch! Think about it. A Sathe has claws in the ends of his fingers, as well as the tendons for retracting and extending them. If a Sathe made a fist and punched something, he would be crushing the tendons and muscles around those claws between the claw and the bones in his hand. Despite the padding, there would be serious chance of the claw punching through the palm of the hand itself. Kind of like clenching your fist with overgrown nails then punching something.

When not fighting in earnest, Sathe usually slapped their opponents. It may not sound like a very dangerous way to fight - pretty pathetic in fact - but I know from experience that a good hit could still rattle your brains; and if the claws were drawn, it could easily be lethal.

The soldier had gathered his wits about him again and was once again trying to commit grievous bodily damage to his opponent.

"Hah! come on, little one. You are having some trouble?" the giant goaded.

The crowd cheered and jeered him on.

The soldier mustered his courage and moved in again. The giant blocked his blow and the returning one sent him spinning to the mat where he stayed for the count.

The crowd burst into excited chatter. Cash changed hands amidst cries of triumph and curses of disappointment.

"Anyone else feel like trying their luck?" the giant grinned.

I wondered if some idiot was going to volunteer.

"Huh, Thraest!" called some smartass in the crowd, "Why don't you try THAT one?" I felt eyes start to turn in my direction and others took up the cry. Uh-uh, I began to back away but the crowd closed in behind me and a corridor opened up, clearing the way between the overgrown rug and myself.

Thraest swaggered across to me, weighing me up with his eyes all the way. He stopped and deliberately grinned again. I tell you, a Sathe who can actually look you straight in the eyes and give you a smile like he'd like to have you for dinner don't inspire confidence.

"Can you understand me?" he asked.

"Yes," I nodded cautiously.

There was a slight murmuring around us but he did not seem very perturbed. He slowly looked me up and down. "So, do you have a name?"

"Kelly."

"K'hy." He wrinkled his muzzle like he didn't like the taste. "All right, K'hy, I am Thraest."

"Get on with it!" someone yelled.

Thraest turned and snarled at the crowd. The front ranks shrank back a pace or so. The giant rumbled in his throat, then spoke to me again, "Are you a good fighter?"

I shrugged: "I can usually hold my own."

"Ah, modest," his scarred ears twitched slightly. "Would you be interested in placing a wager on a match between the two of us? Just a friendly match."

I looked pointedly over at his previous opponent, who was being carried off. A few spectators in the back rows egged me on. "And what would the wager be?" I asked. "I have no coin."

Again his ears flicked. "Well, I suppose a bet is not necessary. I have not had a decent sparring partner for some time. And it could be an interesting match, that is if you are not afraid. . . and I will not use my claws," he added with a glance at my hands.

Goaded me. He was the king of the heap and I was a new kid on the block who needed to be put in his place. It didn't matter that I really had no interest in their pecking order; I was bigger than he was and therefore a potential threat.

One of his fingers was stroking the tooled leather of a padded glove.

"Very well," I nodded slowly.

The crowd cheered its approval.

And that little voice inside said You're gonna be sorreee. . .

We moved onto the mat and there was a brief burst of chatter as bets were placed. The crowd was growing quite rapidly, more Sathe converging on the crowd.

"What are the rules?" I asked.

"No claws."

"That is it?"

"That is it," he grinned and the gloves creaked as he flexed his hands.

My heart hammered as we each moved to opposite sides of the mat, dropped into defensive crouches. The mat crackled and rustled under our feet as we circled.

Thraest darted forward, fast, and swung: a wide, sweeping blow that I dodged without too much effort, but only just managed to avoid his other shot: faster and closer. Then he danced back, out of reach.

Appraising me.

He's faster, maybe stronger, used to this. I've got the reach, the stamina, and this is MY kind of fighting.

I ducked forward and feinted with my left hand, a wide swing mimicking the Sathe technique, while my right jabbed up, nailed Thraest in the gut.

It was like punching a tree. I nearly broke my goddamned knuckles. Still, his breath deserted him with a 'whuff' and he staggered back a few steps.

He recovered quickly and managed to block the hook I threw at his head, stepping inside the blow. Before I knew it, we were grappling. Thraest had the edge on me in arm strength, but his grip was surprisingly weak. We swayed back and forth for a few seconds before he hooked his foot behind my leg and shoved me over backwards.

Reflex made me keep my grip on his arm - pulling it over my head as I fell - and plant a foot in his stomach. He flew over me and hit the mat with a loud thud and exhalation of air. Some of the crowd cheered.

He was up again, shaking his head to clear it, and came at me. No style this time, just brute force and a flurry of blows. I went into the classic boxing stance and managed to block and dodge most of them, but the ones that got through left me with a split lip and spinning head. I staggered back a couple of steps with blood running down my chin. Then, as he followed, I punched him hard, a straight right jab to the nose.

Thraest yowled, hands flying up to his face as he reeled back. When he lowered them blood was pouring in a steady flow from his nostrils. I followed that blow by pivoting on my left heel and bringing my right boot around into his ribs: hard, staggering him again.

And the crowd was going wild! Blood drawn on both sides.

He was mad now, his muzzle wrinkled back in a blood- bespattered snarl.

A thread of glistening saliva snapped into droplets as he shook his head. Then he crouched, yowled and rushed me.

I brought my boot up; hard under his chin and practically flipped him over onto his back.

Sweat trickled down my face. Breathing hard, I backed off and wiped my face. He was down for the . . .

He rolled onto all fours, worked his jaw, then clambered to his feet. He wants MORE ?!

Again he came at me and again I took a couple to the head. By that time neither of us were steady on our feet and the room seemed to be waltzing up and down. I shook my head and managed to dodge a foot aimed at my groin. He caught me off balance; charging in again and grappling, bearing me over backwards. I tried to throw him again but he twisted and I hit the mat hard and he landed on top of me, a blood-smearred puma face baring teeth at me. A glove smashed into the side of my head and redness swam across my vision. Desperately I tried to push him off. Christ! he weighed a ton! His foot came up and raked down my leg and there weren't any gloves on his toe claws. I cried out, my hand fumbled through coarse fur and locked around his throat. I squeezed.

He was raising his arm for another strike when I got his neck. He jerked away. Perhaps that might have broken a Sathé's grip on his throat, but my grip's a lot stronger than a Sathé's. I held on while his eyes widened, then he gagged and tried to pull away again. I squeezed harder, my own face aching from the savage grin plastered across it.

He was making choking noises. His gloves pawed at my face and arms, trying to claw, his mouth hung open, his tongue curling as he made faint hacking noises. I held on, held on even when pale membranes began to cover his eyes. Then he went limp and heavy.

I was panting hard enough for both of us. I pushed him aside and he fell to the mat, suddenly sucking air in huge, gulping lungfuls. I wobbled to my feet and stood over him, fist raised, waiting.

It wasn't necessary: this time he wasn't getting up again.

I don't know who was more surprised; me or the spectators. I released him and just stood there while a ragged cheer went up and my supporters started collecting their bets. Quite a few seemed to have put their money on me. Suddenly my legs refused to hold me up any more and I found myself sitting on the coarse matting while my brains tried to unscramble themselves. Damnation; I can't see how anyone could get any enjoyment out of boxing. The scratches on my leg were oozing thick blood, matting into the hairs. Shit.

At least Thraest was still alive. He'd rolled over and was lying on his back gasping for breath. The blood leaking from his nostril bubbled in time with his breathing. I touched my own lip and looked at the smear of red on my hand then back over to the fallen Sathé giant. His head lolled around and he squinted at me through the swelling around his eyes. For a time he just stared at me, then - ignoring the Sathé gathered around - hauled himself across the couple of metres separating us to sit beside me. "So," he began, then coughed and rubbed his throat, "you do bleed."

"What did you think I would do?" I retorted, rubbing my jaw. "Leak sawdust?"

He blinked, then - slowly - his ears dipped in a smile. "Saaa! But it was a good fight. How can you hold on like that?"

I held up my hand, rotating it. "Put together differently."

He stared at my hand also, his muzzle twitching, then asked, "Where did you learn those tricks?"

"Part of my job."

"What was that?"

"Same as you: a warrior."

He lifted his hand, then dropped it to the mat again. "I did not know

there are more like you. Where are they?"

"Long way from here," was all I said as I climbed to my feet.

"Ah," He reached up to wipe the blood from his nose. "You know, we should try again some time. I might have better luck."

Now he knew how I fought? Shit, he'd probably wipe the floor with me. I shrugged and said, "I shall see."

When I found Tahr, she was already busy; sparring with a young Sathe male decked out in purple lacquered leather leg, arm, and chest armour. They were both damn good.

The blades of the wooden swords they were wielding were hardly visible. Held in a two-handed grip, the laminated blades slashed and parried at an incredible speed, meeting with abrupt smacks of wood on wood, but always under control.

I slumped down on a convenient bench, and dabbed at my split lip, watching them for half an hour as they danced around each other. They would face off, eyes locked in concentration, raise the blade in a salute, then blur forward to meet in the centre of the mat. Maybe thirty seconds at most and a blade would make contact. I'd always thought they aimed at the heart or something; you know, those movies where the hero would swing in on a chandelier and dispatch the villain with a thrust through the heart. The Sathe weren't playing that game: they were aiming for the arms, the wrists, legs, a stomach if there was an opening. Just a tap and they would fall back, salute, start over. For an hour they kept this ritual going until they started slowing and making obvious mistakes. They both seemed to come to a tacit agreement to call it a day. Tahr looked around and came over to me, working at the ties on her cuirass. She stopped cold when she got a good look at my face.

"K'hy. . . By my mother's tits! what happened to you?!"

"I got into a bit of a. . . competition," I slurred, thanks to my battered mouth.

She looked exasperated. "Can I not leave you alone for a few minutes without you getting into trouble?"

"Sorry," I mumbled: chagrined.

Tahr stared down at me, her wooden scimitar swinging idly in her hands.

"Well. . . who won?"

"I did."

"Really?" she affected surprise. "If you won, I would hate to see what the loser looks like. Who was it anyway?"

"Some arrogant asshole called Thraest. Not such a bad guy after you beat the stuffing out of him."

Tahr turned to the Sathe she had been sparring with, standing a discreet distance behind her: "Who is this Thraest?"

"Thraest? Ma'am, he is captain of the guard in the northern quarters, also the biggest Sathe and ego in the Eastern Realm." His muzzle wrinkled in a grin, "Huh, I would have paid to see him finally have his ears clipped. . . High One, this is the individual I have been hearing about?"

"I do not know what you have been hearing, but his name is K'hy. . . K'hy, this is H'rrasch."

I stood and bowed slightly to him. He looked surprised and hesitantly returned the gesture.

"K'hy, bowing is not necessary. He is simply a warrior," Tahr sighed, raking claws through her mane. "Why did you choose a fight?"

"I did not have much of a choice."

Her ears began to lay back: "Explain."

"Well, he challenged me and I could not back down from that."

She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side. "Too proud to back away from a fight? Let me guess: he suggested you were afraid."

"Well what would you have done?" I retorted. "I can not imagine you walking away from a fight. And as for pride, I have been dragged all around the countryside while you passed me off for a pet. I have been attacked,

tortured, and generally walked over. I think I have the right to try and salvage a little self respect."

She blinked, her ears drooping slightly, then batted me softly on the side of the face. "Yes, I suppose you do. Come on, it is time we started back."

I waited with that trooper - H'rrasch - near the stairs while Tahr returned her weapon and padding to the nearby armoury. The young male was wrapped in an awkward silence, unsure of my status.

"Was that a good work out?" I asked him, trying to break the ice.

It didn't translate. He looked up at me: surprised, almost scared: "Work out?"

"I mean the practice; did it go well?"

"Oh, ah. . . yes. Yes, very well. A good challenge."

"Tahr is good with a sword?"

"I. . . I have seen much worse," he said, flicking ears back. Then he asked, "How long have you known her?"

"Tahr?" God, how long has it been. "I think about three quarters of a year, I am not entirely sure. . . Why do you ask?"

He made an absent gesture with one hand. "Huh, never before have I heard anyone speak to a Candidate in such a. . . casual manner."

"I guess I have never really thought of her as a candidate," I replied. "In fact I only recently found out that she was the Shirai's daughter."

"Why did she not tell you before?"

I gave a small laugh. "I never asked."

He didn't have time to answer, Tahr appeared through a door beside us. She noticed our abrupt silence.

"Anything I might have missed?" she asked.

"Uh, no ma'am," H'rrasch hastily replied.

I was sore and aching when I got back to my dark and cold room. It was still early - about 8:00 pm - and I didn't feel like turning in yet. The day's activities had left me drenched in sweat. It didn't bother me too much, but a Sathé would really have something to turn his nose up at.

Without television, radio, or books, the bath was one way to pass the cold winter days. The warmth of the water warmed the air and my bones, loosening the muscles. The tiny windows kept the room dark, so I could stretch out on one of the submerged benches and just doze; listening to the gurgling of the water.

I barely opened my eyes when the door opened, admitting a dim patch of light from the corridor and a trio of Sathé. I didn't expect them to stay at the sight of me, but to my surprise they stripped off and slipped into the steaming water on the other side of the pool.

They chatted amongst themselves and I listened to the low, sibilant sounds of their voices without really listening to what they were saying. I felt a strange, warm glow that had nothing to do with the temperature of the water: they were beginning to accept me.

The fire in the hearth in the Great Hall blazed fiercely, logs that were not completely dry sputtering and popping as the flames licked up around them. The fireplace itself was about three metres long, and the heat it gave off warmed a large arc of the big room.

Overhead, coloured banners hung from wooden rafters. Swords and crossbows of various types hung from the stone walls, interspaced with oil lamps every several metres.

I lounged in a chair in front of the fire. Despite the heat coming from

the fireplace, it was still cool in the room, and I was wrapped in my cloak, not paying too much attention to the goings on around me.

This Great Hall was the social centre for the inhabitants of the inner keep. Sathes of all walks of life, male and female, sat or stood; drinking, talking, laughing. Games were also popular; I saw what looked like a variation of checkers being played by a pair off in a corner. Elsewhere a group of pre-adolescent cubs were kicking a small leather sack around, and bets were being placed on a pair of females who were arm wrestling.

Things near the fire were a bit quieter. A troubadour had a small audience gathered around her, the flickering orange light on their fur turning the scene into something surreal. The instrument that she was playing was a lot like the one I had seen being played in The Reptile all those weeks ago.

The bulky instrument had a very deep, mellow sound that the troubadour used to a good effect in her songs. The music was strange to me, even though I'd had time to grow accustomed to it, I was used to the fast paced music of home. Sathes music is slow and flowing, the sounds blend into one another. Once you get used to the weird pitch, it's beautiful in its own way.

The songs she sung were heavy with dialect, but comprehensible; songs of ancient leaders and heroes and wars. Nothing like modern human music. I wish that this journal could bring across some measure of this music, but translated. . . I feel it would mean very little. In Sathes they have rhyme and metre; in English, they'd be awkward, nonsensical.

Yet in reality, it was something I enjoyed listening to. I still do.

The deep notes put forth by the pseudo-lute were something you could lose yourself in. I dozed, lulled by the flowing notes; somehow they reminded me of water, dripping in a forest after heavy rain, waves on a lake shore. .

I guess I was almost asleep when a tug on my sleeve jolted me awake. "Huh?" I looked around, then down into a pair of green eyes.

"Why do you look so funny?" the tiny Sathes cub asked, his claws still snagged in my sleeve. He twisted his hands to untangle them, then he discovered my watch and started poking at the liquid crystal display behind the glass. I stared, not quite sure what to do.

"Hfay! Stop that!" A young female cub had appeared from between a couple of tables and was making a beeline for the small ball of fluff who immediately abandoned my watch and ducked behind my chair, squealing. The girl stopped a few metres away from me, obviously worried.

"I am most sorry, High One. He did not mean to disturb you. I swear it will not happen again," she said, her hands fidgeting nervously.

"It is all right. He is not causing any problems." At the moment, the object of our discussion had found how different my fingers were and was trying to find out what ways they bent. "Is he your brother?"

"N. . . No High One, I just look after him."

"Hey, do not be afraid of me," I said. "I do not bite. Promise."

Hfay clambered into my lap. "Tell me a story," he demanded.

Fifteen minutes later I had a small group of Sathes sitting in a circle around me. Almost all of them were cubs, but there were a couple of adults including the troubadour listening attentively as well. I was not sure how well ghost or horror stories would go down. Sathes don't have religion or believe in an afterlife, and I didn't really want to risk scaring the cubs. I shouldn't really have worried about that.

". . . and so the crow opened her beak and let out a terrible screech. The cheese that she had held in her beak dropped down to the waiting fox who grabbed and swallowed it."

"That is boring," piped up a tan cub with black stripes. Various sounds of agreement rose from the small group.

Well, not everyone would like Aesop's fables. I sighed and looked across at the troubadour where she sat, ears flickering in amusement. "Any suggestions?" I asked.

"Interesting," she smiled. "Stories about talking animals, bearing a

lesson. I must remember those. . . but I think they would like something a little more lively, with some action and excitement in it. A tale of a great hero perhaps? Do you know anything like that?"

Something more lively. . . a great hero, Okay. I spent a few seconds gathering my thoughts.

"In a land unimaginably far from here, a mighty warrior returned from a war in another distant land. A war in which he had given up his sanity for his homeland. The horrors he had seen in this war, the misery he had endured, the comrades he had seen fight so valiantly then be betrayed by his masters. It was because of this, it was because this was all he knew, that his mind had been twisted. He walked on the thin, razor edge of madness, unable to return to a peaceful life.

"The name of this warrior was Rambo. . . "
Hell, they loved it.

The heavy black oak door swung to behind me with a muffled moan of protesting hinges.

My quarters were cold and dark, the flames in the hearth having died to a small pile of glowing embers. I sighed, wished for an electric heater, then set down to the task of rekindling the fire.

So few places back home still have fireplaces and those who do seem to think they're a charming anachronism, quaint and pleasant, a luxury. I can tell you that when they're your only source of heat they aren't so pleasant. You can't just say, I don't feel like lighting the blasted thing tonight' and turn on a radiator. You light the thing or freeze.

I stuck another twig into the growing fire and wondered how many fireplaces there were in the Citadel. Pity the miserable sod who had the task of cleaning the chimneys.

When the small pile was blazing, I tossed on a back log and got myself a goblet of bittersweet wine. I had been telling rehashed human stories for the past two hours and my mouth was raw. Astonished how well mindless crap like Rambo went down. There's definitely a market for action adventure amongst the young, no matter what their race, creed, colour, or species. And the astonished look on the troubadour's face when I got going. . . that's something I'm going to remember for a long time. I'll have to try Star Wars on her some time.

Sitting on the desk, sipping from the pewter receptacle, I stared absently out the window. The myriad diamond-shaped glass panes that made up the window were acting like hundreds of tiny mirrors; in each of them I could see myself outlined in the dancing firelight, the stars showing faintly through the dopplegangers.

A scratching at the door disturbed my thoughts like a stone tossed into a still pond and I started, spilling dark droplets of wine.

"K'hy?" called a voice; muffled through the door.

Tahr.

"It's open," I called. "Come in."

The young Shirai did so, letting the door close behind her. A large Sathé armchair made of interwoven leather straps had been moved into my chambers and she flopped down in it: heavily.

"Hiya, Tahr. What is up?"

"Up what?"

"Figure of speech. I meant: what is happening?"

"Oh," she waved a hand vaguely. "There are matters of state to attend to. . . and my father."

"Ah." I looked at the slender goblet. It offered no revelations so I drained it. "Would you like some?" I offered.

She waved a No.

"So, how is he? Any change?"

Again she waved her hand vaguely then let it drop back onto the carved arm of the chair. "Yes, but not for the better I fear."

I was quiet for a second, shifting nervously. "I am sorry."

She was quiet as well, there was something on her mind. "I . . . I do have something to tell you K'hy. You know that the Challenge will be tomorrow?"

I looked at the date on my watch; the 20th of December, the winter solstice would be on the evening of the 21st. Tomorrow.

"Uh, yeah! I had lost track of the time. So?"

She waved her hand, palm down. "I do not think you know what is going to happen. I have not told you everything."

An alarm went off inside me.

"K'hy, we fight for the position of Born Ruler."

"What do you mean 'fight'?" It sounded like a stupid question. . . Hell, it was, but she took it in her stride.

"Tomorrow night, at midnight, the candidates go to the Circle and there they fight. They fight two at a time, the victor of one battle, fighting the victor of another. Do you understand?"

I nodded, the message still seeping in. Elimination rounds. God, it sounded like the ancient Roman Circus Maximus. "To the death?"

Now she hesitated, scratched at that strange little furred web between her fingers with a clawtip. "That. . . It depends upon the Sathes fighting," she finally replied. "Sometimes in the madness of battle they can kill. . . Or after. It is up to the victor to decide."

"Oh, Jesus."

One corner of her mouth twitched in a blatant imitation of my grin: a flash of white teeth. "Saaa! There have been no deaths for a long time now. However. . ."

"However what?!"

The artificial smile stayed, like an actor's mask, hiding what was really beneath. "We live in interesting times. Things can happen, change."

"You think they would go as far as to kill you?"

"Huh!" She delicately scratched her muzzle with a claw tip. "I cannot say for certain what may happen. There is a great deal at stake: Power, an entire Realm, and you."

"ME?!"

"Yes." She hugged herself, as if suddenly cold, one hand rubbing at the opposite arm. "K'hy, understand this: whoever controls the Eastern Realm also controls you and your knowledge."

"You as well?"

"Saaa! K'hy, I would do anything for you! But I also love my people. I want to work WITH you, to help you as you help us, but there are others who will use you as a means to an end. No offence intended, K'hy, but to many Sathes you are an. . ."

". . . ugly misfit," I finished glumly. "None taken."

I sighed heavily and got up from the desk to lean against the window sill. I leaned my forehead against the cool glass of the window for a second. Goddamn, where had I lost control? There were things going on that I had no control - no knowledge - of. Here I was being bandied about like a prize at a county fair and my closest friend and lover was telling me she may die the next day!

"Shit! Damnation!" On my feet, I went over to lean spread-eagle against the window frame, swearing impotently at nothing. "Why the hell do you have to do this?"

From behind me she said, "Because I was born to do this. All of my life I have trained and been taught to do this one thing. For eighteen years. Now the time is here, and I must go."

"I have talked to Rehr. He has promised that if anything should happen to me, he will try to ensure sure that you are well treated. That is all he can do."

I turned to face her again. "Tahr, if you died I. . . " I began, then trailed off.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," I shook my head. Oh, Jeeze! If she died. . .

"K'hy. If I should. . . " now she stopped and studied me for a few seconds. "I really cannot ask you to promise anything, can I."

Again I shook my head. "You are the only real friend I have here." In response to her look of surprise I explained: "I do not get out much - for some reason people seem to avoid me."

The feeble joke did little to ease the tension.

"Your weapons. . . " I started to say.

Now she shook her head in a mimic of my gesture. "We must use the weapons of tradition: Swords, our claws, our teeth; no more. To use your weapon is out of the question."

"Oh," I said, my hopes deflated, then almost angrily demanded, "Why did you not tell me earlier?"

She hunched forward. "I did not want you to worry," she said.

"You did not want me to. . . Oh God," I knelt down beside the chair and leaned my head against her furry shoulder. "You should have told me, Tahr. You should have told me."

Midnight. The moon had reached its apex.

In the Circle - the very heart of the Citadel - a procession of nearly fifty Sathe and one human made its way across frozen snow toward the ring of ancient monoliths. The sky was clear, the moon casting a cold light on the snow covered ground, giving everything a distinct shadow against the white background. The warm circles of light cast by torches the Sathe bore were lost in the vastness of the court.

I followed close behind Tahr as she padded through the whiteness. A path had been cleared through the deeper drifts, but still a crust of ice covered the ground. I pulled my cloak a bit tighter as a gust of wind whipped powder snow from a nearby drift and swirled it around us in a chill flurry.

Not that it bothered Sathe. Pelts fluffed out like fur coats while flakes speckled them with white. Cloaks were dark colors - blood red, night-sky blue, earth brown, kelly green - that the strange mixture of moon and torchlight turned into shades of black. The four Candidates wore only a pleated leather kilt, a cloak, and carried their swords. Tahr was bearing the sword that she had worn when meeting the other Candidates for the first time; the one with the dark stone inlaid in silver set into the pommel. A heirloom of the Shirai Clan I had learned. Handed down from generation to generation. Tahr didn't know how old it was.

They were all there, stalking across the windblown drifts: Tahr, R'rrhaesh, Schai, and Eaher. Ready - although perhaps not willing - to kill each other.

The circle was eerie in the moonlight. Towering above the procession, the great, black monoliths cast short, black shadows as dark and chill as the ocean depths. In the very centre of the Circle an oval area had been cleared of snow. The generations-old remains of collapsed dwellings lying silent and shrouded in cold whiteness made a labyrinth of blue- white windswept mounds and icy gullies.

The column had split up and Sathe were moving around the edges of the cleared area, pushing the bases of their torches into the frost-tempered ground around the perimeter of the arena, then left to take their places on the earth ramparts inside the standing stones, brushing the snow away before sitting down: like spectators taking their places at a football game. And like those spectators there were polarized groups, followers and hangers-on to the Candidates.

"Tahr?"

She didn't look at me. Her voice strange, undertones of something not human. "Go. Sit down."

"But. . . "

"Go."

Nothing more to say. I opened and closed my mouth, then left her. Alone, I found my own seat.

The figures in the centre were quite visible in the moon and torchlight against the white ground. I could now see that the unknown individual in the centre was wearing red armour beneath his dark robes: Rehr. He lectured the four Candidates at length, then departed the arena.

The Candidates paired off: Tahr with Eaher, Schai with R'rrhaesh. I guess it was just luck of the draw, who got who. There were no speeches or announcements, they just moved to opposite ends of the oval arena and drew their swords.

For a few seconds each pair just faced each other. I could see their breath condensing and drifting away in small clouds. The torchlight sent rippling highlights of orange running up and down the naked steel of the swords.

R'rrhaesh was the first to move, blurring his sword around in a two-handed arc that ending in a ringing clang on Schai's blade as he parried, then thrust in return.

As soon as R'rrhaesh's sword met Schai's, Tahr moved. She swung her scimitar in a slash to Eaher's side. Eaher blocked - with a blindingly swift move - twisting Tahr's blade vertical and sending it flicking harmlessly away.

There in that cold, snowswept arena, four intelligent beings fought each other for control of their land. I felt so out of place there; isolated, sitting there at on that white-shrouded embankment watching them fight while all around me Sathe sat silently huddling in their dark cloaks, watching the spectacle taking place before them.

The two battles being fought down in the arena among the remains of the first Sathe settlement seemed to drag on forever; thrust, parry, riposte. However it was only about fifteen seconds before first blood was drawn.

Schai was pressing his attack on R'rrhaesh who was defending well, but not quite well enough. A sword thrust darted through R'rrhaesh's defence and was in and out of his arm before he could respond. He backed off a short distance and glanced at the blood welling from the gash and soaking into his fur, then was instantly on the defensive again.

However, he was not reacting with the same speed and strength he had been, and continually retreated before Schai's onslaught. The contest became a foregone conclusion.

R'rrhaesh did his best, but as he moved backward, he lost his footing on something buried beneath the snow; a stone or something. It didn't really matter what it was, for as he stumbled, Schai took advantage of the moment and caught R'rrhaesh with a solid slash across the thigh that his leather kilt couldn't turn. R'rrhaesh collapsed backwards into the snow as his leg gave way beneath him, his sword spinning out of reach.

R'rrhaesh lay there spread-eagle, totally helpless, with blood oozing from his arm and through the hole that had been slashed in his kilt. I could see him lay his head back and close his eyes, knowing he'd lost.

I don't know what I was expecting. Tahr had said it could be a fight to the death, but since Schai had obviously won, I thought he would let R'rrhaesh surrender. I don't think anybody expected what came next.

R'rrhaesh opened his eyes in time to see the final stroke coming, in time to start a scream, not in time to avoid it. Schai's scimitar took him through the exposed throat, pinning him to the ground like a butterfly on a board. Even from fifty metres away I could hear R'rrhaesh's cry cut off abruptly and see the snow start to turn pink beneath him as he briefly thrashed about.

"Jesus Christ." My face twisted in shock.

Down in the arena Tahr and Eaher still battled. Schai pulled his sword

from the now-still form of R'rrhaesh lying like a discarded marionette on the frozen ground. Calmly, methodically, he proceeded to wipe the blade clean on the corpse's fur. There was a disturbed stirring among the spectators, but besides that: nothing.

Tahr and Eaher seemed to be evenly matched and after their initial flurry of blows, were concentrating on strategy: a war of attrition. They circled each other warily, probing for weak spots, defending themselves.

Eaher abruptly turned to the offensive, stepping in with a lunge at Tahr's shoulder, sword at arm's length. That was the opening that Tahr needed. She avoided the swing, stepped inside a return cut, and grabbed Eaher's arm and pushed it. A foot behind Eaher's leg was all that was needed to make her sit down heavily.

Before Eaher could move to get up, she found herself staring at the blade of a scimitar poised just centimetres from her neck. She dropped her sword and tilted her head back in a gesture of submission.

That tableau held for a few seconds: Eaher sitting on the ground staring up at Tahr. Tahr standing with her ears laid back against her skull and her sword at Eaher's throat. Then Tahr said something, lowered her sword, and arrogantly stalked from the arena with scarcely a drop of blood being shed..

Eaher shakily got to her feet and looked around. Besides her, the only other occupant of the arena was the cold corpse of R'rrhaesh staring at the sky. She picked her sword up from the snow, shook it and wiped it clean. Then she slipped it back into the sheath and without looking about walked from the oval of light cast by the torches.

R'rrhaesh's body lay there until four Sathe came out to carry it away. There was no coffin or stretcher, they just lifted it between them and carted it off into the darkness. A single small figure trailed after them. His bodyguard.

I was cold all the way through, both from the snow that had melted from my body heat and from what I had seen. I hugged my knees to my chest and buried my head in my arms. I thought I had become immunized to death to a certain extent, but what I had seen here. . . killing an opponent who had surrendered, in cold blood. . . in front of an AUDIENCE for Christ's sake!

I almost missed the beginning of the final round. I lifted my head when the muttering from the crowd died down in time to see the two finalists walk into the arena; Tahr from the right and Schai from the left. Again they started without preliminaries.

They both fought ferociously: twisting and turning, thrusting and parrying, using all the tricks that they could think of or had been taught: Kicking ice at the other's face, tripping, slashing with claws, yowling abruptly to distract the opponent. Not a model display of sportsmanship.

Despite my reactions at seeing what had happened to R'rrhaesh, I found myself mesmerised by the two Sathe combatants, by their blurring swords. Reflected firelight flashed as they fought and an occasional spark jumped as the scimitars clashed.

However they were both tiring rapidly, starting to make mistakes, slowing down. Tahr had blocked Schai's blade so that it glanced off her scimitar, but she misjudged what he would do next.

A quick reversal by Schai sent his sword blade slamming into Tahr's. Not her blade, her fingers.

I could hear her scream and see the trampled snow become stippled with dark spots. Tahr lurched back until she was almost at the edge of the arena, her left hand clenched into a fist and tucked under her right arm. She still held her sword, but limply clutched in her right hand.

Schai came on remorselessly, and from the way he renewed his attack on her I could see that he wouldn't be satisfied until Tahr ended up like R'rrhaesh, and there was fuck all I could do about it.

Tahr continued retreating before Schai, leaving a trail of blood in the snow behind her and starting to stagger. She almost lost her sword as she

desperately tried to block another blow, but instead of stepping back, she surprised Schai by jumping straight at him.

Schai was still in his follow through and wide open when Tahr came at him, abandoning her sword and attacking him with her bare hands. With her wound forgotten, she cannoned into him, knocking him over backwards with her on top. They struggled frantically in the snow as they fought for their lives. I could hear their snarls and yowls; it sounded like a catfight. Suddenly Schai exerted himself and rolled over on top of Tahr, pinning her arms with his body and struggling to reach for her throat with claws extruded.

He would have killed her but for the fact that he had his face too close to her's.

". . . , our teeth and our claws,"

I watched, wide-eyed, as Schai thrashed about in the snow, reflexes from limbs that did not yet know they were dead. Blood pumped from the gaping wound in his neck where Tahr had torn his throat out with her teeth.

She dragged herself out from under his still-twitching body and stood. For a few seconds she wavered back and forth, then collapsed face first over the not-quite-dead Sathe beneath her.

The snow slowed me down, made me stumble and fall face-first, filling my shirt with ice before I reached the two bodies in the arena split seconds ahead of the Sathe.

I rolled Tahr over.

"OH, Christ!"

The blood that drenched her was a gory conglomerate of her own and Schai's. She was still breathing, but faintly, her body wracked by tremors. The last two fingers on her left hand were hanging from the palm by flaps of skin while blood pulsed from the stumps, staining the snow with crimson blotches. My belt made a satisfactory tourniquet around her arm, but I felt queasy as I tightened it. I needed a pressure bandage. . .

"Dammit Tahr. Come on, don't you dare die on me. . . " I wasn't aware I was muttering in English until Rehr put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me aside to let a Sathe physician crouch beside her.

"You," the physician pointed out two of the surrounding Sathe, "take her to her quarters."

The two he had told to carry her moved to pick her up; one grabbing her feet and the other her shoulders.

"Fuck it!" I screamed. "Get away from her!" They were so startled, they almost dropped her. I scooped her up in my arms and pushed my way through they crowd toward the gateway. I could feel the blood seeping through my shirt: cold and sticky.

The morning sun was just starting to shine over the wild hills on the far side of The Narrows and in through the windows of Tahr's room.

She lay on the bed, her bandaged hand resting on the sheet that covered her. The worst of the blood had been washed off, leaving enough to make her look out of place among the clean sheets. From the time we'd brought her in she'd laid in shock, slipping in and out of consciousness.

The physician they called had had to remove the two fingers, there was absolutely nothing we could do to save them. All I was able to do was to put antiseptic on the remaining stumps and stand by with the morphine in case it was needed. Afterwards I sat and kept an eye on her as the night passed.

Morning found her with a fever and delirious. She muttered and moaned in her sleep, her skin, her nose, had grown hot to the touch. Through the night she was panting and thrashing in her sleep, sometimes screaming out. The several times I heard Tarsha's name I tried to calm her with cool cloths and water.

Rehr returned the following morning, fifty hours after the duel. Fifty hours without sleep. It was the advisor who ordered me to go and get some

rest. "You will be told if she wakes. Now get out of here. Go on, before you collapse!"

I wearily acquiesced and stumbled back to my room, almost knocking over one of the guards who had been posted outside Tahr's room. In my quarters I fumbled with the buttons of my shirt, but in the end I couldn't be bothered. I just fell onto the bed, pulled a sheet up, and was asleep.

I awoke to sickly light outside. Dawn? My watch told me that it was 19:32. Shit! I'd slept most of the day away! Pausing only to grab an apple and a mouthful of water, I double-timed it back to Tahr's room, pushing past the guards at the door.

The doctor was carefully packing a bundle of herbs away into a small bag as I barged in. He looked up and jumped. "Rot! What is that?!"

I ignored that. "How is she?"

He swallowed and said in a small voice, "What?"

"What word did you not understand," I growled. "How is she?"

"Ah. . . well, the fever has passed, but she is still very weak. What ARE you?"

"Is there anything else you can do?"

He stared, then waved a 'no'. "I have done all I can, and I have other patients to attend to. I. . .ah. . .I will be back later." He picked up the bag and sidled past me out of the room, keeping an eye on me until he was out of the room.

I went over to the side of the low bed and looked down at Tahr as she slept. Someone had cleaned her up; the clotted blood had gone and her mane and fur had been combed out. The bandages on her left hand had been changed for clean ones. They were doing their best, but I would have traded my soul for a real hospital with proper equipment. I knelt down and touched her mane where it pushed over the crown of her head between her pointed ears, then moved my hand down to the damp leather of her nose; she did feel cooler.

"You'll be fine."

I gave her fur a final stroke while wishing I could feel as certain as I sounded, then got up and walked around to the window, where I leaned against the sill and watched her; she didn't even twitch.

Outside the window, an icicle had stretched down from a stone that stuck out from the wall above it. It acted like a prism on the setting sunlight striking it, refracting the light in much the same way as a crystal would. Moving pinpoints of light were formed by water running down the side of the icicle, dangling from the end, and either freezing solid or being blown away by a gust of wind.

Hours passed, the icicle growing as the sun vanished. Attendants scurried about the room lighting lamps and candles. I watched the darkness spreading. A soft flurry of snow damped any lights in Mainport.

"K'hy?"

I almost tripped over my feet turning. Tahr was watching me through half-closed eyes.

"God, you had us worried. How are you feeling?" I sat down on the side of the bed.

She closed her eyes before answering. "Alright I think. . ." Her eyes snapped open and she tried to sit up. "My hand!"

"Steady. . . lie back." I gently forced her back down on the bed. "I will get you a drink." I patted her shoulder then ducked out to the other room and poured a mug of water from the jug there, at the same time telling one of the guards outside her door to inform Rehr that Tahr was awake. When I got back, Tahr was resting her bandaged hand on the sheets covering her chest, her other hand was gently caressing it.

"I have lost them, have I not." It was not really a question.

I sat down on the bed again. "Yes, I am afraid you have. . . but it could have been worse. Here, try this. . . slowly." I propped her up as she sipped at the water and set the mug aside when she said she'd had enough.

When she spoke again, her question was strange: "Why did Schai spare

me?"

"What?"

"Why did Schai not kill me? I was. . . it would have been too easy," she seemed to sag as she said this; difficult when you're lying down. Before I could answer, the bedroom door opened and Rehr walked in, slowly and cautiously, carrying a small satchel and closely followed by the physician. I got up and went to lean against the window sill.

"Shirai," Rehr bowed respectfully.

"Rehr, what is going on? Is this some kind of joke?" Tahr demanded, struggling up on her elbows looking distressed and confused.

Rehr was startled at this. "Excuse me, High One?"

"Tahr," I interrupted gently, "You won. You now rule the Eastern Realm. . . You won."

She sank back and looked from Rehr to me, the doctor lurked in the background and kept his mouth shut. "I won?" she whispered. I nodded. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them to stare at the ceiling. "I do not remember. . . How?"

Rehr told her.

Having seen it once already, I didn't need reminding. I stared out the window while Rehr spoke and tried not to listen.

When he finished, there was a silence, broken when the doctor asked to examine her.

"There is no need; I feel fine," she protested, not very wholeheartedly. I wondered just how much use it would be having this sawbones examining her, then realised that while he may not know much about the finer points of medicine, he could at least recognise what were good and bad signs in a Sathe. More than I could do.

He took her pulse then her temperature, touching her nose and holding his hand there for a second. She shifted uncomfortably. Unwrapping the bandages on Tahr's hand, he examined the stumps where she had lost the fingers. Tahr stared in horrified fascination, then looked away. Living meat, clotted blood and bone. I felt queasy myself. Tahr grimaced when the surgeon rubbed a oily looking salve on them.

"She will be alright," he diagnosed. "Give her rest and a lot of liquid to make up for the blood she lost. She should not do anything too active for the next week or so." So saying he dropped his little jar of ointment into a bag. "I will check on you from time to time," he said as he left.

"Is there something you wanted, Rehr?" Tahr asked after the physician had gone.

"There were a couple of matters of state that I wished to discuss," he replied. "There are the matter of the Succession Honours."

"Rehr, I am tired. I do not think that I would be able to make the best decisions at the moment. Is it so urgent that it cannot wait until the morning?"

"I suppose they can wait High One. I will let you rest." He backed out the door and pulled it closed behind him.

"I had best leave as well then," I said and started to move toward the door. Tahr stopped me.

"No K'hy. That was just to get rid of him." She patted the bed beside her. "Here. sit." I did so. She coughed and touched her bandaged hand. "I am sorry that you had to see that," she said. "But it was your choice."

"I know," I nodded. "You did not have much of a choice."

"But you still cannot get used to it, can you?" she said.

"No, I suppose I cannot."

"It is strange," she mused. "You have killed almost a dozen times, yet you say that death disturbs you."

"It is a lot easier to kill someone when they are trying to kill you than to sit and watch someone tear out another's throat," I said.

"Yes, and this time I was the one who had to kill or be killed," Tahr replied. "As you said: I had little choice in the matter."

I ran a hand through my hair. "I know. I cannot help it."

"Enough about that," she raised and dropped her uninjured hand on the sheet, as though chopping the previous conversation off short. "Do you think there is any chance of these growing back again?" She lifted her bandaged hand.

I shook my head. "No. I am sorry."

"Huh," she snorted and glared at the hand as if it had offended her.

"But your wound is clean and should heal well," I tried to console her. "Just keep it clean; make sure that anyone who touches it while it heals has clean hands and boil any bandages before using them. It will be fine."

"Yes, our doctors know to keep wounds and sores clean. . . but why boil bandages? You had me do that, for your chest."

I tried to explain about microbes, viruses, but my heart wasn't really in it. There were other concerns. Still, it seemed to help Tahr take her mind of the pain in her arm. She listened attentively, grimacing occasionally.

When I finished she grinned at me; pained. "What I wouldn't give for one of your physicians. Saaa. . . Your home sounds like a dream: a world free of disease."

I shifted and shrugged. "In some places, yes. . . others, no. There are Realms that are more advanced and wealthy than others. The wealthier ones have destroyed many disease, in other places the poor suffer from the most common of them. Some people in more isolated areas were given the knowledge to let them and their children live longer, but before they could use it properly. Now there is starvation and drought in many areas where there are more people than the land can support.

"And we are not free of diseases. There is one that recently appeared. It lingers in the body, then kills. We have no cure for it and more forms of it are appearing all the time. Last I heard about sixty million humans were infected, most of them from the poorer Realms."

For a while the only sound was the wind howling around the walls of the Citadel. "I have been here long enough, you should rest." I patted her shoulder as I got up to leave.

Just as I put my hand on the door latch, she stopped me: "You are not too disgusted by me are you?"

I shook my head, then grinned. "I guess I will have to learn to put up with you, disgusting as you are."

"Get out of here!"

As I pulled the door shut behind me, I heard a brief hiss of laughter.

I ate my dinner in the great hall, sitting at the end of one of the long tables with my legs stuck out to the side. The furniture hadn't been built with my frame in mind.

The Sathe at the table watched me curiously as I ate. I was used to their bolting chunks of food, but to them, taking small bites and chewing them thoroughly would be most unusual. I finished off the meal loaf I was eating and washed the dry, half-stale bread down with a swig of water from the wrong side of a mug, much to the amusement of my table companions.

One of them seemed a little too amused, was laughing too loudly and his voice was slurred as he called out, "Hai, Ugly One!"

I kept drinking.

"Ugly One! Shave-face! Yes, you!"

I lowered my mug and weighed him up. Not very big, just an oversized mouth. Too drunk. Yeah, the last time I'd seen drunk Sathe it'd been a rape. Did they always lose it that bad? I hoped not. "My name is Kelly."

He hissed and sputtered into his mug. A silence began to travel around the table like a row of tumbling dominoes as Sathe stopped their conversations. "As ridiculous as the rest of you. Look, Bald One, you do not

even know the right way to hold a drink!"

I drummed my fingers, beginning to get annoyed.

He grinned. "Were your parents as deformed as you?"

THAT did it. I froze, then turned to him and smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "All right, what do you have on your mind? If you will pardon the exaggeration."

He opened his mouth, then frowned and cocked his head to one side? "What?"

"Deaf as well as an idiot," I shook my head. "Well, what you lack in intelligence, you more than make up for in stupidity."

There was a hissing of laughter from others, and the Sathe who had spoken took a while to get it. When he did, he bristled - literally - and started to reach for something at his belt. One of his comrades grabbed his hand and whispered something; the fire went out of his eyes. He was helped out of the room, none too steady on his feet.

Well, that could have gone worse. Didn't even have to fight. I looked around at the Sathe staring at me. "Everyone's a critic," I growled and finished my meal in peace.

That kind of thing is one of the reasons I don't eat out that often. It's also the kind of thing that can play on your mind. The walk back to my quarters gave my mind plenty of time for playing, so I was pretty wrapped up in my own thoughts when a Sathe stepped out before me. "Shit!"

"Sir?"

I knew I'd seen him somewhere before. "You are. . . Hrach?" I asked.

"H'rراسch, High One," he corrected. Oh yeah, the young male who'd sparred with Tahr in the exercise rooms. He was fidgeting, his eyes locked on me with iris black and wide. "You have seen T. . . uh, the Shirai have you not, sir?"

"No 'sir' please," I smiled, "I do not think I deserve that. Yes, I have seen her."

He looked uncomfortable, clearing his throat before speaking. "Huh. . . uh, how is she? She was hurt badly. I heard. . . "

"She will be fine," I forestalled him. "She is just resting at the moment."

He looked as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. That look was more than just a loyal soldier would have. I studied him thoughtfully and he squirmed. "Do you need to see her about something?" I asked.

"I thought. . . she might remember. . . " he trailed off, clenching his hands.

I smiled, "She is beautiful, is she not?"

He looked up at me and I swear his eyes seemed to glow, "Yes, she is. . . " Then he appeared to realize what he was saying and who he was saying it to. "Uh. . . yes sir. Thank you sir. I am sorry I disturbed you."

"Anytime." I replied automatically. Watching his back as he disappeared down the corridor, I broke into a grin. Seems like Tahr has got herself a not-so-secret admirer.

I was in my room later that evening, practising on the harmonica I had acquired aboard Hafair's ship. Why was it I only felt able to work melancholic airs that night? My solo performance came to an end when guard appeared at my door, saying Tahr wanted to see me. I reluctantly left the relative warmth of my room and followed her.

Tahr was still bedridden, propped up by a small mound of pillows. A glowing oil lamp threw dull-redish light on pieces of paper scattered on the sheets in front of her: some covered with the bird scratchings of Sathe writing and others with what looked like maps. She wasn't alone: In a chair beside the bed a piece of night turned around and stared at me with wide green eyes. I stared back. It was a Sathe, a female, but her fur was black. . . or a brown so near black it didn't make much difference. I'd seen her around before, but she'd always kept her distance.

A snort from Tahr interrupted our mutual scrutiny. She waved a hand as she made the introductions: "Remae, this is K'hy, my escort and friend. K'hy, this is Remae, [Marshal] of the Eastern Realm's forces."

I bowed my head to her, and she uncertainly returned the gesture, then she turned to Tahr. "Do you really think that. . . he may be able to help?" she asked.

"I hope so," Tahr replied. "K'hy, look at these. Do you recognize them? The area?"

She handed me several rough maps of the eastern seaboard of America and Canada, and the area around the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. So, this was going to be a geography lesson?

"I recognise them."

"Do you know where Mainport is?"

Where Mainport was was there; a triangle drawn in green ink. I pointed it out.

"Very good. This area, from the tip of the Swamp Lands, up along the far side of the Sky Scratcher mountains and ending in a line from the Great Lakes to the Eastern Sea. Many of these names were new to me, but I translated them as best I could, surprised that the Sathe also called those lakes bordering Canada the Great Lakes.

Tahr continued: "The Gulf Realm lies here, on the southern coastline, from the Borderline River extending down the peninsula here, and up the Slow River here. Their capitol - Riverport - lies here," she pointed out the spot where New Orleans should have been.

"Here, northeast of the Eastern Realm are three more Clan lands. This area around the Great lakes is the domain of the Lake Traders." She traced the area out with the crescent of a claw.

"They are actually two separate Realms with an ancient bond of allegiance between them. Alone, they are small, but together they are as large as the Gulf Realm, and much larger than us.

"On the far side of the Sky Scratchers is the Open Realm. It is probably the largest realm in sheer size, but in terms of cultivated and inhabited lands, cities and the like, it is the smallest and weakest realm."

"Open Realm. Why that name?" I asked.

"Because of the vast plains that make up most of it," Tahr explained.

"Oh."

Tahr put the maps back on the bed, and picked out one particular one. "Remae, explain to him what has been happening," she handed the map to the Marshal, then sank back against the cushions, curled her legs up under the sheets, and closed her eyes.

"Shirai, you are prepared to continue?" Remae leaned forward, concerned.

Tahr opened her eyes again. "I am fine, just tired."

Remae's ears flickered with worry. "Should I have some Thamil brought in? It would help relax you."

"Uh. . ." I started to speak, but Tahr beat me.

"No," she gave me a smile, a small flicker of her ears. "We want to talk to K'hy, not listen to his snoring."

Remae looked confused. "I do not understand."

"Do not concern yourself. . . No, no Thamil now. . . maybe later. Now tell him."

Remae blinked. In the dim light, it was as if her eyes had flashed off and on again, she held the map while I peered over her shoulder. I could see she was nervous having me so close, her ears were at full alert and opalescent claws poked indentations in the paper.

"Over the past few months," she began, "small Eastern villages, outposts, and caravans around this area have been attacked, most destroyed completely." She pointed out an area covering the lower Appalachian mountains - the Sky Scratchers - down the Appalachian river in Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico.

"The smaller towns on our side of the Borderline River have been raided, with crops burned, outlying farmsteads looted, Sathé killed. The Gulf Realm claims that settlements on their side have been attacked."

Uh-huh. I had an inkling where this was leading. I scratched my chin and asked, "Who has been doing the raiding? Bandits?"

The black Sathé looked surprised. "Ahh, the survivors say bandits. But bandits do not usually attack armed convoys, nor garrison towns. And these bandits did not fight like bandits: they were too well trained and equipped."

I remembered being bound and helpless in the back of a wagon by Sathé soldiers wearing tattered cloaks concealing red and black armour. I said so.

"Yes, the Shirai has told us as much," Remae replied. "We know they are smuggling troops into our borders, we just cannot prove anything."

"Why?" I asked.

"We have never been able to catch them."

"No. I mean why are they doing this?"

"War seems most likely," she grimaced. "Internal upset. Disrupt supplies to outpost settlements. Destroy food supplies. Spy on our resources. Propaganda. They will probably complain to the other realms that we are not able to conduct our own affairs. They will insist upon sending a 'peacekeeping' force across the Borderline, posting troops in key areas such as river crossings, major towns, seaports. That would put them in an excellent position for an invasion. With the river crossings already controlled, they would be able to move more troops into our Realm virtually unopposed."

She bared her teeth in a snarl at the implications of that. "The Gulf forces would bite off a major chunk of us before any of the other Realms could send aid, even if they deign to assist us."

"But at the moment, the bandits are our greatest worry. They strike and are gone before we can get soldiers there." A frown creased her face, "It is not an honourable way to fight a war. Aside from disrupting traffic across the Realm they are causing much death, destruction, and fear amongst innocent people."

Guerilla Warfare I thought.

Aloud I said. "You said that I may be able to help. . . how?"

Tahr looked both awkward and hopeful at once, "Do you know of anything that might help us?"

I sighed. I had been kind of expecting this. "Weapons and such? Yes."

"What about finding those supurating bandits? You have had experience with that kind before?"

"I know of them," I admitted. "We have the same kind of fighting back home. Same kind of problems. All you can do is be smarter or stronger. Difficult. Send oldiers with the present caravans, even make entire fake caravans to lure them out and trap them."

Remae tapped her leg with a clawtip. "Yes, we HAD thought of that."

"Well, I might think of something more original. Tahr," I looked to her and held out my hands helplessly, "I am not a genius. I cannot do the impossible. I can give you some ideas and new tools, but working wonders is not my field. . .my expertise. All I can do is the best I can."

Tahr's ears flickered and she gave me a pleased grin. "I know. That is all we ask. Thank you, K'hy. You will have all the aid we can give you."

I smiled back. "Thank you. Oh, and a merry christmas to you."

I started to learn the tactics the Sathé used in battle. They were simple to the point of ridicule: not really so different from the way we did it a few hundred years back.

The opposing sides would meet each other on an open field and combat would take place in much the same way it'd done in the human middle ages. Archers would soften up the enemy with long-range fire. As the forces closed

upon each other, the archers stopped firing because of the chances of hitting one of their own. After that things started to break down: communications were lost, units separated and the battle was left up to the individual soldier with his or her sword.

Disorganised and chaotic with much loss of blood on both sides.

I watched the Citadel guard drilling in the exercise hall. I examined their swords.

I saw something that threatened to really screw my plans up.

The Sathes used their light swords two-handed. Okay, I had noticed that, but I hadn't realized why.

Humans are descended from apes; brachiating creatures who are at home hanging from branches. Apes' hands are crude, but they are built for grasping. Even a chimp has a powerful grip, much more powerful than a human's but without the finesse.

Sathes are descended from (no prizes for guessing), cats. Probably some kind of large hunting cat, maybe the bobcat or puma, it doesn't really matter. I don't know how it happened, but somewhere in the convolutions of evolution, Sathes started manipulating things.

Starting from paws they had a lot further to go than the apes of my world, and even now they lack the grip that my simian ancestry has given me. With their claws and speed, they never had to rely upon being able to grip a tree branch or weapon to escape from or fight predators, and it is only with the development of their tools that they had need of a strong grip.

But their grip was not as strong as is needed to swing a sword one handed and hold against the shock as it meets an opponent's blade, armour, or flesh. With two hands they were wicked swordsmen, but they were incapable of holding a shield at the same time as their scimitars.

I trashed my plans of skirmish lines based upon the ancient Roman and Greek ranks and started anew.

The target mounted on the straw bales at the far end of the hall settled between the V of the modified sights. I squeezed the trigger, and without waiting to see if the quarrel would hit the target, braced the cross bow against my hip and pulled the lever that re-cocked it. As the bow-string caught on the catch that held it back, another quarrel dropped into place from the magazine. I raised the bow and fired, repeating the operation several times.

Remae and several others whom I had been told were other high ranking Sathes officials and Clan Lords stood off to the side, their breath turning into small clouds on the chill air in the hall. They eyed the target and looked fairly impressed.

One of the Sathes, a scholar by the name of Sthrae stepped forward to speak. He could say and express ideas that I had trouble saying in Sathes. "Imagine archers armed with these bows. They can fire several times as fast as a normal crossbow. Imagine what a toll they would take upon infantry."

There was a brief conversation between the officials on the side, before Remae called out. "Continue."

"Of course." Sthrae bent over and picked up a sack, pulling out the next item. The chain metal links rattled and glittered dully in the light coming through the windows along the top of the hall. He gave it to me and I carried it over to the watching Sathes, they tensed as I came near.

"This is a type of armour that you do not have, Sthrae has called it link-armour." I handed the chain-mail hauberk to Remae. She turned it over in her hands, flexing the steel links.

"Is this worn as it is?" one of the other Sathes, a grizzled looking veteran, asked.

"It can be worn like that, but is more effective over leather armour," I said. "Padding helps: It stops the links pinching the flesh, although I think

that will not be so much of a problem for Sathe."

There were a few smiles.

I had been thinking about a suit of plate-mail armour. With a few modifications in the design and materials, I'd be able to both cut down on the weight and make it tougher. I'd decided against it. The Sathe favoured their speed over a lot of armour. After all, if you can't be hit, then there's no need for hot, clumsy armour.

Devices such as the five metre long pikes and halberds they'd never seen before. The long pole arms had simple leather straps a Sathe soldier could sling over his shoulder to help him hold the unwieldy wooden poles. They found these interesting, especially the news that a formation of these were practically invulnerable to attack by swordsmen, but the real pièce de résistance had no blades.

I unwrapped the bulky cloth bundle and sorted out its contents. The airtight ceramic and steel-bound cylinders I slung over my shoulders on their straps. There was a metal tube that stuck out the bottom of the right cylinder and then made a ninety degree turn and continued on for another sixty centimetres before ending in a tapering nozzle with a simple mechanical mechanism attached to it. I tucked this nozzle under my right arm so that it stuck out in front of me.

"High Ones, if you would kindly move back. . . ." a couple of guards ushered the watching Sathe officials back to what I hoped was a safe distance.

My hands were steady enough as I lit the small taper that stuck out in front of the nozzle and opened a valve on the pipe; we had tested this before, but something could still go wrong. Too wrong and they'd be scraping me off the walls with a spatula.

I advanced on the target, the bale of straw, until I was about six metres away, then I took a breath and squeezed the trigger.

The stream of compressed methane, oil, and coal tar shot from the muzzle in a pressurized stream, igniting as it passed over the taper, and flying in a blazing orange-blue arc to the target.

Three more two second shots, each blast of flame throwing dancing light on the walls, floor, and spectators. When I lowered the sputtering muzzle of the flame thrower, the bale of straw was a pillar of flame dancing up towards the roof, sparks floating up and extinguishing themselves before reaching the huge timbers of the rafters.

I turned back toward the Sathe spectators, my shadow flickering and wavering in front of me. Snuffing out the taper, I shrugged out of the harness and let the riveted cylinders fall to the floor with a metallic clang.

The Sathe were staring at the pyre behind me, their eyes wide and filled with the sparks that danced behind me. I couldn't tell if they were delighted, overawed, or shocked.

"You asked for a weapon. . . you got it."

Not waiting around for an answer, I tucked my hands in my pockets and walked out, still feeling the heat from the fire on my back.

There was a tower in the citadel, not one of the highest, but it still commanded a complete view of Mainport below. Occasionally, a guard on punishment detail huddled in the lee of a merlon, but more often than not the tower was deserted. As it was now.

It was a place I could go whenever I wanted to be alone. Maybe that sounds strange coming from someone who is about alone as one is ever going to get, but it was another kind of solitude I sought.

I leaned on the embrasure between the teeth of the merlons and watched the activity on the streets below slowly die as the shadows drew longer. The temperature hovered around three degrees celsius, it would have been colder if it weren't for the wind that whirled and twisted through the walls and turrets

of the Citadel.

Wrapping my cloak a bit tighter around my shoulders and settling the hood, I watched as the setting sun tried to beat its way through the layers of granite cloud that blockaded the western horizon, backlighting them with a corona of orange.

I've always loved sunsets. Usually they're restful, but tonight. . .

"Do you often come up here?"

I jumped, turning, then relaxed when I saw who'd spoken. "So they let you out."

"It took a bit of persuasion," Tahr smiled. "I had begun to wonder if I was Clan Lord or prisoner."

"How did you find me?"

She adjusted her own cloak and propped a shoulder against the grey stone of the ramparts. "You are not exactly inconspicuous, K'hy. I just had to ask." Green eyes looked out at the clouds - now faded to a dull magenta - and her mane whipped in the wind. She brushed it back out of her eyes with her right hand, the left one still swathed in bandages. "I want to thank you for what you have given us."

I didn't reply.

She reached up and took my chin between two fingers, turning my head, studying my expression. "You are upset. . . why?"

I jerked my head out of her hands and stared fiercely back at the alien world disappearing into the night. "I thought it was obvious." I turned away from the view and leaned against the solid, wind-worn granite of the merlo, watching Tahr. She looked as if she fitted there; standing on top of a tower amid small drifts of blown snow, the wind sending her mane into periodic flurries about her head. I continued:

"Those weapons will be used, will they not?. . . of course they will," I sighed. "So in a way I will be responsible for the death or injury of everyone that those things are used against."

Tahr gave a quiet sigh, betrayed by the mist that condensed in front of her nostrils. "Yes, that is not a thought that gives me great joy, but they are for the protection of the Realm. Surely that counts for something?"

I nodded curtly. "That was why I gave them to you. I owe you Tahr, but I do not know whether that justifies making new ways to kill people. I think I have started something terrible."

"It cannot be that bad, can it?" she tried to soothe me.

"Dammit Tahr, have you ever thought about what it would be like to be burned to death? To be maimed for life by flame? I had a friend who died by fire, I saw his body." I shuddered at the memory.

"From these will probably come bigger weapons, able to kill at greater distances. You will make a fire that cannot be put out, even under water it will burn to the bone."

Tahr opened her mouth to say something, but I got my say in before her, "In my world, entire towns were burned to the ground by this flame: Buildings, animals, trees, males, females, and children. The stuff was dropped by flying machines in a blanket that covered and destroyed everything below.

"If you think that you will be able to keep it a secret, it will not work. The idea is too simple. My Realm developed the most powerful type of weapon that my world has. They thought that they could keep it to themselves. Within a few years, the rest of the world also had these weapons."

I let her think about that.

K'hy," she finally said, "It was your choice. If you really felt so strongly about it, why did you give it to us?"

I slapped my palm against rock; once lightly, again harder. "I said I owed you. You needed a weapon to help you, I give you that. I thought that they would be too limited to be of too much use. I could not give you the secret of my gun. . . " I broke off. I'd begun something that I didn't really want brought up.

She came up to me and leaned against my side. "You could not. . . or would not? "

I didn't answer. She prodded. "K'hy? Please tell me."

Goddamn, could I trust her for something that could be the pivotal point to the future of her Realm; life or death of her people? I wasn't sure.

Maybe she read my mind. "Please, K'hy, you can trust me. It will go no further than these ears."

"My weapon, can be far more. . . deadly than any fire. . . " I choked off.

She looked down at the town, now lying dormant beneath a growing cloak of darkness. The sun's rays were just a glimmer behind the clouds, "You would not want to be responsible for that. . . I do not think I would either."

"Someone will discover it, you can be sure of that. Then you will be able to kill each other all you like."

Her eyes opened wide in shock and I realized what I had said.

"Tahr. . . I did not mean that." I stuttered. I wanted to say something, to take it back, but the words failed me. I just hugged her close and hard. I could feel her claws tense and then relax against my back as the fur on her muzzle tickled against my neck.

Still pressed against my chest, she touched my cheek. "You are as cold as a stone! Come, let us get you into the warmth." A claw snagged my sleeve, and she led me toward the stairs.

Selected Sathes trained with the new weapons, getting the feel of them and learning techniques and strategies that may someday save their lives. I shared my time between the exercise hall where most of the training was carried out, and the workshops where work was being carried out on the flame throwers.

I wasn't satisfied with the strength of the cylinders in which the pressurised, volatile mixture was carried, and I wanted more tests carried out on the safety valve intended to prevent blowbacks. If one of those throwers exploded, there wouldn't be enough left of the operator to pick up with tweezers and an electron microscope.

The dashing to and fro between the two places left me totally exhausted at the end of each day, but the effort was paying off.

After a couple of weeks, the pike-Sathes were becoming quite adept at using the long unwieldy weapons. They could form a skirmish line and hold it steady. While retreating or wheeling to face an imaginary charge on an exposed flank, they kept in perfect formation, the swordsmen and archers spaced in among them moving to stay in their positions.

Buckles and other pieces of loose metal clattered and clinked as they manoeuvred, pike and swordsmen crouching to allow the archers to fire volleys over their shoulders, then standing and awaiting orders.

Their commanding officer drove them hard, but finally told the weary troops to fall out. He noticed me watching from the shadows of the cloister that ran around the outside of the training hall and started in my direction. I recognized his scarred face from a distance.

"They are much improved," I told S'sahr as he fiddled with the straps of his battered practice armour.

He gave me a weary smile. "They have had a lot of practice, but with all these new weapons and tactics, it is hard for them and us." The 'us' must have meant the officers. He snorted then: "We have only a little more idea of what we are doing than they do."

He opened a door and stepped through, holding it open for me; I had to duck my head to get through the Sathesized portal. The room long, narrow room was filled with the stuff they used in combat practice: wooden swords by the barrel-load, blunt and bent arrows, basic leather armour hung from pegs on the walls.

"Why did you not go with Tahr on her parade the other day?" S'sahr asked as he pulled off his brass-studded leather skirt and scarred cuirass.

A couple of days ago, Tahr had gone down to the town, amidst great pomp and pomposity. She told me that it was a P. R. exercise, showing the people that she was alive and well. I had watched from the Citadel as the procession made it's way on a roundabout route through the streets of Mainport, Sathe thronging to see it.

"I am not really sure," I shrugged. "I think that she did not want me seen by the townspeople."

S'sahr's one ear gave a flicker of amusement as he grabbed a pair of breeches from where they hung amongst several others. "K'hy, there are rumours all over Mainport that the Shirai has her own, personal monster. I do not see why she would not want you to be seen. . . you are not very fearsome."

I leaned back against a handy post, "I seem to remember a certain Sathe who was scared shitless when he was, uh, introduced to me."

He tightened his waistband and gathered up his dark blue cloak. "I was taken by surprise," he sniffed.

I laughed out loud and he looked at me curiously, then snorted in an aloof manner; S'sahr, captain of the guard was not used to being laughed at.

As we walked down to the wide central courtyard I listened while S'sahr told me how the training of the various companies was going. They were making slow but steady progress, adapting the tactics that I remembered from my history class, as well as adding their own. I listened, but there was very little I could actually contribute.

We parted company in the courtyard. He headed off towards the outer walls and his stations, and as I made my way back towards my room, I realized that I had a little free time on my hands, so I ignored the stairs that led to my quarters and instead headed for the baths.

As the weather had grown colder, so the baths had grown more crowded. Heads - and maybe a few stomachs - still turned when I entered one of the bathrooms, but by now most of the patrons only gave me a cursory glance when I entered.

There was, however, still muted talk between others. That and the fact that the baths were unisex, made it the more embarrassing. However, the warmth that seeped through my cold body from the water made it worth the trouble.

With my hair still damp, I stoked up the fire in my room, and headed for the bedroom, rubbing at my hair with a coarse towel. I'd eaten and bathed and was feeling comfortably warm and tired. The circular bed creaked slightly as I collapsed on it and pulled the heavy sheets up to my chest.

Outside was still, the moon just a ghostly glow behind the clouds. There was scarcely enough light coming through the windows to cast a shadow from the window's lattice across the floor and the 'foot' of the bed. I found myself wondering if I had done the right thing with the weapons, for the hundredth time, before I dropped off.

The first sensation I was aware of was my head throbbing, feeling as though it had swollen to twice its normal size. The next was the pain as I tried to lift my hands to my head.

Muscles that had been tied in one position for too long screamed and protested as I tried to move. I couldn't budge.

My knees were up against my chest, my arms wrapped around them, wrists tied to ankles. I was naked and freezing and gagged with a saliva-sodden rag shoved in my mouth and tied in place.

I was lying on my side, crammed into a tiny, wooden, straw-lined space barely large enough for me. Shafts of light danced in through gaps between the planks. Creakings and the rumbling of wheels could be heard and occasional bumps jolted me. I could hear the muted sound of Sathe voices, but the words

were muffled beyond comprehension.

Trying to struggle free of the ropes proved useless, my arms were stiff and sore from the unnatural position and hard boards. The ropes were tightly tied and a lot thicker than they needed to be.

Unable to move at all, I lay there and suffered, confused and scared shitless. It was hours before the rattling and bumping slowed, then stopped.

There was a pause, then the sound of bolts being drawn. A hatch above me was flung open and I clenched my eyes shut against the light that poured in on me. Furry hands grabbed me, holding my head and yanking the gag out. I gasped air and something was shoved into my mouth, water went down my windpipe. I choked and coughed, spraying water.

"Drink, rot you!"

I managed several mouthfuls, then the water was withdrawn and something that smoked was passed under my nose. I recognized the sweet, pungent odour and tried to pull back; tried to hold my breath.

The hands held me fast, claws puncturing my skin, and eventually I had to breath.

After several choking breaths the world floated into pinkness, spun a few times, then spiralled down and away. Blackness swam over me.

Groaning out loud, I woke. A migraine that had to be the granddaddy of all headaches pounded in my skull. I was frozen, the uncontrollable shivering doing nothing to help the pulsing in my temples. Trying to move, coarse hemp rasped against my skin, straw or grass rustled and poked at me.

"Look. It moved."

"It is waking. Go tell the commander. Go!"

My hands were tied behind me and my ankles were bound together. The gag was still firmly in place. I felt hands tugging at the ropes, testing them. My eyelids stuck and ached as I forced them open and squinted at my surroundings.

A Sathe snarled and hissed in my face.

I gave a muffled yelp through the gag.

She moved to crouch down at my feet, her hands on the hilt of a sword resting tip-down on the dirt floor, and gave me a glistening grin. "You behave. No trouble."

I tried to say, fuck you!

"Mmmphhh mmmphh!"

When she growled again and stood up, I caught a glimpse of the red and black armour she wore underneath her green cloak.

I shuddered violently, not entirely from the cold, twisted my hands against the ropes. No go.

Where was I? It looked like a . . . stable? A stable. There was that permeating smell of animals and damp straw, the bleat of a llama came from a neighbouring stall. Heavy wooden rafters supported the gabled roof, all held together with wooden pegs. What little light there was had to fight its way through chinks in the walls. Opposite the stall I lay in, several stools sat around a rickety table covered with scraps of food. Blankets were spread out on the dirt floor. The Sathe guard settled herself on a stool, leaned back against the wall and watched me intently as I shivered. It was literally freezing.

Minutes dragged themselves by on broken legs. Eventually there was the sound of voices: ". . . paid when we see it."

"I assure you it is fine."

"And nobody saw you?"

"Nobody, High One."

Shadows fell across me as several Sathe appeared at my stall. Four of them: three dressed in the red and black armour of the Gulf Realm, the other wearing an ordinary dun cloak.

One of the armoured ones sported the gold chevrons of an officer on his cuirass. He eyed me, then turned to the guard. "Kas, has it done anything?"

"Kicked around a bit, sir. Tried the ropes."

Shit! She'd noticed. Not too slack.

"Huh!" The officer turned back to me, looking at me like I was a particularly suspicious lump in his stew. He kicked my foot and I growled back.

"Well, it seems to be in good condition. Here," he pulled a pouch from his belt and tossed it to the civilian in the cloak, "you earned it."

The cloaked Sathe snatched it out of the air and poured pieces of gold into his palm, counting them. Him. He was the bastard who'd snatched me! If I ever caught up with him he'd begin a new career as a fur hat!

Oblivious to my glare he tipped the gold back into the bag and bowed, "Thank you High One. It has been a pleasure doing business with you."

"Likewise," the officer snorted. "Get out of here!"

The cloaked sathe scampered off, leaving the other three staring down at me. The female guard sat at the table in the background, watching with interest.

The Gulf officer then casually squatted by my head, studying me with interest before he yanked the gag out. I sucked air, watching him while he watched me. "Tell me your name," he said.

Shivering violently, I clamped my mouth shut. It stopped my teeth rattling.

Smoothly, before I could react, his hand darted out and grabbed my hair. I yelped as my head was forced back then froze when his claws began tickling my throat. "Now," he continued, unruffled. "You CAN talk. You know it and I know it. Tell me your name."

He wouldn't kill me. He'd gone to too much trouble to get his paws on me. He wasn't going to kill me. . .

A minute later I was writhing and choking in pain on the stable floor, something moist trickling down the side of my throbbing face. He raised his hand again, the claws peeking out. I tried to cower away and the hand came down and took another fistful of hair, forcing me to look up at him.

"Your name!" he hissed.

I licked my lips, tasting blood. My nose ached, bubbled when I breathed. Scratches down the side of my face stung. There was a limit to how far I could push him and he was teetering on that line. "Kelly," I croaked, deflated.

"Was that your name?"

"Yes."

"That is better. Ka. . . K'hy," he did an acceptable job of wrapping his long jaws around the name. "Do not be such a fool. You will find things a lot more comfortable if you co-operate with us. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Very good." He said, then checked my bonds. He huffed with satisfaction, and before I could say anything, he grabbed my jaws and rammed the gag back in, "Since you do not seem to enjoy talking, you can stay quiet."

"Sir," the female guard ventured from across the room as he turned to leave, "is that safe? He has no fur - he looks cold."

I made muffled noises and frantically tried to nod my agreement.

He stopped and looked at me again. "I think it will survive. . . You can stay as you are. No games next time, a?" He grinned, then with a final word to the guards, he was gone.

I turned my incoherent appeal on the guard, who looked at me, then settled her cloak closer about her shoulders and leaned back in her chair. Desperate now, I began to struggle.

The ropes didn't give at all. My efforts warmed me for a while, but in no time they left me exhausted and with wrists burning and slippery. I moaned into my gag and collapsed into a shivering heap.

Time passing.

A cold aching throughout my body, my limbs leaden and numb. The shivering had died to spasmodic twitches and then even they stopped. Totally spent I just closed my eyes as a vague warmth began seeping through me.

". . . a blanket. Hurry!"

Hands grabbed me. If there were claws I couldn't feel them, but they lifted me and a biting wind wound its way around and through me. When I tried to open my eyes, all I could see was swirling whiteness. It wasn't worth it: I closed them again and a door slammed then there Sathe voices all around, questioning.

"What happened?"

". . . know! It is frozen!"

". . . it alive?"

"Over here. . . by the fire."

They dropped me. Soft surface, hands grabbing me warm around me. There was a tingling in my limbs like pins and needles that grew more and more intense, like aching like real needles, then like fire under my skin, then something beyond burning. I screamed. I screamed until my throat was raw, struggling and thrashing like a beached fish with the ropes biting into me and adding to the pain. Shouts, growls in my ear, fur and armour against me as they pinned me. And the pain grew.

The pain changed, going beyond pain, becoming other sensations. I moaned, unable to move, suffering until the flow ebbed. They released me. I just lay there, sobbing for breath.

Furry arms propped me up, something soft was thrown around my shoulders and warmth was forced between my chapped lips. I could smell food; some kind of hot broth against my lips. I swallowed eagerly and choked as it went down the wrong way. When I recovered, I was allowed another sip, then another. I could feel the heat tracing a warm trail through my gullet, warming from the inside.

More pain lanced through my head as I opened an eye. Sparks jumped and swirled in the open fireplace before me. All around, glimpses of polished wood, heavy rafters, the glitter of brass and Sathe eyes.

And there was someone touching me, helping me sit up. The bowl was raised to my lips and again I drank. My gaze followed the furry hand holding the steaming bowl, travelled up the arm until I was nose to muzzle with the female guard from out in the barn. Her eyes - the same emerald green - locked with mine for all of two seconds, then she pushed me away.

Unable to support myself I fell back into the soft embrace of the furs. The room swam and I moaned, clutching at the furs to stop myself falling onto the ceiling.

A Sathe leaning over me, staring into my face: ". . . you hear me?"

There were other voices in the background: inconsequential static.

I rolled my head away and the noises faded as I sank into simple, untainted sleep; the only drug used this time being exhaustion.

I hunkered down in the cold corner beside the fireplace, huddled against the fire-warmed stones of the chimney for the meagre warmth they provided. I was still cold: they hadn't given me clothing or even a blanket. Covered in goosebumps, my privates retracted up around my lungs. I was hungry. Miserably I made myself as small as possible and stared at my chains.

While I'd slept they'd replaced the hemp ropes with manacles. The fetters upon my feet were linked with heavy chain with just enough give for me to hobble. On my wrists the manacles were joined by a solid iron bar just long enough that I couldn't touch my fingertips together.

The chain rattled as I picked it up, weighing the links. A guard looked up at the sound. "Drop it," he hissed, hand going for his sword. Others looked around.

I dropped it.

Placated, but still wary, the guard settled back into his chair. I heaved a shuddering sigh and stared at my irons.

It's a demoralising thing to have your every movement restricted by cold metal. If I wanted to move one hand, I had to move the other, yet I couldn't bring them together. If I couldn't so much as touch two fingertips together, then how the hell was I supposed to do something like picking the locks? crude as they were.

Damnation! It was going to be hard enough to eat!

I glumly turned to survey my prison again. Perhaps there was something I'd missed.

A single room combining kitchen and living area. The walls were rough wooden logs, cracks caulked with clay. Black rafters supporting a thatch roof; solid, utilitarian wooden furniture with that interior glow of well-used wood were scattered about the room, the most elaborate a pair of chairs before the fire. Crockery, a few metal pots, and strings of food: ears of corn, and various spices sat on shelves or hung from the heavy rafters, slung lower than they would be in a human house.

Two doorways in opposite walls, one sealed by a door of half-logs, the other by a heavy tattered curtain. Wind howled around the wooden door, rattling it in its frame.

Yeah. The room wasn't much of a cell, but there were bars.

Gulf Warriors.

In the dim light of a lantern and the fireplace they lounged around, looking as bored as waiting soldiers everywhere. Some slept, using their armour as pillows. Some played games of chance. Every so often a trooper would don armour and cloak to go and relieve a guard on duty outside.

Sathe returned with their fur coated in ice and snow. The hearth was littered with drying cloth, armour, and a single soldier who'd assured himself that I wasn't a threat before stripping and falling asleep.

The air was heavy with the smells of cloth and wet fur.

Where were they taking me?

The Gulf Realm was a pretty safe bet.

And what would happen when they got me there?

That one I had no answer for. But someone had gone to a lot of trouble to see that I dropped by and someone obviously didn't give a flying fuck about my comfort. Whoever it was definitely wanted to ask a few questions as well, and I guessed they wouldn't want to talk about the weather.

Again I shivered.

Time passed slowly in the gloom. With the windows shuttered, not a whisker of light penetrating the storm outside, I didn't know what the hour was. Hell, I didn't even know if it was night or day!

Later, a drab-brown female with nervous eyes and ears prepared a meal. Civilian, had to be. I watched her working at a pot over the fire, adding herbs and meat and it was obvious that she was no part of the Gulf retinue. Who then? One of the original residents of the building I guessed. A farmer?

After a time the tangy aroma of stew prevailed above even the Sathes' miasma, setting leathery nostrils to twitching. A pre-adolescent male cub (the farmers' son?) scampered around the room ladling food into the soldiers' bowls, dodging half-hearted cuffs from claws. Saliva flooded my mouth as I watched the troopers begin to eat and the cramps in my stomach made me realise how hungry I was. How long had it been since I'd had a decent meal?

Damnation! I was starving!

"Hey! " I called. A guard looked up from his meal, his head bobbing and throat pulsing as he swallowed his mouthful. "Please," I glanced hungrily at his bowl. "I need food."

There was silence. Heads turning to stare at me.

"Talking now," said another voice. The Sathe officer rose from his seat in the shadows across the room and approached me. I pressed further back into the corner as he stood over me. "Hungry?"

"No, I am just making conversation," I growled, mustering all the courage left in me. "Goddamn, You are killing me. I am starving and freezing."

His ears set back and his muzzle rumped up like a rug. "Suddenly you seem to have become very verbose. Perhaps I should leave you as you are and see what else you may say."

"Dead people say very little."

"People!" He hissed in amusement. "You do presume a lot upon yourself!" Nevertheless he snapped an order at a trooper and the Sathe filled a bowl from the communal pot. Eagerly I took the carved wooden bowl in both hands, almost drooling, then asked, "Think you could take these things off so I can eat?"

The Sathe officer bared his teeth.

"Thought not," I sighed. I was forced to put the bowl on the ground and kneel before it, carrying the greasy, undercooked lumps of meat to my mouth with both hands chained together.

They had a good laugh.

He sat there in his chair before the fire, just staring at me. For half an hour, just staring at me, until I couldn't meet his eyes and curled up, hiding my head.

"K'hy."

I slowly looked up at him.

The Sathe commander gestured at the impressive bearskin rug lying in front of the hearth. "Come here."

I hesitated in my niche by the fire, then, as guards began to move towards me, awkwardly shuffled out with chains rattling to kneel on the rug. He flickered his ears at my sullen glare.

"Sit," he invited cordially.

I sat.

"Huh!" he huffed and cocked his head, chin propped with a fist, elbow resting on the arm of the chair. "You really are a delicate creature, aren't you? Not as dangerous as you look. Such a thin hide. . ."

"What do you want?" I demanded wearily. I was tired and cold.

"I want to talk. Scent the wind and understand, K'hy. We are your friends."

"Friends!" God, that was so pathetic I found the energy to laugh.

"Friends! You have drugged me. Kidnapped, frozen, and starved me! I would be safer with my enemies!"

He sat there and regarded me for a time. Then gave me a wide, glistening grin: "You really are not as stupid as you look."

Damnation! Keep your mouth shut, Davies!

"Now, K'hy, I would like to know a little about you."

"I need clothing. Please."

"Perhaps," he said pleasantly. "That will depend on how cooperative you are."

"No answers, no clothes."

"Exactly." The chair creaked as he settled back. "What are you?"

What would it hurt? "Human."

"What?"

"Human," I repeated. "That is what I am: Human."

"H'man," he mused. "Where are you from?"

"New York."

His ears laid back slowly and his eyes slitted. "Are you," he hissed, "playing games again? These words mean nothing!"

"What did you expect?" I snapped. "Sathe do not have the words for what

I am or where I am from. I can only tell you in the words of my kind."

"How can you have any other kind of words?" he sneered. "If a hand is not a hand, then what is it?" He emphasized by leaning forward to wave his hand in front of my face, making sure I saw the claws.

I flinched back: "A hand is a hand whether you call it by that name or something else. My people use different sounds, but they mean the same things. I still do not know all your words."

He leaned back, mulling that over. "You have had to learn our speech, like a newborn cub."

"Yes."

He used a clawtip to scratch at his muzzle, a rumbling sounding in his throat. Finally he said, "Very well. This Hew-ork, where is it?"

"I do not know."

"Then how did you come to the Eastern Realm?" He was sounding impatient again.

"I had no choice in the matter. I am a . . . a . . ." Nervously I fumbled for a phrase I didn't have. "I do not know the words. . . survivor of an accident."

"A [castaway]," he prodded. "You are perhaps from the continent to the south?"

"Perhaps," I nodded vaguely, trying to blur that distinct line. Don't press it! "I just do not know!"

"Then why did you go to the Eastern Realm for assistance!" he demanded.

"I did not choose! I did not know where I was, I did not understand Sathe. I was looking for my own kind, but I found yours."

"You found the Shirai female!" he corrected sharply. His mane began to bristle and he reached up to pat it smooth. "Why did you interfere? It was not your concern!"

"I was defending myself," I said. "It was not planned."

"If it was not planned, then why do you stay with her? Why do you aid them? give them weapons?"

"Why do you feel you have to help them so much?"

I didn't answer.

The blow that caught me around the ears knocked me to the floor. Dazed, I looked up at the officer who calmly knelt above me: "Come now, if you expect me to answer your questions, you must answer mine. That is only fair, is it not?"

I clenched my fists helplessly and struggled back to a sitting position, thinking unprintable thoughts. "You forced me to choose sides!" I snarled. "You dragged me into your war, and while they have helped me, your people have invaded their land, killing their people, and trying to kill me. You have seen the scars on my chest? Did you think they were natural? They are a gift from one of your own. Perhaps you knew him; a shit called Tarsha."

The Sathe commander looked at my clenched fists. "Yes, I knew him, and I can profess no love for his techniques. I also saw his remains after the carrion birds had finished with him; his corpse and the remains of his patrol. I do not know how you killed them all, but I am not taking chances with you.

"Whatever you are, you have made some people nervous and they do not like that. My orders are to return with you alive. Alive, they made that quite clear; as long as you are alive, they do not care if you are missing fingers, testicles, or toes.

"Now, I have heard tell of interesting new devices that are appearing in Mainport: New tools. . . and new weapons also. Did you perchance have anything to do with these? Yes?"

"Perhaps," I said.

He cuffed me around the ears again.

I looked up at him through watering eyes.

"Yes?" he asked mildly.

"Yes," I growled.

"Good. Now, do you give them this knowledge from the goodness of you being, or is there payment involved?"

"I try to pay my way," I said.

"Saaaa!" His ears twitched. "Is that all? Perhaps it is in return for the favours she shows you? What is coupling with her like, ah?" The Sathe grinned and his ears flickered when he saw that hit home. "Tell me this: Why do you think she is willing to do that with you? Why would any female couple with you? Do you really believe she is ATTRACTED to you? To YOU?! Huh!"

I didn't want to hear this.

He turned to the troopers behind him, addressed a female: "Mer'ap! Would you ever consider coupling with. . . with this?"

"Perhaps in nightmares," came the cheerful reply.

There was the water-on-shale sound of amusement hissed from a dozen throats. The commander turned his attentions back to me. "The Shirai could never feel for you," he grinned. "Anymore than I could feel for my llama."

"I would not put it past you," I growled.

He flashed teeth. "Insults now? That is not really the subject. You realise how you have been manipulated?"

"Shut your face!" I snarled.

"Why? Are you afraid to hear the truth?"

"What would you know of truth!"

"Use your mind, if you are capable of it. You are ugly. What could she possibly see in you but a means to an end? You are just a stone she is stepping on to cross a stream and when she is finished with you she will leave you behind."

I shook my head, trying not to listen. Inside a seditious voice was murmuring, It could be true!

"She is simply using you," the Sathe's voice went on. "And you are such a fool as to believe she has affections for you! A fool!"

"I must be, to be snatched by assholes like you."

His eyes flickered. I grinned and he struck me again. Even after the dizziness settled there was a stinging pain in my ear and wetness on my shoulder. Blood dripped to the rug. The bastard had had his claws out that time. I swallowed and glared at him.

"Take care," he growled. "You might hurt yourself."

He wasn't funny. I didn't reply.

Then he leaned forward and held his hand up for me to see; flecks of blood stippled his fingertips. "Some advice: mind your mouth. Some people are not as patient as I am. . . and your Shirai is not here to watch over you and lick you clean."

I reached up to touch my ear. It stung. "She will find you."

Somehow, as a threat, it fell kind of flat.

"I doubt it," he grinned. "We have put some thought into this. You will disappear like you had never been. The Shirai. . . well, we have you, her sire is dying and as for her: poison, a crossbow, some kind of accident. . . once you are safely tucked away, of course."

That. . . My hands stopped trembling as I met his eyes. I simply said, "I am going to kill you."

He spat and raised his hand to hit me again.

There were guards around us, and I think he may have been half expecting it, but they still weren't fast enough. I hit him hard. He swung wildly, claws extending, striking my shoulder when I cannoned into him, taking him over backward, me landing on top of him.

He managed to roll over, to clamber to his knees. I swung and clubbed him on the side of the jaw with the manacles, sending him tumbling. Then I was looping my arms around his neck, trying to use the bar between the manacles as a garrotte. He squalled and ducked his chin. Instead of crossing his neck the metal slipped into his mouth, like a horse's bit. His claws scrabbled at my arms with growing desperation as I hauled back, cutting the skin, drawing blood, scraping against the fetters that dug into my wrists.

Perhaps - given time - I could've broken his neck. But I didn't have time. It was less than seconds before the guards got there and piled on.

I hit the floorboards hard, ending up in a tumbled heap back in a corner by the fireplace. Claw cuts burned across my body. My right shoulder howled pain, cutting through the confusion when I tried to move. I couldn't. My hands and legs were pinned. Sharp points dug at my throat, hot breath and spittle against my skin. I froze, gasping, just moving my eyes. The Sathe with my throat in his jaws growled and twisted his head to glare up at me. Teeth and tongue rasped against my skin. I almost shit myself.

"Alive!" another voice screamed. "We need it alive!"

Reluctantly, the jaws loosened and the Sathe snarled into my face. There were other troopers holding - sitting on - my arms and legs. Over there was the Sathe officer: hanging half-supported between two of his captains, displaying curved tongue and an impressive array of dentures as he hacked and coughed, blood-tinted spittle running from the corners of his mouth. The troopers carried him bodily from the room, through the curtain.

More guards approached, heavy chains draped over their arms.

Ah, shit!

Now a short chain led from my ankle fetters to an iron staple hammered into the floor. Also my wrists and ankles were connected by a heavy chain. I was completely hobbled, any hopes of escaping retreating further across the horizon.

My fault!

Damnation, I should have just sat and let it wash past. He was just trying to goad me, to see how far he could push me. I should have sat there and taken it, let them think me helpless and subdued, bide my time until an opportunity came to make a break for it. Now my stupidity had landed me with more chains and bruises. Their punishment had been none too gentle; working me over good, but taking care not to cause any damage that would be permanent. Then I was dumped back into my corner where I could use the night to nurse my aches.

Now the morning meal was being prepared, the cub once again passed among the waking soldiery passing out bowls of food with deferential ducks of his head. His mother worked by the fire, stirring a pot, occasionally adding water. She warily watched me as I struggled to sit up, propping my back against the rough wall. My shoulder was swelling up and moved only with aching protest.

"You want food?" a soft, hesitant voice ventured: childish tones. The cub sidled a little closer, bowl and spoon in hand. Over his shoulder his mother was watching with concern foremost in her expression.

"Thank you," I grated hoarsely, taking the bowl that he proffered at arms length. My own arms were chained down at waist height; I had to double over to get my mouth down to the bowl. I fumbled awkwardly with the spoon before it twisted out of my fingers. I stared at the bowl in growing frustration.

"Here," the cub offered, leaning forward and taking the bowl from my hands, holding it while I used the spoon. It was long, narrow, and deep - shaped for Sathe mouths' - but it worked. I shoveled mouthfuls as fast as I could. . .

"Saaaaa! Boy!" from behind the cub there came a cry and a clatter of wooden utensils being hastily cast aside. The cub yelped, dropped the bowl with what little stew was left in it, and instinctively dashed to his mother's side as several guards bore down upon us. They shoved the female aside as she tried to protect her child and lunged for the kid. He dodged their grasp and tried to duck around them, but they had him cornered. As a guard moved in I flicked the chain securing my ankle to the staple, hooking it about the Sathe's feet and pulling. The guard squalled and hit the floor in a clatter of

toughened leather and metal buckles. Taking advantage of the opening, the cub was over the body, gone.

The trooper snarled, shook the chain away from his leg, then kicked out at me, his toe claws catching me just above the knee, ripping up my leg. The tingling burning of the pain came almost as quickly as the blood, rivulets merging and pooling. I gasped and looked up to see the Sathe raising his hand for another blow.

"HOLD!" Another Sathe snarled and a hand grabbed the trooper and shoved him out of the way. The Gulf officer was standing above me with his muzzle drawn back in a white snarl. Beneath his fur his face was the worse for wear: one side swollen while the corners of his mouth were raw and red with patches of clotted blood. Breath hissed through flared nostrils and his eyes were furious black pools, ears laid back flat against his skull. "You," his words were scarcely understandable, they were so distorted by his fury, "are going to learn!"

I shrank back, but there were enough of them to drag me out and pin me down by kneeling on my arms and legs. Casually the officer strolled across to the fire and squatted there. I couldn't see what he was doing, but when he turned back to me he was holding a smoking poker, the tip glowing red.

"Hey. . ." I tried to shrink away, but they just held me tighter. "No. No, please, do not. . ."

He didn't speak, just waved it slowly in front of my eyes. I could smell hot metal and burnt pine. I could feel the heat, going light headed with sudden fear and he just stood there with his eyes locked on mine, pointing the poker down at me, waving it around my face. Slowly he moved it down and I could feel the heat on my chin, my neck, my chest.

Then he jammed it up against my left nipple.

A hissing, feeling like ice at first, then. . . I screamed, uncontrollably, thrashing and bucking and twisting madly. Sathe shouted, more held me. The poker twisted and I think I passed out then.

Seconds. . . He was crouched over me, looking down into my face, still holding the poker. I could smell burnt meat. The pain in both my chest and leg was dull now and I was shivering, dimly realised I was in shock. His voice growled, then he grabbed my jaw and shook me until he was certain he had my attention. "You understand now?" he hissed. "You try something like that again, and we will simply hamstring you."

"Ness. . ." I croaked. My jaw didn't want to work. "Next time. . . better job."

His eyes widened and he glanced down at my chest. I had no urge to see what was there. Already the pain was returning. My leg spasmed and I could feel the blood drying there. It'd been sliced down to the muscle.

"You want to die?" He stared at me, as though not quite believing it, then snorted. "Ah, such loyalty and stupidity." Turning to his troops he gestured at me, "Alright, get that cleaned and patched." Then he gathered up his cloak and pushed out into the cold whiteness outside. The others dragged me back to the fireplace and dumped me there. Christ, but it hurt: almost like I was going to pass out, but it never quite happened.

A trooper approached me, a small bag in her hand. She crouched down near me and produced herbs, small sealed pots, a grey-brown stuff that looked like moss, and strips of cloth. I recognised her as the guard I'd had in the barn, the one who'd fed me. "I want to help you," she said slowly; enunciating. "I have your word you will behave?"

I nodded vaguely, "Yes."

Catching a breath she inched forward and chirred to herself. I didn't move as she worked on the wound on my leg, washed it clean, pressed the moss against it, then began binding it, wrapping coarse cloth around my leg. Considering where the gash was located - my upper-outer thigh - it was an extremely personal operation.

"Stay still," she hissed through her teeth when I flinched at an errant brush of fur against sensitive flesh. Oh God! Don't let me get an erection!

But of course, even with the pain, just thinking about it. . .

The Gulf Troops saw it, laughter hissed:

"Kas! I think it likes you!"

"Careful. You could hurt yourself there!"

"Ha, pity Mer'ap's not here! That could change her mind!"

The one working on my wound looked up at my face and hissed in amusement. "Not so different then. I am surprised you are in the mood."

I felt the heat rising in my ears. Her's fluttered madly as she settled the bandages, then moved on to my chest.

My nipple was gone, turned to a red and black ruin. Not as bad as it looked. He hadn't gone deep, being careful not to damage me too seriously. Still, it hurt enough when the female began to treat it and put the salve on, almost as much as when it happened.

The room had gone silent, the Gulf Sathe standing and watching as I moaned and ground my teeth, fighting to keep from striking out at the female ministering to me. I don't remember when she finished, just that one moment she was pressing ointment against the charred skin, the next she was packing up her equipment. "Finished," she told me. "You will be all right." Then she leaned closer to my head. "Take my advice," she whispered soto voce. "Do not provoke the commander. He can be most unpleasant." Then louder she said, "Try not to do anything stupid that might reopen that. I will change it later."

"What? That mean jogging's out?" I panted in english. She scratched her neck, head cocked to one side in puzzlement, then she snorted and gathered up her kit.

The storm was still blowing the next day. It stopped us from going anywhere, but it also stopped any pursuit there might be. A stalemate. I wasn't going anywhere either. Outside, without clothing and in my condition, I would freeze to death before I could get a mile.

Still, they watched me. When I had to relieve myself, they sent a guard along. There was a shuttered window in the freezing little room that I would probably have been able to squeeze out of, but with the temperature outside hovering around zero, I wasn't about to try.

Now I had an idea of just how many of them there were: approximately twenty, a large number to be moving around deep in enemy territory. Capturing lill' ol' me was their only directive? I found that hard to swallow.

I guess I should've been flattered.

As the wind howled around outside and wormed its way through gaps that you could have sworn weren't there a minute ago, the seven Sathe sitting at the table played a game of chance that I guess must be universal; dice. Others were outside: barracked in the stables, on picket duty. My wrists and ankles were beginning to chafe from the constant rubbing of the iron manacles. Both my leg and chest wounds were continuous sources of nagging pain. I couldn't do much moving without gritting my teeth. The Sathe who was guarding me sat in a chair nearby, cleaning his already-gleaming sword, always keeping a green eye on me.

Bone dice rattled on the rough wooden table top amid the muted sibilants of Sathe voices and occasional bout of laughing and curses when someone won.

The day dragged by slowly. The evening meal was a kind of sausage. Like a dog I was fed the table scraps.

The manacles stayed on.

Afterwards, the cub was crouched by the fire cleaning the dirty pots in a tub of melt water, the iron and copper utensils clattering and rattling. As he worked he stared at me where I sat near him on the rug before the fire, at the extreme extension of my tether and trying to get as near to the heat as I could. Several times it looked as if he might say something, only to change

his mind at the last second. So I sat in silence, watching him work.

As the evening dragged on into night the temperature plummeted again. I huddled up into a small ball in front of the open fire, for all the good that did. An icy draught needled across the room, wending its way up the chimney and leaving me shivering violently in its wake. My wounds ached as my muscles knotted up.

"Huh," a Sathe coughed. It was that female, the one who'd patched me up. She knelt beside me, looking me over. "What is the matter with you? Huh? Your leg?" She touched a hand to my leg and swore, "Mother's milk! You are still cold?" She stared then waved a shrug and left me again, going through the curtain to the back of the house. A few minutes later the commander himself appeared with a bundle tucked under one arm. Guards shifted and stirred themselves when he snapped orders, several baring their teeth and approaching me, their clawed feet clicking against wooden floorboards. Instinctively I tried to move back, away from them. They leapt forward and I yelped in pain when claws sank in. One of them grabbed me by the hair; dragging me to my knees, forcing my head back and laying bared claws alongside my throat. My chest roared pain. I began to raise my hands; the claws pressed harder. I froze motionless.

The Gulf commander stepped around in front of me, showing me the bundle. "You," he said slowly and clearly, "are going to get your clothing. Your chains will be removed and you will do exactly as I say. Anything else and you will be hamstrung. Cause trouble and we kill you. Your choice."

As simply as that. From the corners of my eyes I could see swords glinting.

"Understand?" the Sathe asked.

"Yes," I croaked.

I was hauled to my feet, the claws still at my throat whilst keys rattled in locks. The weights upon my wrists and ankles were lifted away with a clashing of heavy iron links.

The claws at my neck tightened still more, breathing became difficult, my leg and chest ached.

"Now, you will take the clothes and put them on. . . slowly and carefully. Understand?"

"Y. . . yes." I could hardly speak.

The claws released me and I gasped air, starting to reach for my throat. A sword tip tickled the skin of my back and I stopped moving, stopped breathing.

"Good," the Commander grinned, making sure I could see all his teeth. "Now these."

I carefully took the clothes from him. Rough-spun brown breeches and ragged cloak; tight for me, my leg hurt, my nipple burned as fabric brushed it, but they were warm and that was all I cared about. I wrapped the cloak around my shoulders and looked at the officer. Standing, I was almost a full head taller than he. Something flickered in his eyes, ears went back and nostrils flared. I knew fear when I saw it.

And that look vanished under anger and he snapped an order and the chains were brought forward again. I retreated a single small step and suddenly the claws were at my neck again, a low growling in my ear. I went rigid, forced to submit to the chill iron of the restraints again.

The Gulf Commander personally examined the manacles. "Keep your hands in sight all the time," he warned me. "Tomorrow the storm should have abated enough for us to leave. You are going to need the clothing. If the guards have cause to be suspicious of you, if you cause trouble, you will be punished. We do not want to kill you, but you will stay quiet even if we have to fill your skull with drugs."

He signalled for the soldier to release me and I sagged to the floor. They didn't try and stop me when I raised my hands to rub my sore neck; red smears on my fingertips when I looked at them.

"Fragile," the commander hissed.

"Fuck you!" I hissed right back.

He spread his hands in a Sathe shrug and then turned his back on me.

End of conversation.

The soldiers who had clustered around drifted back to their games of chance and story telling, leaving me huddled there, pulling the cloak tight around myself. There was little talking among them, the scrape of chair legs, the clatter of a keyring. . .

That got my attention. There on the table, the keyring, just eight, ten metres. . .

Damnation! I slumped again. They might as well be back in Mainport. Here am I, unarmed, chained to the floor, in a room full of hostiles. I was just going to get up, waltz over and say, "'scuse me, just borrowing these. Alright?"

Right.

Face it, Kelly. Your future don't look too bright.

More footsteps; a half-hearted kick at my ribs to get my attention as the female guard who'd patched me up crouched beside me: "Turn around." I complied. "Hold out your arms," she ordered.

"Do you enjoy this as much as I do?" I muttered as that female double-checked my bonds with a critical eye.

She gave the chains a tug, making sure the links were secure. As if I had a chance of breaking them. "I am only doing my job. . . can you move your fingers?"

"Yeah, right, sure. . . " I muttered in English as I wriggled my digits. Just doing her job. I'd heard that one before.

Her claws caught my shoulder. "Those noises, are they words?"

"What do you think?"

She growled. "I think you do not know when to keep your mouth shut. What did you say?"

"It was not important," I muttered. She squeezed my shoulder once - hard.

Behave yourself. . .

But the hands stayed on my shoulder even when the claws had retracted. Her eyes narrowed and she cocked her head, scrutinising my face. She had a curious ring of white fur that poked out from under the fringe of her mane, encircling her left ear and eye. When she moved her hand upwards, toward my face, I flinched away. She waited, then gently - almost tenderly - touched her fingers to my overgrown hair. She stroked once, twice, then dropped her hand again.

"What. . . " I began and automatically tried to lift my hands to my head only to be stopped when they reached the limit of their chain. "Why did you do that?"

She shrugged "I wanted to see what it felt like. Softer than it looks."

I wasn't sure when I'd started trembling, but then I was aware my chains were rattling. Suddenly I had to know. . . "What is going to happen to me?" I blurted.

That startled her. She stared at me, her nostrils flaring, then she shook her head. "You are to be taken to Riverport. Beyond that, I cannot be sure. I have heard rumours. . . " She broke off and looked around quickly. "There are whisperings that you can sway the balance of the war, ensuring victory for whoever owns you."

"Dammit, all I want is to return to my home! How am I supposed to sway the balance of the war if I cannot even remove these?!" the manacles clattered as I shook them.

She looked at the irons, then met my eyes for the briefest moment. "Listen," she lowered her voice to a whisper. "I will have nothing to do with helping you escape, but if you so choose, I can arrange a death that is a lot quicker." Her hand touched the silver inlaid wood of her scabbard as she spoke. "It could be far preferable to what will probably happen to you in

Riverport."

I didn't say anything. She suddenly looked around as if embarrassed and flowed to her feet in one smooth move. "Sleep now, all right?"

I nodded mutely, not caring if she understood or not, and curled up, my cheek against the rug. Was she trying to be friendly? That offer she had made. . . Was it going to be that bad?

I shuddered at the cold chill that ran down my spine.

The shadows on the rough wood walls danced and flickered into unearthly shapes. Nooks and corners had their own little pools of darkness. Sathé moved around the room without trouble in the dimness, cat's eyes acting like little green mirrors when the firelight caught them.

There was a rattle of metal on metal from the corner by the fireplace. I looked up. The cub gave me a startled look, then gathered up his pots and pans from where he had been taking entirely too long cleaning up.

I slept badly that night: long, indeterminable periods of uneasy wakefulness interspaced with dreams.

I dreamt badly that night.

Dashboard lights. Outside, signposts flashed through the headlights, too fast to read. Tenny was at the wheel, cigar clamped in a corner of his mouth. In the hellish green glow of the dash lights I could see he was grinning, laughing about something. I couldn't hear over the growl and crackle of the engine.

I looked at the sky out my window: glowing red, The air was thick and cloying: like smog, like the choking reek of thamil. Trees were dark shapes like jagged teeth, fangs and claws with a sullen slit of a moon hanging over them.

The sky blinked.

Now there were flames, a searing heat, only this time it was me inside the inferno. Through the flames licking over the windshield I saw a shape blurred by the heat: a human figure standing with head bowed and shoulders slumped, a helmet dangling forgotten from a hand. The heat and noise became unbearable. . .

I thrashed and cried out and opened my eyes to flames not a foot from my face.

"Jesus!" I swallowed a lungfull of smoke. Choking and coughing I backpedalled to the end of my chain, retreating into the corner between stone fireplace and the wall.

The centre of the room was ablaze, a pool of blue-orange fire spreading from the shattered remains of an oil lamp, crawling across the floor between me and the rest of the room. Already it was climbing wooden posts, crackling into the rafters. Ah shit! The roof was thatch!

The chain still refused to give. I grabbed at the tether and hauled back frantically. "Goddamn! You bastards! HELP! Goddamn! HELP ME!"

Beyond the flames and smoke the Sathé were frantically fighting a losing battle against the fire; already being pushed back. Several of them manhandled a bulky object over to the fire and tipped it. Water poured across the floor, washing burning oil aside, but not extinguishing it. The oil just floated on the water, but it created a causeway through fire. A single trooper in leather armour, arm across face, pushed through. That female again.

Already her fur was curling and smoking with the heat. She pulled at the shackles then yelled back through the fire, "KEYS! WHERE ARE THE KEYS!"

There was blurred activity. "I do not know!" came the reply from the other side of the flames.

"FIND THEM!"

"They are not here!"

Then the thatch caught.

There was a soundless explosion of light, a pressure as air was torn

from the room. The female looked up in panic, then turned and fled. The flames roared up behind her.

"Nooo! GODDAMN YOU!" I screamed uselessly into the fire, grabbing onto the chain and yanking until my skin burned and tore and bled, screaming and the staple pulled out of the floor sending me recoiling into the wall.

Now the chains tangled my legs.

Flames spun about me, burning, as I coughed and hacked and tried to scramble for a footing. Smoke rushed into my lungs and I doubled up; coughing. The cold stones of the fireplace were hard up against my back, the flames drawing closer. A rafter collapsed in a shower of sparks and a hand grabbed my shoulder, sharp points digging in. A white-shrouded figure was leaning over me and for a split second I wondered if perhaps I should have adopted a religion.

It shouted somethin inaudible over the roar of flames and fumbled with the locks on my ankles. I felt the fetters on my feet fall away.

Part of the ceiling fell in, steam hissing and sputtering as snow plunged into the flames and was evaporated.

"Hurry!" it screamed into my ear.

I was on my knees, gagging on pain, smoke-blinded, trying to stay low as I stumbled after my guide through the smoke until the Sathe vanished. Where. . . ?

I all but fell into the hole. A hand grabbed my arm and tugged. "Come on!"

A tunnel, dark as pitch and tiny, meant for Sathe stature. I struggled through on belly and elbows, cobwebs dragging at my hair. Every time my chest or leg scraped the ground I wanted to scream, feeling myself go lightheaded, but I couldn't pass out, not there. It was impossible to see, but I could feel, feel the moist earth, wooden supports, bugs that crunched under my hands. Fear when my shoulders wedged and dirt pattered on my neck.

God! Not a cave-in.

Yet, amazingly, it held as I frantically pushed my way through. There was smoke in the tunnel now and breathing was becoming harder by the second. Head down, I crawled. . .

Right into the feet of the Sathe ahead of me. He did something and a cold, dim light filtered past him, along with freezing, fresh air.

"Come on!" he hissed.

I followed him, spilling out of the hole like a worm from its tunnel, rolling into the shock of snow in a low culvert. Red glare shone from the farm fifty metres or so behind us. I snatched a peek: just a pyre of flame with the skeleton of the house in the heart. Silhouettes of Sathe dashing around in confusion. What did all the light do to their night vision? Could they see me?

A hand grabbed my arm, pulling me along. Then we were running, stumbling across a night-cloaked white landscape, roaring of fire hiding the noise of chains, perfect white crystals, glittering with red and orange light, crunching under my feet. So soon after that scorching heat it was bitterly cold. My damaged leg buckled, sending me sprawling, ice crystals scratching at my skin. I spat snow and scrambled after my rescuer.

"Down!"

Again I dove headlong, rolling, landing in a drift in a ditch, almost screaming as my nipple ripped along the snow. I shook ice from my face, feeling the aching chill lancing into my skin again. For a time we lay there before a swat on my back got me up and running again. Across a wide space; blue-dark under the inconstant moonlight. My heart hammered; surely they would see us. . . a shout. . . a crossbow bolt. . . pursuit. They would catch me! I couldn't outrun Sathe!

There was no outcry. Snow-covered fields merged with woodland. Night and shadow mixed under trees. Branches I couldn't see tore at me as I stumbled over invisible roots. Thank god my feet were so numb, I didn't feel the pain as I stubbed my toe yet again. My wounded leg collapsed twice more and the

second time only the other's aid got me back on my feet.

He was short, so small. . . The cub! By God! the cub. The mask against the smoke had fallen from his muzzle and his eyes were wide as he glanced back past me, then at me.

"Th. . . thank you," I managed to get past my rattling teeth.

He waved that aside, hissing, "Come on! Run!"

"I cannot see! It is too dark."

A small hand caught mine and pulled. "Follow!"

We ran. I followed him through the trees, not seeing anything else, just holding his hand and trusting him absolutely. Branches lashed me and I held my other arm over my face, protecting my eyes.

Now the cub stopped me, made me kneel, guided my head into absolute darkness. With my hands I felt another earthen tunnel - this one not more than a metre long - then a tiny round chamber, soft leaves and scraps of cloth lining the floor, the heavy smell of loam and. . . and something else. Here I collapsed, gasping air, the acrid aftertaste of smoke lining my mouth and throat.

"Wait here," I was told.

"W. . . what? Where are you. . . " There was a scrabbling sound.

"Hello?" I ventured.

Silence.

After a time I reached out, trying to determine the limits of my burrow. My shivering hands touched cold earth, then cloth. A few blankets of coarse-woven cloth; something like canvass. I grabbed handfuls and wrapped myself, trying to get away from the freezing earth and air, huddling in the dark, slowly thawing.

The cub was a while returning. I heard the panting in the entrance to the den and remembered wolves before a quiet voice reassured me. There was a metallic tinkling, then hands pushed aside the blankets to work at my irons. It was only seconds before tumblers clicked and the shackles came off.

"Y. . . y. . . you have the k. . . k. . . " my teeth were chattering so hard I couldn't work my mouth around the Sathe words.

"Quiet down," he growled. "Your hands." The manacles were quickly removed.

"T. . . thank you. "

Fur and leathery pads on small fingers touched my skin. "You are still cold? There are more coverings. Here. . . " It was almost a bed he helped me find in the darkness: soft furs under me and blankets - albeit thin and feeling worn to my fingertips - on top. He settled me there, then said, "I have to go now."

"Hey! Please wait. . . "

"They will miss me. There is some food over there. I will come back, " he told me, then there were scuffling sounds and his presence was gone.

"Wait!" I called after him. "Don't. . . " I trailed off into the silence.

There was no reply.

I crouched at the border of field and forest, hidden behind the snow-dusted skeleton of a bush and a drift banked against a fallen trunk.

Now the storm had passed, the sky was a pure cobalt blue with a white sun and the world was a clean as a blank sheet of paper. Over there, a stark contrast to the crystalline snow and achingly clear sunlight, the farm was a cluster of low outbuildings around a blackened mound of timbers. A stiff breeze whisked tails of powder across the fields, piled it millimetre by millimetre against the buildings, making it even colder. And over there a hare worried at the a few remaining leaves on the lower branches of a bush.

There was no other sign of life.

That morning I'd woken alone to light at the entrance to the burrow. It

was a strange little chamber and I spent a time trying to puzzle out what animal had dug it: a badger set? Too big. Wolf? Perhaps, but I didn't think so.

There was food, as the cub had told me the previous night, but precious little. I ate, rationing myself. The dried meat was tough, like old leather, but it filled a hole.

For some time I waited there, hiding. Would my abductors think I'd died in the blaze, or would they be looking for me? Should I stay put or make tracks out of there? Where the hell was I? I spent hours waiting, hoping the cub would return, but there was no sign of him.

Finally I crawled out of my sanctuary.

Strange how people who have never before encountered snow have the impression that is soft, dry, and fluffy. It is none of these things. It is inimical to humans. New-fallen powder may be soft, but after a time it can compress, melt, form a layer of ice on its surface that is quite capable of breaking the skin. My impromptu marathon the last night had left me with lacerations that only that morning were beginning to make themselves noticed. Could've been worse. I'd torn the blankets into strips, divided them between makeshift moccasins and mittens. They'd provide some protection against that, but they weren't waterproof. Frostbite: I'd have to take my chances.

Outside, I squinted in the sunlight, the first I'd seen in God-knows-how-long. I was somewhere in the forest, snow knee-deep all around me. The kid had done a good job of covering our tracks, but I was able to trace tell-tale signs - a half-covered footprint, trampled bracken - back the way we'd come.

The tunnel opening was gone; closed and buried under snow. Just as well. There were the prints of adult Sathes along the culvert: most likely Gulf Sathes. Just making sure.

I limped over to the homestead and spent a while poking through the wreckage. The farmhouse was a gutted ruin. The chimney had collapsed into a pile of rubble. Some of the stones had been moved in an aborted attempt by someone to search the debris, a few beams shifted, but otherwise the ruins were undisturbed.

I pulled the cloak tighter about my shoulders and nudged a blackened beam; it shifted with a grating and a slight cloud of soot. Not very thorough on their part. If they HAD searched the remains they'd have discovered the lack of a body, or even of the chains.

Outside the stable there were the wheel marks of wagons, hoofprints of llamas and bison, already half filled with wind-blown snow. Inside, there were half a dozen crude pallets arranged about the remains of a small fire. Nothing there. The other rickety outbuilding was a storage shed of some kind. Any food had been cleaned out, but there was still some heavy canvass sacking, a few farm implements.

I took up a rusty knife with a handle bound in varnished string and set to work.

A few hours later I was leaving the farm again, this time for the last time. Even through the crude padded jacket and leggings I'd made from the sacking I felt the bite of the wind.

New England winters are harsh.

Most of the day was behind me by the time I reached the road. Like all Sathes roads this far from habitation it was little more than wheel ruts following the path of least resistance around boulders, steep hills, lakes, and gorges. I had almost passed it; missing it completely. Buried beneath the snow it was all but invisible.

I tightened my hold on the cloak around my shoulders and set off at jog. . . well, a fast walk actually, following the road north. At a guess, my captors would have been taking me south, toward the Gulf realm. . . But then

again they might have been headed west, into the neutral territory of the Open Realm. No, not at this time of year. The Appalachians. . . Skyscrapers would be impassable. And this road was the only way to anywhere I had, so I stuck with it.

Kilometre after kilometre crawled by. The cloth wrapped around my feet became torn and soaked. Through the damp, chilling cloth my feet grew cold, numb. They felt as if they weren't even really there; just abstract lumps on the ends of my legs I'd dreamed up to walk on. Muscles that hadn't been used in the long months in the Citadel started complaining, occasionally balking, causing me to stumble. The gash on my thigh throbbed, adding to the pain. I'm not sure when it reopened, but blood began seeping through the rags and running down my leg to chill in a sticky mess.

My jog turned to a walk, to a stagger.

Finally, my legs gave out completely, leaving me sprawled and exhausted in a rut.

An ancient conifer, a pine, with branches that formed a curtain to the ground. Inside this circle, near the trunk, the snow had not encroached and the ground was dry, covered with needles.

I pushed the branches out of the way and wearily sank down on the needles, leaning against the trunk. Huddled in the cloak, I tore at a strip of the dried meat with my teeth, too exhausted to make much of an impression on it. I dropped the meat and closed my eyes.

"Just five minutes," I told myself.

I don't know exactly how long I slept.

A llama's whining bleat sounded through the veils of sleep, jolting me to bleary awareness.

Dim light - morning light - was filtering in through the branches of the tree, throwing moving, stippled light across the ground and me. Beyond the branches, I caught a glimpse of rapid movement before they were pushed aside amidst a deluge of pine needles and snow crystals.

Two cloaked Sathe were silhouetted against the morning sun shining over their shoulder, dazzling me. I gave a yell; fear and desperation turning it into an animal's howl, and hurled myself at them.

They seemed as surprised as I was, falling backwards as they fumbled for their weapons. I pushed past them, knocking them aside, and found myself in a circle of Sathe.

My leg screamed pain as I spun on the spot, but found that the two I'd knocked down had recovered, their swords in their hands. I kept turning, looking only for a way out of there; all I saw was the glittering steel of swords and knives, the swirl of cloaks, shaggy faces with flattened ears snarling.

Something landed on me from behind, clinging and tangling: a net. I tried to throw it off again, but someone tackled me and I hit the ground hard. Thrashing and kicking, I tried to wriggle free, but my legs were pinned. I jabbed with my fingers and elbows and was rewarded with a grunt of pain. A hand grabbed my arm, trying to hold that down as well, hit my chest, sending skyrockets of agony bursting in my skull. I twisted my wrist, caught hold of the hand and wrenched the arm, aiming to crack the elbow. A Sathe howled in pain.

Then they all piled on and hammered away until the lights went out.

Something sent a white-hot burst of stars through the back of my skull and made me whimper with pain.

I was curled up on a hard surface covered with a thin smattering of reeking straw. Everything was shaking and jolting. There was the distant

clattering of wheels and squeaking of axles. A bump, and again the lump on the back of my head met the floor with agonising results.

Dim. A low, wooden roof, metal bars and beyond those a rough, canvass fabric with pale, yellow light filtering through. Animal stink was overwhelmingly strong. My clothes, the rags I'd cobbled together, they were all gone, but the temperature was bearable. Barely; I was still shivering with the cold.

I rolled over onto my hands and knees, my head hanging and my vision blurring in time to the throbbing in my skull. A low growling made me look up into a set of amber eyes and bared fangs. I flung myself backwards against the bars of my cage as the wolf in the next cage snapped and snarled viciously at me.

Cages.

Cages of all sizes stacked in the back of the wagon, animals of all kinds locked within them: Minks, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, gophers, birds of various kinds, a badger, and the beady, bespectacled eyes of a ferret watched me. There were furs of all kinds hanging stacked in piles, other fresher ones hanging from the roof. My prison was a cube about a metre on all sides; not nearly enough room to let me stand or stretch out. The bars were grids of solid iron, a couple of centimetres thick. A clay container with a few dregs of water left in it was strapped to one of the bars. The door was just a hinged side of the cage, held shut by an iron bolt; no lock.

The wolf and I were the largest creatures in the menagerie. It stopped lunging at the bars but retreated to a far corner of its cage and kept growling while it watched me strain my fingers through the bars to reach for the bolt. No go. The thing was rusted stuck, my trembling fingers couldn't budge it.

My throat was parched and swollen. The water in the dish looked fresh, probably melted snow. I drank it all; then shaking wildly, I curled up into a small ball in a corner of the cage, futilely trying to burrow into the straw for as much warmth as I could.

They'd got me again, but why wasn't I guarded? Why was I shut in here? It didn't look as if I were going anywhere, but wouldn't they at least have someone watching me?

What would they do with me?

The wagon creaked and groaned on through the day and occasionally, I could catch snatches of Sathe voices from outside. When we finally stopped there was a long heart-pounding wait before the flap at the back was flung open.

The wolf shrank back, snarling and I cowered back with an arm flung up against the half-blinding light. The Sathe who rocked the wagon as he clambered into the back of the wagon was a complete stranger, not wearing armour, just a pair of dirty breeches and a thick leather guard around his left wrist. From the wooden bucket he was carrying he pulled something that he tossed into the wolf's cage, then dipped his hand back into the bucket and threw a lump into mine.

Raw meat.

For a time I stared at it. I was starving.

But raw meat?!

I snatched it up, ripped a chunk off and forced it down. Cold and raw, juices trickling over my hands, like rubber in my mouth.

The wolf had already devoured his meal and was snuffling around in case he'd missed anything when my stomach clenched violently. I doubled over and puked, bringing back up what'd just gone down, heaving until my stomach was empty and I was curled up in a retching, trembling ball.

"It looks ill, Ma'am," a rough voice grated. "It hasn't even tried to eat anything since it vomited everywhere."

I lay quietly, staring dully at the Sathe who appeared beyond the bars of my cage. A female, decked in blue and dark green; a cloak and breeches. She stared at me, then turned to address someone behind her, "What have you been feeding it?"

"Meat. It ate some, then was sick and has touched nothing since."

Something sharp jabbed me and I tried to press further back into the unyielding iron. "Try something else," she said. "Try and keep it alive. Incredibly ugly thing. Have you ever heard of anything like it before?"

"No. Never."

"Saaaa," there was a long drawn-out hiss. "Neither have I. That rare. It is bound to be worth something then. Perhaps it prefers plants:berries and leaves."

"But then it would not have touched the meat."

"Huh! Depends how hungry it was. Bears eat both. Try it." She turned to leave.

"Who are you?" I tried to say, my voice seizing in my swollen throat. The female's head snapped around to her companion. "What? Did you say.

. . ."

I licked my lips and forced my mouth around the Sathe words. "Who are you?"

"My Ancestors. . . " Sathe gaped at me. "It TALKS!"

I struggled to sit up, finally propping my back against the bars and panting with the effort. "Who. . . who are you?"

The female squatted before the cage, staring at me. "Can you understand us?"

She didn't KNOW! My heart leapt. "You are not Gulf?"

There were more faces appearing behind her, all staring at me.

Again she looked me over, as if unable to believe what she was seeing.

Slowly her ears went back and she hissed, "No, Eastern. What are you?"

But I was just staring at her. "Eastern?"

"Yes, Eastern!"

"Ohjesus!" I buried my head in my hands and sobbed in sheer relief.

"Answer me!" the female hissed. "What ARE you!"

I looked at her, at her face, the anger and pure distaste in her eyes. I suddenly felt fear. "My n. . . name is Kelly. Please, let me out."

"Let you out?!" she snorted incredulously. "Something like you must be worth a fortune!"

"Wha . . ." My heart lurched into doubletime. "No! You cannot. . . "

"But I can," she smiled. "Who did you escape from. Who was your previous owner? Ah, I can make a lot of profit from you and I do not intend to lose you!"

I made a small noise, not really believing what I was hearing. "But. . . No owner. . . I am. . . I am not an. . . animal."

"You smell like one! You stay in there."

"No!" I lunged forward, grabbing at her through the bars.

She was faster than anything has a right to be. Her sword jabbed my shoulder, drawing a stream of blood. I scrambled back with a yelp and clutched at the wound, panting.

"Please. Do not do this. I am not. . . dangerous. . . I am a friend to the Shirai. Please! You have my word I. . . I will stay!"

Her muzzle wrinkled, baring white, pointed teeth and she ran her gaze over me, taking in the tattered and torn clothing, bandages across my chest and leg, the red marks on my wrists. . .

"A friend to the Shirai you say," she sneered. "Not dangerous. . . Animal, you just tried to attack me. You have broken S'kasavienr's arm and the Shirai would never consort with a reeking pile of filth such as you." With that she turned and jumped from the wagon. I saw Sathe had gathered behind the wagon where they were staring at me. "What are you gaping at!" the female snarled at them. "Move your tails! Go! Get out of here! There is work to do!"

She turned to the Sathé with the leather wristguards. The gamekeeper, I realised with a hollow feeling. "I want that thing chained," she ordered. "Keep it alive, but do not let it out on any account."

The gamekeeper looked at me. "But if it knows the Shirai. . . "

"You do not believe that?! Look at it! Look at the marks on its wrists! It has been chained recently and I am willing to lay bets that it escaped from someone's collection. Perhaps even the Shirai's."

"No," I croaked in disbelief. "No! I did. . ."

"You shut it!" she snarled at me. "Keep it shut! We can always take your tongue!" Then she turned back to the gamekeeper: "You heard how anxious it was to learn if we were Eastern. It may be worth a fortune." The Sathé looked at me and I stared back in shock. "I know several collectors who would pay a great deal for a rare specimen like this."

"No. . . "

Later on, several of the Sathé opened the cage and forced me to lie face-down at sword point. I couldn't do anything while they fastened an iron collar around my neck and riveted it shut with hammers. When they withdrew I just stared at the heavy links of the chain running from my collar to the bars of the cage.

"It is an animal," the female had said. "Keep it alive, but whatever you do, don't let it escape. If it even gets out of that cage I will have your hides for blankets!"

The shivering and fever got worse.

They fed me pieces of raw meat or stale bread, ignoring my protests. At first I tried to force the meals down, but I just couldn't stomach it, there wasn't enough water and gradually I couldn't be bothered to make the effort to eat at all. I had to live with rotting food and the stink of my own wastes until they were cleaned away by a perfunctionary bucket of freezing water sloshed into my cage when someone got around to it.

The days were hot and cold blurs of darkness and nauseating jolting and Sathé faces thrusting inedible food upon me. My leg throbbed in pain, the wound turning black and foul-smelling. My body kept trying to vomit, but there was nothing left. All I could do was lie there, staring dully at the bars, the wounds the collar had chafed in my neck stinging painfully. Noises of the animals chattering and squeaking merged with the dull pounding in my skull. Time stretched, melting with the misery until even that died into a drifting detachment.

I was almost dead by the time the caravan reached Sand Circle.

Winter sunlight streamed in as the canvass flap across the back of the wagon was thrown aside.

The Sathé soldier in blue and silver livery looked bored as he carried out his inspection of the wagon. His eyes travelled over me, to the wolf curled up and staring sullenly back at him, to the other cages, then back to me. He leaned closer, blinked in mild bemusement, his muzzle wrinkling at the stench from my cage, then took a scroll from its case at his belt and unrolled it. With widening eyes, he looked from the scroll to me then back to the scroll.

I stared back without really seeing him.

Then he was gone and I faded out again.

The voices woke me up. The cage door hung open and Sathé leaned over me, their voices loud as they called to others, but their hands were gentle as they touched me. Anger set their ears back when they examined the black collar biting into my neck, then tools were working at the metal.

"Careful! He's been burned."

"Tortured you mean. . . By my mother's tits! Look at his leg!"

"Ai. Bad."

"I wouldn't keep my llama like this!"

"Rot you, move! Out of the way!" Another face - familiar black fur - pushing others aside and freezing in shock. "Oh, my Ancestors. K'hy? K'hy Do not move! My Ancestors. Do not try to speak. You are safe now. Hear me? Safe. Rot it! Get him out of there!"

I croaked something unintelligible and tried to touch her face. She caught my hands and clasped them in her own, then a blanket covered me; warmth after so long. When they lifted me onto a makeshift stretcher she stayed by me, stroking my face. I remember glimpses of blue sky and a sun that dazzled me, also a furious female Sathé being held by guards, her hide slashed and bleeding from marks left by raking claws. There was shouting, then a pause while several unfamiliar Sathé leaned over to stare down at me. One of them said something, then I was moved again.

Indoors, carried through doors, up stairs, along corridors. In a bright room Sathé fussed over my leg and chest while the dark-furred female stroked my brow and calmed me during the pain. After that came the warmth and vague pleasure of a bath, hands with fur slicked down by water washing me then carefully rubbing me down with rough towels. There were the cool sheets of a bed against my bare skin, then the salty flavour of something hot forced between my lips. Hands held my mouth closed while I choked and gagged and finally swallowed and then the fever hit me again.

I awoke with a gasp in almost complete darkness. Sweat beaded on my face and body, the clammy cotton sheets adhering to my skin. For several minutes I just lay there, gasping and listening to my heart settling down to a regular pulse. The dream was already fading back into the recesses of my mind, but it still left me shaking. Flashes - barely remembered glimpses of pain, bars and blades, hate and claws. . .

I let out a shuddering sigh, finally taking a breath and looking around. Blackness, the faint glow of a dying fire. The only door was delineated by the thin spread of light shining through from the other side.

The sanded floorboards were cool and smooth under my bare feet as I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, grabbing for the side of the bed as my legs buckled beneath me. I rested, examining my wounds. My upper thigh was heavily bandaged and was throbbing angrily. My ruined nipple was scabbed over and looked absolutely terrible, but seemed clean. I grimaced and rested a few seconds, then tried again. This time I made it to the door, but even that exhausted me. I had to lean against the frame as I fumbled with the latch. The door swung open with a squeal of misaligned hinges and I squinted into glow of the lantern on the wall opposite.

A long corridor panelled in a dark wood, rugs on the floor and paintings on the walls. Closed doorways flanked either side of the passage while at one end it finished in a latticed window - dark outside - and at the other in the blank wall of a T- junction. I made it three-quarters of the way to the junction before I had to rest, slumped against a panel beside a portrait of a Sathé noble with a condescending gaze.

A Sathé carrying a tray and decked out in the simple kilt of a servant turned into the corridor, saw me and jerked back with a startled bark. The tray hit the floor with a crash and a rattle as several bowls rolled to a standstill, their contents staining a rug brown.

For a second he just gaped at me while I watched him nervously. He was a stranger, and recently I had had some bad experiences with strange Sathé. When he closed his mouth and came towards me, I flinched away.

"Hai, no." He stopped, setting his face in what he must have hoped was a reassuring expression. "You should not be out here," he said in the same kind of tone one might use on a child. A couple of paces away from me he stopped,

held out his hand, then drew it back again. "Can you understand?" he asked, unsure of himself. "You must go back to your room."

"No," I shook my head. "Where is Tahr?"

"Your room, please!"

"Fuck off, runt !" I pushed past him and lurched off down the corridor, reeling against walls. The domicile scurried after, futilely pleading that I return to my quarters, that he would send Remae to me. Sathe appeared in doorways, stepping back as I passed. Finally several soldiers in the livery of the Eastern Realm burst into the corridor in front of me. I snarled at them, sweat running down my face, and they started to crouch, their hands going for their swords.

"No, do not hurt him!" the servant yelled.

"Hurt HIM?!" one of the guards snarled. "He was not the one I was worried about!" However they left their swords and claws sheathed and began to move in on me. I only struggled briefly, futilely. I could scarcely stand. What hope did I have against armed troopers? I gave in, letting them half-walk, half-carry me back to my room.

I lay limply on the bed and simply stared at the ceiling while a fire was laid and lit and guards stared at me. I could feel the traces of fever burning in my body; just dying embers, an echo of the heat that had raged and stormed through my dreams.

When the door opened again, I turned my head to see the moving blackness that was Remae enter. Her eyes flared briefly in my direction before she turned to the guards. There was a brief exchange with several references to yours truly, then the troopers bowed and left. Remae snagged a chair and brought it over to my bedside, sitting down and leaning forward with hands clasped on her knees.

There was a pause.

"How are you feeling?" she finally asked.

I lolled my head over to see her better. "Where is Tahr?"

Her ears matted, "Still in Mainport. A messenger has been dispatched."

"Uhhh?" I looked around. "I thought this was Mainport."

Her hand waved as she waved a negative. "No, Sand Circle. Mainport is six days away. The trappers who found you brought you here."

I closed my eyes and grimaced. It was a haze. "Trappers?"

"You do not remember?"

I tried. "There were Sathe and. . . and a cage. Only pieces. . . I am sorry."

Remae leaned back into the chair and steepled her hands, her chin resting on two fingers. It almost looked as if she were praying and that might have been funny at another place, another time.

"There's no need to be, K'hy. Their intention was to take you to Mainport, to sell you, but I doubt that you would have survived the journey." She reached out and took my arm. Her stubby thumb and forefinger were able to close around my forearm. "It is nothing I would wish to remember. You were nothing but bones with a little flesh attached. You still are. That little walk you took will not help. You must rest. . . "

There was an interruption then as the door opened and a servant entered with a tray. Remae waited until he had placed it upon a table and left, then the Marshal rose and poured water from a jug into a strangely wrought cup: all lopsided with swirls and bulges in the glass. She picked up a small sachet and looked at me. "This is to help you sleep. It is tasteless and quite safe for you; we have been using it to quell the dreams you have been having."

I drew back slightly into the cushions. More drugs. "Do you really think I need it?"

"Yes."

I sighed: "Very well."

With a delicate claw she tore sachet open and poured a powdery substance into the water, stirred it slowly with a swizzle stick. I cautiously sniffed

the concoction, then while Remae propped my shoulders up, I drank. She was right, there was absolutely no taste and the water was the best thing I'd felt in ages. "It will take a short time to work," she said as she laid the glass aside.

I lay back and waited for my awareness to start to fade.

After a while: "K'hy?"

"Hmmp?" I mumbled, already floating away on warm waves.

"Can you forgive us? For everything Sathe have done to you, can you forgive us?"

"I will work on it," I said, then smiled and fumbled after her hand. She hesitated, then clasped it: just lightly at first.

The Marshal of the Eastern Realm held my hand and watched me until I slept again.

Thri ai Hast, lord of the Hast clan sat at the head of the table. A young, slightly-built male Sathe. Red breeches went well with his reddish-brown fur and a distinctive white fur blaise marked his chest fur over his sternum, if that's what you call it on a Sathe.

Beside him, his mate was a female who looked young. . . well, no older than Tahr, with fawn-coloured fur, dark stripes on her forearms, blue breeches. In each ear she bore a single, silver ring. Opposite, Remae was a black, muscular figure innocuously sipping delicately at her spouted wine goblet.

The room wasn't the large hall where banquets and meals were held to impress visiting nobility, it was a more informal place. Dark wooden panels and a few tapestries lined the walls while a pine table dominated the centre of the room. A fireplace set in one wall blazed fiercely, keeping the room and the food set on an iron grid before it, warm.

Neither of the nobles seemed to know what to make of me.

There was no doubt that they'd had plenty of time to study me while I slept. I had a hazy recollection of the Clan Lord's female standing over me, hastily pulling her hand away from the scars on my chest as I opened my eyes. What had she been thinking? Disgust? fear? perhaps sympathy?

And now they watched me again. The small amount of meat on the platter before me had been specially overcooked, tasting fantastic to me, but the looks upon the faces of the Sathe as they ate their own almost-raw fare made it obvious that they wondered how I could eat the charred stuff.

Of course they asked me what I was, where I was from, how I came here. So - once again - I told my story. It was starting to become a litany, but what the hell; it was great for breaking the ice. Eventually the conversation worked its way on through the smalltalk to the point where Remae explained what had happened after my abduction:

"We did not know what had happened when you disappeared, K'hy." Remae paused to rip a goblet of meat from the haunch she held in both hands, then continued with juices matting the fur around her mouth. "Tahr went ordered immediate searches of the town, the Citadel, and the countryside. Messengers were sent to all the nearby towns to alert the garrisons.

"At first we did not know what had happened to you. They said you'd gone and we didn't know if you had decided to leave us of your own will or had been taken by force, but when we found traces of thamil in your quarters the Shirai went berserk. She ordered a massive search of all towns and roads between Mainport and the western borders."

"Excuse me, Marshal," Thri looked slightly puzzled. "Thamil? What relevance does that have?"

Remae looked at me before answering. "From what I have been told, it does not affect him as it does us. To him it is a powerful soporific. That is why we have been using a derivative of it to help him sleep."

"Thamil?" Thri repeated, looking at me. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I am not entirely sure. I . . . work differently from you. Things like thamil have different effects on me. Not so pleasant."

The Sathe still looked bewildered. Their nobility used thamil as humans used designer drugs or used to use expensive tobacco; how could it be dangerous to anyone? That was the point when the conversation turned to human vices and pleasures. Awkward and somewhat embarrassing to me, filled with entertaining titbits for the Sathe. It was some time later before it wound its way back to the present situation.

"Remae, how long have I been gone?"

"Two and a half weeks now."

What? God, how long had they kept me drugged? Everything had been so chaotic, I'd lost all track. How long had it been since the trappers had found me? Since the fire?

"Do you think they will be all right?" I asked quietly.

Thri looked away while Remae stared into her goblet, swirled the wine inside. "We will not know until the patrol returns. . . It will depend upon the Gulf troops," Thri answered.

I swallowed hard to choke back the lump forming in my throat.

"K'hy," Remae said, I looked at her and saw her expression was gentle and a little sad, "We will not be able to wait for the patrol."

"Yeah , I know." I sighed. "Please, if you will excuse me."

"Of course," Thri said.

"Do you need help?" Remae asked.

I shook my head. The marshall cocked her head, watching me shuffle out on my walking stick.

The room was simple, wooden panelling, a shuttered window, a few pieces of furniture and of course the circular bed in the centre of the room. The only light came from the fire that had been laid so the room would be a comfortable temperature for me. Even so, I sat with my legs crossed in the middle of the bed, the blankets pulled up around my shoulders like a shawl. In my mind I ran over what I had done. . . what I could have done.

I should've realised what would happen to the family. With me gone, the bastards would have had no further use for them when they moved out. . . They were alien, I was alien, but that family had set light to their own home to help me. At what cost to themselves. . . ?

The door squeaked slightly as it swung open. I looked up, startled. Remae stepped into the room, one hand holding the door. She was almost invisible in the dim light, her dark fur blurring in with the shadows, but her eyes burned like green coals. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I am fine," I forced a smile. "Did you want something?"

"I was just checking on you. Tahr would have my pelt if anything. . .
" She trailed off then with a gentle hiss. She closed the door and came to stand by the edge of the bed. "K'hy, I noticed it downstairs. What is wrong?" The glowing embers of the fire shone through her fur, outlining her in flickering orange. "Do you want to talk?"

"What makes you think there is something the matter?"

She snorted. "I have stood here and watched you scream as you lived the emotions of your dreams: fear, pain, hatred, love, pleasure. . . I think I have known you long enough to be able to read your moods. I can tell when something is bothering you. Do you want to talk?"

"No," I shuddered. "Please, just leave me alone." It just washed over me: I couldn't face the. . . the ALIEN in front of me. I was scared and alone in a world where I was a pawn in a game I only half understood. All I wanted to do was curl up and wait till it went away.

She ducked her head. "All right, then. As you wish." She walked back to the door and placed one hand on the latch. "They would have killed them anyway. Do not blame it on yourself. . . Good sleep, K'hy."

The door's hinges screamed like a comment behind her.

The cellars of the Keep were cold, dark. They reeked of urine and something less tangible. Fear? Beneath my feet the steps were damp and slimy, as were all things down here. The stones of the walls leaked moisture and lichen abounded in these dank corridors and stairs. It was a screaming contrast to the culture of the panelled and ornate hallways upstairs. A textbook dungeon.

The torch of the Sathe guard in front of me began to gutter and he paused to pull another pair from a rust-encrusted iron sconce in the wall. The wood sputtered and smoked into life and the guard continued down the passage that was an inch deep in opaque water.

"Here," he finally said, stopping at a heavy door barred by a wooden beam. He started to open it, then hesitated, tipping his head and asking, "Are you sure?"

"Just open it," I snapped, nerves making me touchy.

He shrugged then removed the beam and stood it aside while he pulled the door open. Warped from the moisture, it stuck halfway. The fetid stench that wafted out of that hole was indescribable, had me dry-retching.

The cell was tiny: two metres by two, and not tall enough for me to stand upright. I held the torch up, squinting past the flame to make sense of the cell's shadows. It was the only light, without it the cell would've been a black, wet, reeking hole. Opposite, in a niche carved into the damp stone wall, the lone occupant was shielding her eyes from the sudden light, blinking, dazzled. Then she made a small, strangled noise.

"N. . . No. . . No," she choked. "Guard. . . GUARDS!"

The rough stone walls seemed to swallow her cry. Even so, the guard outside must have heard her, but he didn't respond. Oh Jeeze, she was a pathetic sight: There were dark scratches down her muzzle, one of her ears was ripped and torn, her fur was filthy and plastered to her skin by water and dirt, and she had obviously not been eating. Rust-stained manacles around her wrists were chained to an iron loop in the wall. They rattled as she held her hands out as if trying to push me away.

"GUARD!" she screamed again, then her eyes seemed to glaze, refusing to focus on me. "Go. . . Go. . . Get out, get outgetoutgetoutgetout. . ." she was panting wildly.

I held the torch out to the side as I approached her, sidestepping a puddle in the centre of the cell. She shrank away, as if she were trying to ooze into the cracks in the wall, covering her head with her arms.

I crouched down in front of her. "I am not going to hurt you," I said, then waited for some kind of response. Nothing: she just huddled there, trembling. "Look," I continued. "I just want to ask you something. . . Hey!"

She gave no indication that she'd even heard me.

"Please, listen to me! Either after or before you. . . found me, did you see anyone else? Another convoy? Just some Sathe? Anyone?"

In the silence afterwards I heard the guard outside cough, water drip from the ceiling. She didn't answer. After everything she'd done to me, almost killed me. . . Damnation! I was going to get something! That anger lent me strength to seize her mane and twist her around to face me. She mewed and tried to hiss, then started panting again, staring at me with fascinated terror. "Fuck it! Listen to me!" I yelled into her face, shaking her.

She started chattering uncontrollably.

With that my strength deserted me. My head reeled and I lurched back away from her, breathing hard from the exertion. No. . . I wasn't going to collapse, not here. The whites of her eyes were showing as she stared, teeth glinting. This was something I'd never seen in a Sathe before.

"Get away from me," she moaned.

"Tell me," I replied. "Did you see anyone?"

"No!" she tried to bury her head again, then raised it, looking anywhere but at me and her words turned to a babble, "No! I. . . There was a caravan. Going the other way. In a hurry. I did not see. . ."

"They had a cub with them?"

"I did not see! I DID NOT SEE!"

"How do I know?"

She moaned.

The torch flickered in a draft, the smoke staining the ceiling black and stinging my eyes. I blinked, weighing up the female huddled there. She buried her head again, trembling violently. Scared. Too scared to lie? How was I supposed to tell? She'd never shown the slightest compassion or mercy toward me; what was to say she was being honest with me now?

"You are sure."

"I do not know." The voice was so small, tiny in the stillness of the dungeon.

I stood there for some time, watching her. She stared back, breathing fast and shallow with the white of that third eyelid partially eclipsing her eyes, glittering technicolour with the torchlight. Moisture dripped and glittered in the dimness. The guard coughed again.

Finally, I nodded, slowly and told her, "I am going to believe you, but let me tell you: if I find I have been lied to, I will be back. You understand that?"

She just stared at me, huddling in on herself. Closer, and I caught the sharp smell hanging over the general miasma: the stink of fresh urine. It stopped me in my tracks and I was sure she wasn't lying and that her terror was genuine. That feeling, to have someone so petrified of you they lost control of themselves; it's not pleasant to learn you're a deepest and darkest nightmare come to life. It hurt with the pain I feel when cubs run from me in fright.

My tongue failed me. I did the first thing I could think of, unbuttoning my cloak and draping it over her. I waited awkwardly for a few seconds while she just. . . just stared at me, at my chest, as though looking right through me. With goosebumps breaking out on my skin I left that reeking little hole.

The guard stared at me and I ignored him. He didn't say anything and there was a hollow thud as he dropped the bar back into place across the door. I could imagine her curling up in a small ball on the icy stone as the darkness closed in around her.

It was a long, cold walk back up from those depths.

Remae intercepted me on the ground floor as I came past the guards. She took one look and whipped her own cloak off, throwing it about my shoulders. "Rot you, you fool! By the Plagues! Why did you go down there? And you gave her your cloak, didn't you?"

I didn't bother answering, just pushed past her and started off down the hall. She caught me before I'd gone five steps, hooking claws into my sleeves and pulling me up short, pushing me against a wall to snarl up at me. "Shave you, K'hy! What were you doing down there?!"

I shrugged. "Looking for answers."

Her head drew back. "Did you find them?"

I looked at the floor: "No."

She hissed softly and disengaged her claws from the folds of the sleeve, then turned to chase after the guard who'd let me down there.

"Remae."

She turned.

"Let her go."

"Who?" She blinked. "The one down below?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "Let her go."

She cocked her head and frowned, furrows wrinkling the velvet of her muzzle. "What? Why?"

"What laws has she broken?"

Remae stopped with her mouth hanging open, surprise at my question turning to a level stare, as if she were trying to see what was going on in my head. "K'hy, you must understand. Laws are dictated from ages past; they can be difficult. When a person is taken against their will there is no. . . "

"Would I be considered a person by your laws?"

Her mouth snapped shut. A tic twitched at her jaw.

I nodded slowly, my legs feeling rubbery. I'd thought as much; When it came down to the crunch, I wasn't a person. I swallowed bile and began to turn to head back to my rooms and the promise of warmth there, pausing to say again to the Marshal, "Remae, let her go."

Morninglight; the white landscape bathed in that crisp light and shadow that is the early morning. The blue vault of the sky was of a hue that made it appear almost solid, the airy clouds across the horizon cloaking mountain peaks in mist.

Cocooned in furs I was bundled into the back of a wagon hitched to a pair of bison encrusted in sparkling ice-crystals, steam snorting from their nostrils. The iron-bound wheels of the wagons and hooves of the llamas clattered and skidded on the ice-coated cobbles as the small caravan wound its way out of the town and across the whitewashed landscape.

It didn't take me long to realise I was getting the bird in the gilded cage treatment. The wagon was comfortable; luxurious by Sathé standards with padded benches, cushions, warm furs and sheets; all obviously put there with me in mind. But there were also the guards, two of them, one male the other female. I know they were there for my own protection, but I was sick of being watched over.

The pair were stony-silent as we put the town behind us, both of them avoiding my eyes. At midday the caravan paused to rest the animals and let the riders stretch their legs, however I was lucky to be able to talk Remae into letting me out of the wagon. Well, 'talk' isn't exactly the right word; rant would be better. She gave way to my anger looking more than a little surprised.

I lay dozing, half-in half-out of sleep, suffused with that warm glow that comes after eating. There was the rocking, lurching movement of the wagon that I'd almost learned to ignore, the rumbling and fingernail-on-blackboard screech of badly greased axles that I hadn't, and the soft sibilants of Sathé talking. About me.

"If you have something to say about me," I said, "why do you not simply ask me. Instead of whispering behind my back." I stretched and rolled over to see them staring at me. "Well? you were talking about me?"

The pair looked embarrassed. "Saaa! Yes. . . Sir," the female began, then looked to the male.

"Sir," he took over, "are you the one all the madness has been about?"

"Madness?"

"Sir. . . most of the Citadel troops are searching for you. . . also the militia of a dozen towns. You must be important to someone."

"Oh. That."

"There were rumours around Mainport that the Shirai had herself a fearsome creature. . . you do not look so fearsome."

"That would depend upon the mood I am in," I grinned back at him and they both stiffened at the sight of my teeth. "Sorry, that is how I smile," I apologised. They still looked pensive.

Of course they asked what I was. I gave my usual answer.

"Your name is H'ey?"

"Kelly," I corrected. "It has a 'K'."

"K'hy." They tried, but their pronunciations still missed the palatal ells, transforming my name into a cough with a hiss in its train.

"Strange name," the female said.

"Yes," I sighed. No point in disputing that. Here - to alien ears - it

is a weird name.

The male was called Chirthi, and the female. . .

"R'Raschhhh. . ." I broke off, almost choking on the tongue-twister.

"No. . . R'R'Rhasct, it is easy," she said and repeated her name, enunciating. It sounded like a cat being deep fried.

My efforts to get the pronunciation of her name correct had them in hysterics; a pair of armed cats hissing their heads off with laughter. But eventually they took mercy on me, letting me call her Rhasct. Even though - to Sathe - it was a totally different name, I could at least pronounce it.

I wondered how they would cope with a name like 'Elizabeth'.

They confessed they had been 'volunteered' by their superiors to be my guard, but it seems they had the last laugh. It was a cushy job, I wasn't too unpleasant, and they got to ride in comfort and warmth. They couldn't understand why I wrapped so many blankets around myself.

They taught me to play Thsaa, a game in which small, flattened sticks with various dotted patterns on them were used in place of cards. The object of the game was to get several sets of various different patterns. The sets you had to collect were determined by the first hand you were dealt. You could dispose of sticks and pick up new ones. The first to get the necessary hand was the winner. It was a simple game and helped pass the time.

When we stopped for the night, I once again had a guard with me when I had to relieve myself. Sleeping arrangements stuck me in the wagon with my guards, both the Sathe taking it in shifts to keep watch. I huddled under my piles of sheets and furs, unable to sleep, watching Rhasct's silhouette perched at the front of the wagon. In the dark I felt a furry arm bump against my back as its owner rolled over in his sleep. What a crazy universe.

THE HUMAN MEMOIRS
PART III

When so many are lonely
as seem to be lonely,
it would be inexcusably
selfish to be lonely
alone.

--TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

The day started as it had way back when Tahr and I were on the road. How long ago was that now? God, almost a year now. Ah, things were simpler then, when we'd first met, back in the good ol' days: Living day to day, up with the sun, break camp, and eat a cold breakfast on the move. Usually what was left of last night's dinner.

A clear, crisp morning; one of those days that winter lives for. A translucent, half-hearted mist clung to the snowy countryside, sinking like an insubstantial tide as the sun slowly warmed it. The sky was a cobalt blue so sharp it cut.

Off in the distance a flock of geese - flying in V-formation - skimmed low over the mirror-perfect surface of a lake that for some reason had remained unfrozen, the still water reflecting the birds and the bare trees

along its shore . . . until the birds touched down, their wakes spreading ripples of distortion out across the crystal surface.

New England would have looked like this, before the Europeans arrived. Indeed it was a paradise, but when everyone turns up expecting a share of paradise, it very rapidly becomes something else. Was that going to happen back home? Had it already happened?

I reached out to push the flap back further. The outside air was cold, but fresh. I'd been cooped up for too long already.

"Sir?"

It was Chirthi. He reached past me to close the flap again. "I am sorry sir, but I cannot let you do that."

"Huh? Do what?"

"Sit like that, where someone might see you."

I didn't quite believe this. "Say what? Why?"

"Orders, sir." He ducked his head.

I drew a deep breath. "Chirthi, you cannot read my expressions very well, can you. Do you know how I'm feeling?"

He looked wary - rightly so. "Ah, no sir."

"Annoyed!" I snarled. "Who told you to keep me inside?!"

He cringed back, ears flattening. "The Marshal, sir. She ordered us to keep you in the wagon, out of sight, even if we have to chain you. If anything happened to you, or if you even got out to relieve yourself unaccompanied, she would drown us in the nearest river."

I wanted to punch something. "All right then," I grated, "I will not try to make your job any harder."

"We would appreciate that," R'R'Rhasct smiled. I rolled my eyes and wished the sarcasm wouldn't go past them so easily; took the fun out of it. Oh, shit, I sighed and settled back into the cushions. Tired. I still wore out easily. If my guards wanted to physically restrain me, they'd have little trouble.

It was later that evening, when Remae brought me my food, I had the chance to ask her why I was being treated like I was under house arrest.

"Your safety, K'hy," she said. "Look, if they were Gulf Realm who abducted you, then there could be a war brewing. They outnumber us, badly."

"But, those maps you showed me. The Realms are about the same size. Anyway, what has that to do with me not being able to go and relieve myself without a cub watcher?" I demanded.

"Huh . . . Those maps show the land we hold, not the number of Sathe on the land. The Swamp Lands to the south are almost worthless; too hot and wet. Insects, diseases, and hurricanes . . . There are not many Sathe who would wish to make their homes there."

Yeah, it'd been a long time before the Florida peninsula back home was settled.

"Also," she continued, "the Gulf realm has grown a lot over the past fifty years, they have built three new towns in the west."

Three towns in fifty years was a LOT?! I was about to ask about that but she kept talking.

"We knew they were increasing the sizes of their armed forces, but we did not realise the magnitude of these increases. They did it subtly, never marshalling large numbers of troops in one place. We just never knew just how many they had. When they recalled garrisons from outlying settlements they had a trained army that hopelessly outnumbers our own. Putting it simply, they are equipped for a war, we are not. So we need something to even the odds. You and you knowledge may be it, and they know it. They have tried to steal you from us once and failed. They may try again, or . . . or they might to decide to eliminate the thing that could possibly help to balance our forces."

Why didn't she just say it? "Kill me."

"Yes." She twitched a shoulder; an imitation shrug? I wasn't sure. "You see why I have ordered you kept under guard and out of sight. If they think you have been lost in the wilderness, all the better."

"You think they will try again?"

"I am not sure, but if their spies report you alive and causing trouble, I think there is a very good chance they will. This time they may not bother with trying to take you alive either. A well-aimed crossbow bolt would put an end to their problems. It all depends on how large a risk they consider you."

"Thanks," I grimaced. "That makes me feel a whole lot better." I doubted they would have gone to all the trouble of kidnapping me if they thought I would be a minor irritation. Up to that point they had contented themselves with hit and run operations, making sure that their operatives struck at targets they could be sure of destroying while remaining anonymous. Now, with my abduction that had changed. They were willing to risk the disapproval of the other major powers just to snatch at a relatively unimportant target.

How unimportant was I?

Damnation! Given long enough a dedicated interrogator could get enough information out of me to give them a serious edge, technology-wise. I knew how to make gunpowder, I knew how to make a steam engine, or a glider or an electrical generator. I knew more efficient methods of refining iron ore, of smelting steel and of casting it.

Perhaps the Eastern Realm had not deemed it an extravagance to put most of their forces on the watch for me. Now I knew that both sides wanted me . . . Bad.

But perhaps there was a difference in their motives.

"Six-eyes again!" R'R'Rhasct laughed. "Full set. That's two hundred and five golds you owe me, K'hy."

"Shit!" I muttered. "All right, another hand. I cannot keep losing."

"Perhaps," Chirthi grinned, "but you are pretty consistent."

"Ah! Fuck you!"

"What?"

"I was just congratulating you on your luck," I replied airily. They both laughed at that and R'R'Rhasct swirled her hand, spreading the sticks in a starburst - marked faces down - and plucked one at random, then another, and another, finally setting one back: "Your draw."

I picked my chits, and selected the trio:three dots in an equilateral triangle. As Chirthi took his turn, I asked, "What can you do for entertainment in Mainport?"

"Well," R'R'Rhasct began with a glint in her eyes, "You can buy anything and anyone: males, females. I am sure you can find someone who would . . ."

"Not that kind of entertainment," I broke in. They both hissed their amusement. "Seriously."

"Seriously," Chirthi said. "There are inns and taverns everywhere. Also a couple of theatres and libraries." That sounded interesting. I wondered what a Sathe play would be like. "Or - if it is more to your liking - you may be able to find a fight-pit."

"Ah . . . Fight-pit?"

"You do not know of them? Well, I suppose they are not spoken of a great deal. Well, two or more Sathe are placed in an arena where they . . ."

"Fight," I finished.

"Sort of predictable, ah?" R'R'Rhasct grinned. "Sometimes Sathe against Sathe; sometimes Sathe against animals."

I shook my head. "Uh-Uh. It does not sound like my kind of place."

They looked at each other in surprise. "Fighting is not to your liking?"

"Just say I have grown very tired of it," I said picking up another stick. "Alright . . . What are the taverns like?"

"Huh!" R'R'Rhasct coughed. "Best in the Realm. But the water holes up in the Citadel are too to heavily policed. They are tame, boring. Only the clawless retainers patronise them. You should try the ones down by the docks. I would recommend the Red Sails."

"Best food by far," Chirthi agreed. "They have actually got someone who knows how to cook. Also good ale and musicians, and at that place I think they would not even notice one such as yourself!" he laughed again and rejected another stick. R'R'Rhasct also laughed and picked one up.

"Hahh!" she grinned and laid her hand out: TWO full sets this time - four quads and the five pentagons.

"Shit!"

The wagon clattered and squealed through the cobblestone streets of Mainport as the small procession wound its way up toward the massive shape of the Citadel looming on the skyline. Sathé melted away to the sides as we passed.

Chirthi and R'R'Rhasct made sure I was hidden in the wagon while they settled themselves on guard before the opening at the back. I couldn't see what was going on outside, but I could hear the sounds of the city: the rattling of metal bound wheels, the bleating of llamas, and the multitude of Sathé voices forming a sibilant background noise, like surf on a shingle beach.

The tailgate was lowered into the shadows of a postern gate where my guards of four days helped me out into the arms of Royal Citadel guards in their spit-and-polish armour. Walking still took a bit out of me.

Armour clattered as my guards dropped down beside me. Green eyes blinked up at me, then a hand flashed up to pat my cheek. "Perhaps I see you again some time, ah? Good luck, K'hy, " R'R'Rhasct bade me.

"Thank you, Rhasct."

"R'R'Rhasct," she corrected and she laughed and gave a final wave as the soldiers hustled me off into the cover of the Keep. Through the labyrinth of passages inside the Citadel they guided me, going higher all the time. All those twisting corridors and stairs completely screwed up my sense of direction, I didn't know where we were. And I wasn't in the greatest shape; those stairs exhausted me. The guards caught my elbows when I stumbled and helped me up the few final flights to a place I recognised from a long time ago.

The corridor was wide and brightly lit with several guards posted in niches along its length. They were guarding the Royal chambers; the rooms where the old Shirai lay. My escorts stopped at a heavy door, only a couple of rooms down from the heavy doors of the Royal chambers. After unlocking the room with a bulky iron key from a large keyring already jangling with other keys, two of the score of Sathé guards checked the room, then they left me to wait.

I didn't have much choice. When the door closed I heard the key turn in the lock.

I poked around the room. It was similar to my old quarters, but plusher: Rugs covered the finely polished wooden floor and several pieces of wooden furniture were arranged around the room. A wide, if low, desk was set before a narrow window filled with latticed glass, a highbacked, carved wooden chair behind it. A couch and single-place chair made from leather cushions supported in wooden frames sat before a fireplace with logs and kindling already laid. Empty, expansive shelves and a large mirror hung from the wall; large for a world where mirrors had to be backed with silver, say, about as big as my head. Through another door: the bedroom.

The whole room had the air of one that has'nt been used for a while, but there was not a speck of dust to be found anywhere.

Looking out the window, I saw that the room was somewhere on the southern side of the keep. It didn't have the view of the bay that my last room did, but the main gates of the town below were visible, standing above the rooftops. Directly above the window were the eaves of a tiled roof; a bit surprising to find that on a fortress. About six or seven metres below was a

wide, flagstone parapet overlooking the courtyard.

My clothes were waiting in the bedroom, my twentieth century garments lying clean and folded on the concave bed. I didn't put them on. In my unwashed condition, I would only make them filthy again.

There was another door in the bedroom. Upon examination, I was surprised to find that it led to an ensuite toilet. Nothing fancy, just a long drop, probably leading to a cistern that served several other jakes, but it was a luxury here. Even though it was a bit draughty. My previous quarters were served by a communal crapper on the same floor. Unisex bathrooms. They didn't reek nearly as much as some gas station restrooms I've used.

I collapsed into the couch to wait. Same problem as will all Sathe furniture: built to the wrong proportions, either me or the chair.

Finally, keys rattled in the lock. I was on my feet, starting to demand to see . . .

Tahr hadn't changed. Had I really expected her to? I'd only been away for about a fortnight, but it seemed longer.

For what seemed like ages we just stood and stared at each other. I remember what she looked like perfectly: every piece of fur standing out in sharp relief, brushed to a glossy sheen, her breeches green and gold. That silver ring hung from her ear, bracelets from her wrists. Against that I was woefully bedraggled.

When the rush of relief hit me, it couldn't be described. All the trials and tribulations of the past weeks seemed remote: nightmares banished by the dawn. She was an anchor, a stable pillar of support in a land of unpredictable landscapes.

"Tahr," I choked and she was holding me, and I was hugging her, resting my head against hers. Her musty scent, like a cat after it's been lying in the sun. With one hand, she stroked the back of my neck; there were not as many fingers as there should have been.

Water lapped softly. A monotonous sound, like a metronome, changing slightly whenever I moved.

I floated there in the warm dimness, eyes closed and listening to the water and the sound of my pulse. It was hot and peaceful and I could stay there forever, letting the heat melt away the aches from old bruises and ease the stiffness in my leg. Returning to the womb? I smiled lazily to myself. Not such a bad idea.

There were voices at the door, then a wedge of light as it opened and closed again. Almost inaudible footsteps sounded on the flagstones and I turned my head to follow the Sathe as she moved to crouch by the pool and dip a finger into the water. Ripples spread as she moved her hand in slow circles.

"Hello, K'hy," Tahr's face twisted into her parody of a human smile. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," I stood and moved to sit on one of the underwater benches carved from the stone. "Much." I cleared my throat. "Ahh, about earlier, grabbing you like that . . . Sorry."

She stood, shucked her breeches then slipped into the steaming water, her fur floating out in a ruff at the waterline. Sinking a little lower, she hissed softly, not meeting my eyes. "I cannot blame you," she said. "You have been through a lot." Her eyes drifted and I knew she was looking at the pale scars on my chest, legacy of a previous meeting with soldiers of the Gulf Realm. "I heard . . . How is your leg?"

"Healing."

"Oh," she ducked her eyes. "They did hurt you . . . Your chest . . ."

"This, you mean," I glanced down and almost touched the red tissue where my left nipple had been. "They were trying to . . . to make me behave. I was not exactly cooperating."

Tahr frowned. "You are too delicate to play games like that. Just a

wrong touch can scratch you and they would not have known that. Without clothing you could have frozen . . . " She gave me a sharp look: "They did give you clothing?"

"Not a first, no. They did not know how . . . harmful cold is to me." Not a pleasant memory. I didn't go into details about that and tossed her the greyish lump that passed for soap.

Tahr caught it and held it for a second. What was she thinking? Damn that furry face; so inscrutable, like a mask with the expression only in the eyes. Windows to the soul? More so in Sathe. She didn't press the conversation, lathering the soap, rubbing the slimy result into her mane and face fur, then ducking her head to rinse it off.

"Tahr, how did they get me out of the Citadel? All the guards and gates . . . "

"I do not know that part." The bar of soap twisted in her hands. "All we do know is that they used their agents to drug and take you; a great gamble on their part. The agents they used were highly placed within the servants ranks. We caught one, but she killed herself."

"There was a Sathe who was not a soldier," I remembered. "The officer in charge paid him . . . For delivering me. I think he was the one who took me."

Tahr's ears flicked to attention. "He was their contact? Would you recognise him if you saw him again?"

"Uhm, well, I am not sure," I confessed. "Many Sathe look alike to me."

"What?" That surprised her. "You cannot tell us apart?"

"Oh, Sathe I am familiar with I can, but I cannot see someone in passing and remember his face." I grinned sheepishly. "Many of you look alike."

She shook her head; quickly, as if trying to shake water from her ears. "You continue to puzzle me, K'hy."

"Sorry."

"Huh, stop SAYING that!" She punctuated that with a splash at my face, then settled back so only her head was above water, wisps of mist drifting around her. "Well, we will find him. Meantime, anyone trying that agin will not find it so easy."

"Tahr, I have been wanting to ask you about that."

Her ears pricked up. I cleared my throat and continued.

"When I asked to take a bath, the captain in charge of the guards wanted to bring a tub into my room. God's sake , Tahr, I know that you are trying to protect me, but how long must this go on? I cannot live my life surrounded by soldiers and walls. I think I would rather . . . " I cut that off and bit nervously at my lower lip, waiting for her answer.

For a few seconds, the only sound was that of the water.

She finally shrugged, sending wavelets racing each other across the pool. "I do not know how long, but it is important that you do remain safe."

"Because of the weapons I can give you?"

She hissed, "Because of your knowledge, and because I want you to be safe."

I hung my head. "I am sorry."

"It does not matter," she said gently, then she flared in mock anger.

"Will you stop apologising!"

"Sorry," I smirked, then ducked underwater to dodge the torrent of water she splashed at me.

When I came up thirty seconds later, it wasn't where I'd submerged. Tahr's back was to me as she cast about in the dark water: "K'hy?"

"Yes?"

She whirled with a yelp, just in time to get a faceful of water. Sputtering, she jumped forward and pushed me over backwards onto one of the benches carved out of the side of the bath. Waves splashed over the side.

I found myself face to face with her, my small nose almost touching her broad, valentine shaped one. She had me pinned against the side of the bath. Below, her fur rubbed against me, feeling like the weird caress of some marine plant. "Now you have got me, what are you going to do with me?" I grinned.

She glared at me, and her ears flicked, flinging droplets of water. "For a beginning, how about this?" Her head darted like a snake and sharp little teeth nipped my nose. I yelped in mock pain and she pulled back, laughing. Abruptly serious again she studied my face, then darted forward to place her lips against my cheek and withdrew again. "I missed you. You and your strange ways."

"Same here. Sometimes you almost seem human."

"Is that intended as a compliment?" she smiled, then intercepted my hand as I tried to bat the side of her face, staring at it. "Do you know your hands are wrinkled?"

"It is just the water."

She didn't let go of my hand, inspecting it like an entomologist with a new butterfly. "Does water make you wrinkle?"

"Only if I have been in for too long," I said and she laughed at that. "At least," I added with a lopsided grin, "our fur does not block the drains."

She stopped laughing.

I hauled myself out of the water and scraped excess moisture off with the blades of my hands. Tahr lounged in the pool, arms up on the side and chin rested on laced fingers.

"I have to say I am relieved," she said.

"About what?"

"That." She pointed. "Male llamas and bison can be made easier to handle by removal of . . ."

"Not funny!" I cut her off - wincing - threw a towel around my waist and grabbed for my clothes.

"My help?" I asked Remae.

A flare of lightning burst beyond the rain-lashed windows, outlining the dark Sathe Marshal in a flickering nimbus of electrical light. Her ears pulled back tight to her head and she turned away from me to snarl back at the storm that seethed outside. I waited.

I had been doing a lot of that for the past couple of weeks; waiting in my chambers, seeing little of either Tahr or Remae. Very early on I had discovered that the guards outside my door had their orders to - however politely - restrain me in my quarters.

That time I used for working, for sketching out some ideas I had about my future. A way I could give the Sathe advanced tech, but also make sure that they understood it. A way to produce not just a few limited handmade articles that would rapidly reach ridiculous prices the further they went from the source, but a way in which an entire economy could be kicked - if into not the twentieth - then into the nineteenth century. From there, hopefully it would be self-perpetuating. More concentrated progress has been made in the past hundred-fifty years than in the entire history of mankind.

However, that time quickly palled. Days passed, each like the one before, each promising to be like the one to come. I had begun to slip into a blue funk, unnoticed by the menials who fed and watered me. Tahr, when she had time for me, was often preoccupied and tired. Her arguments that this was all for my own good fell flat with me.

Now Remae was here asking for my help. You can understand why I was a little dubious.

"My help?" I repeated. "How?"

She shuddered and reached out a black hand to yank the heavy drapes across the window as thunder from the strike rolled over the Citadel, rattling the thin panes in their lattice. The dim orange-tinted lamps were inadequate, shadows casting the subtle illusion of the room being much larger than it really was. The marshal propped herself up on the corner of the desk. "Storms make my fur stand on end," she muttered then twisted to look to where I slouched in the leather-web armchair, a mug of warm wine in my hand. "K'hy, we

have been unable to find the Gulf forces who abducted you."

I nodded. "Big surprise."

"Do not be facetious," she reproached. "We simply do not have the wherewithal to cover every square span of the Realm. So it has been decided that if we cannot go to them, then they must come to us."

It didn't take much to fill in the blanks. "And you want me to be bait."

She coughed and scratched at her muzzle. "If you wish to put it that bluntly: Yes."

"Uh-huh," I mused. "Sounds like barrels of laughs. What is the game plan?"

"Game plan? Oh, I see. Well, first it hinges upon you being able to identify the one who abducted you. Do you think you can?"

"I am not sure. I sometimes have trouble telling Sathe apart, but I think I should be able to recognise him."

"Excellent. Then we lead him to believe that you are being moved from the Citadel with all possible haste. For speed your escort shall only be small.

"However, that escort shall be armed with the flame throwers and elite guards. Also, many small patrols shall have been sent out over the previous weeks. Some of those shall not return, but shall instead shadow the convoy, ready to reinforce you."

"Sounds good . . . on the surface," I said. "But a few rough points . . . One: How can you be sure that the bastard who kidnapped me would fall for that? If he has heard I am back, he would be doubly wary about being identified. In fact, there is a good chance he has decided to see what the living standards in some of the other Realms are like.

"Two: If the Gulf Realm gets wind of it being a trap, or their outriders spot the tails . . . the reinforcements, they simply vanish and we traipse along our merry way to nowhere." I sipped from my wine before speaking my third point.

"Three: What if there are many more Gulf forces in the Eastern Realm than you know of. Flame throwers make exceedingly good terror weapons, and they are useful for defence, but they are only good for a few shots, after which they are only so much junk. They would be of limited use against hundreds of opponents."

"True," Remae agreed. "But we have done our best to make sure that none but a few selected guards know of your return. We intend to make it appear as if you are simply stopping here for a while to recuperate, then moving on. The traitor will receive the information in the most discreet way possible.

"As for the Gulf Realm suspecting a trap, well, there is little we can do about that except be as cautious as possible."

"And what about three?" I asked.

She gave a fluttering sigh, her nostrils flaring open and shut again. "Their attacks on convoys . . . They choose only small targets and strike from ambush."

"That proves little," I said. "They have limited resources, so they are careful to so completely overwhelm the opposition that they suffer few or no casualties. There could also be quite a few small groups out there, and if they got together they could become quite a formidable force."

"Still not as many as we intend to use," she shot back. "Most people have little love for fire . . . our fur. With your weapons you should be able to send them running straight into our arms."

" 'Should' being the operative word," I muttered.

Still she heard me. "K'hy, we need your help. You must be on that caravan, be seen leaving the town," she entreated. "They are killing us. Every week caravans are reported missing. Trade is being stifled as merchants are reluctant to enter or leave small towns that cannot protect them or gather enough vehicles to make a convoy large enough to deter attackers. Small merchants are being stripped trying to provide guards for their wares."

I drained the rest of my wine in a lump that burned all the way down.

"Whatever happens is better than sitting around here gathering dust. Alright, you have got your bait."

The great hall was filled with the sounds of Sathes enjoying themselves. Gambling, arm wrestling, and drinking bouts went on at various locales scattered about the room. Down there, in her traditional place by the hearth, a minstrel wove her tales to an attentive audience of cubs and mature Sathes.

And I was watching it from high up in one of the walls.

I should have expected secret passages in a construction as massive and as ancient as the Citadel; in fact I had thought about it, but never asked anyone. The passage ran the length of the hall. Peepholes at strategic points along its length admitted pencils of light.

"How many of these passages are there?" I asked Remae.

"Nobody really knows," she said, brushing aside a cobweb. "Every dynasty has built them since the Citadel began and many have been forgotten. I think that mapping them would be near impossible. But the ones that are known come in useful . . . keep watching."

I turned back to the narrow peephole between the stones. The light wasn't the greatest, the field of vision was narrow, and it was a long way down. "I am not sure I will be able to recognise him."

"Just try."

I bumped my way down the narrow passage, awkwardly. The only light came from the dim spots seeping through the spy-holes and the white beam from my flashlight. The floor of the corridor was not level: beams and other obstructions poked through the walls at interesting heights. Several times I wacked my shins and Remae hushed my curses.

She didn't seem to have any such problems.

The next hole was the second to last one, looking out over a place near the fire. I skipped over the children and the females, trying to get a glimpse of the males . . .

"There, Remae!" her fur brushed against my face as she pushed her head in close to peer out the narrow gap. "Down there, in the corner beside the fire. Dark brown fur, talking to that female. You see him?"

"Yes . . . You are sure that is him?"

I frowned, hesitating until the figure below us turned around to give me a good look at him.

"Yeah . . . That is him."

"All right, now we set the bait and make sure the wolf catches the scent."

The covered wagon rumbled through the day, as it had the past four days and nights.

Inside it was dim, stuffy, and crowded. The smell of nervous cat overpowering any smell of nervous human. There were nine in the back of that wagon, one human and eight Sathes, and after four days, tempers were a bit short. The bulky packages by the soldiers' feet did nothing to ease tensions.

Outside the wagon, I knew there were two more of the slow moving vehicles as well as half a dozen llama mounted cavalry. For a moment I wondered if the Sathes had such a thing as a coordinated charge with mounted troops, then dismissed the idea. One would be better off using donkeys than llamas.

Time, and the caravan plodded on.

I was fiddling with the straps on my helmet, for the thousandth time, when the cry came from someone outside. "Ambush! Ambu . . ." The yell cut off abruptly.

I slammed my helmet on my head and followed Sathes out the back of the

back of the wagon, hitting the ground in a crouch with the M-16 at the ready.

Already there were two riderless llamas stamping around in panic. Sathe in red and black armour were racing from the trees on both sides of the road, too many to count. I didn't try, just raised the rifle and pulled the trigger as fast as I could, blazing away on full automatic.

Some Sathe stumbled as though they'd been tripped. Holes appeared in armour as if by magic. The M-16A1 is a fairly lightweight weapon, lacking the punch of a Kalashnikov or an M16A2, but even so the shock factor of the muzzle flash, the noise, and impact of bullets was hideously effective against people who'd never even heard of firearms. The 5.56mm slugs tumbled in flight, buzzsawing as they hit the target, spreading out like dum-dums, the concussion smashing bone and pulverising flesh.

The rifle ran dry. I popped the clip, snatched another from my belt and rammed it into the well.

An Eastern realm soldier was falling back under the onslaught of three red and black armoured figures. She ducked wildly as slugs hissed past her head and the Gulf warriors had their strings cut, jerking and falling.

I clamped the ArmaLite under my arm, firing with one hand as I reached for the handle of the flare pistol tucked into my belt. Muttering a silent prayer to whoever may be listening, I pointed it at the sky and pulled the trigger.

Heads on both sides turned as a trail of smoke shot into the sky and a glowing red sun swung slowly to earth. Come on, Remae! Be there!

The Eastern soldiers were fighting to clear areas about the wagons, and only just succeeding. The Gulf forces were pressing us hard, especially around my wagon. Dropping the flare pistol, I spun to fire on attackers behind me when something hit my helmet with an impact that nearly broke my neck; a crossbow bolt fell to the ground.

Their archers had reloaded and fired a second volley; Eastern soldiers fell, dead and wounded.

"Assholes!!" I screamed and emptied the magazine at the archers as they tried to reload, they scattered for cover, many of them falling. The Gulf forces were closing in.

"MOVE IT!" Our backup was taking too long.

"Furless bastard!" A Gulf warrior howled and hurled himself at me, claws glittering red and shedding tufts of flesh and fur swinging for my throat. I ducked away and felt him hit my helmet.

He also fell back, crouching to snarl, "You should be dead!"

I recognised him then: the officer from the farm. He took advantage of my moment of shock to rush in again, to meet the muzzle of my M-16 in his stomach and I found out the rifle wasn't dry. The shock of impact jarred my trigger finger and his back exploded in a pink and grey spray.

Everything seemed to stop.

I was staring into his eyes when he dropped. His hands fell to fumble at the barrel of my rifle, his fur curling from the heat, then his mouth opened and he made a small sound. Not loud, but pained. Then his legs folded and another Gulf soldier appeared in front of me, and I was busy dodging his blade. I stepped inside his swing and grappled with him, trying to keep his claws from my face, forcing him back, but it was taking too long; at any second I could have been skewered by another Gulf soldier. His leg came up and I instinctively twisted my hips to protect my crotch. He wasn't using his knee however. Toe claws dug into my calf and raked downward. Through the adrenalin the pain was nothing. I screamed my rage at him and drove my helmet into his face, used the room that gave me to finish the job with my rifle butt. He no longer looked like a Sathe.

More Eastern Sathe started spilling from the wagons. Instead of swords or crossbows, they carried bulky cylinders on their backs, tubes poking out from under their right arms. They formed a circle at the back of each wagon, and at a shouted signal, Eastern realm soldiers disengaged from their opponents and scampered into that circle.

I ducked past one of the Sathe at the perimeter of the circle, changing the stick on my M-16 at the same time. I stood amidst a small knot of panting Sathe, staring past bulky packs at the Gulf Soldiers.

They didn't charge, sensing something strange was going on, staring at the flickering flame burning on the taper in front of the nozzles pointing at them. At last one of their officers started the charge across the few metres that separated us.

From where I stood, I couldn't see what happened behind the curtain of greasy orange flame that sprayed out. That was probably a blessing, listening to the screams.

The flames died for a second then flared out again, the Sathe carrying the flame throwers started to advance, moving outward for as long as their fuel lasted.

That wasn't napalm in those flame throwers; it didn't cling and keep burning with the sadistic vigour of jellied petroleum, but it did burn, almost as well as Sathe fur. Gulf Soldiers fled into the woods, those who could flee. Others staggered about screaming, their fur crackling and burning brightly with a hideous smell. Sickened, I shot several flaming, screaming figures, no longer identifiable as their faces burned; mercy killing. It was no longer a battle, it was a massacre.

The fuel in the flame throwers was exhausted quickly, but puddles of oil still burned on the ground and charred corpses sizzled and smouldered, lying twisted with blackened lips pulled back baring teeth in rictus of agony. Many had been killed not by the flame itself, but by merciful sword thrusts up under the ribs or through the throat.

Out in the woods the remnants of the Gulf forces were fleeing; shapes disappearing into the depths of the woods. We waited.

Distant shouts came soon, the faint clash of steel upon steel as an unseen battle was waged. We defenders of the wagon train clutched our weapons and waited.

Figures appeared in the trees on both sides, not many this time, and they weren't attacking. Gulf soldiers - many of them wounded - staggered back onto the road and dropped their weapons, standing there with their arms at their side and their necks bared. In the woods behind came shouts as Remae's troops rounded up stragglers and wounded.

For a few seconds I contemplated the crumpled corpse with its spine blown out, then limped over to help collect our prisoners.

The funeral pyre threw sparks into the air as wood settled. The dark shapes standing around the fire had their heads dipped, in mourning for their friends and comrades who died. We had our quarry, but Eastern Sathe had died for it.

I leaned back against the wagon wheel and inspected the bandages around my calf. Ten metres away, the prisoners clustered around a campfire.

They were a sorry looking lot. Their armour had been taken from them, and now they huddled together around the fire for warmth. Several Eastern Realm guards stood watch over the fifteen or so prisoners.

There was little speaking among the prisoners, the loudest sound was that of moaning. At the back of the group, farthest from the fire, a Sathe with its back to me sat beside a limp bundle of blood-smeared fur on the ground, every now and then reaching out to touch and caress with a manacled hand.

The guard was worrying at a slab of meat. He turned when he heard me approach. "What is wrong with that one?" I asked, pointing at the two figures.

He swallowed and licked his jowls, looking at them. "Oh, him. Just a burn," he snorted. "Not worth worrying about." He took another huge bite.

I blinked at him. It couldn't be . . . Nah, Sathe don't eat each other. Shaking my head I limped over to the figures, the one sitting down turned its

. . . her head away. Kneeling down, I examined the one lying down.

'Just a burn' the guard had said.

Mercifully, the Sathé was unconscious. The arm and part of his neck and chest was red and oozing blood and a clear, watery fluid. Skin had burned, crisped, blackened, and peeled away, red muscle showed where the skin had split. The hand was curled up into a mangled claw, and there was a manacle on the roasted wrist.

"Oh, Jesus . . ." I winced, sickened, then yelled, "Guard!"

Still worrying at his steak he sauntered over, only moving faster when I started to rise, intending to drag him. "You," I snapped and pointed at the manacle. "Take that off. Now!"

"Ah . . . I cannot do that," he said about to take another bite of his meal.

I stood and knocked it out of his hand, glaring down at him. "I said 'take it off'. NOW!"

He glanced at the meat lying in the dust, then looked up at me, worried. "Uh, sir . . . I cannot, without the commander's word . . ."

"Fuck that!" I roared, drawing stares from all over the camp. "Unlock this, or I will shove your arm into that fire myself!" If he had been wearing a shirt I'd have hoisted him up by the lapels.

"But if the commander finds . . ."

"I will take responsibility," I growled.

He quickly grabbed a keyring from his belt and unlocked the chain on the burned wrist. The crippled Sathé moaned and hissed as his arm was moved.

"Thank you," his companion whispered. I frowned. There was something . . .

I caught her mane, lifting her head so I could see her face properly. The crusted blood and soot didn't hide the circlet of white fur around her left eye.

"You!"

Oh Beejeezus, a small world.

My guard from the farm shrank back, her heavy chains rattling as she threw up an arm to shield her face. She was terrified.

I stared back at her, surprised to find I was unable to feel anything. As drained of emotion as some of the derelicts I'd seen in New York. I was exhausted and my leg was throbbing. "Okay," I sighed, unclenching my fist. "I was not expecting to see you again."

She didn't reply. Just stared at me.

I met her gaze. "Who is he?" I gestured at the wounded male.

She started shaking then. I thought for a second she wouldn't answer, before she sucked air and stuttered: "M . . . My mate."

Damnation! But she was a mess as well. Blood matted her fur from a wound in her neck, and she kept one arm tight against her chest. "Do not hurt him," she bolstered her courage and bared her teeth at me.

Behind me there was a susurrus of metal on leather. "Hold it!" I stopped the guard as he was drawing his scimitar. Then I swung my pack around, opened it, and pulled out what I needed.

She stared at the gleaming steel needle as I pulled a styrette from its sterile packaging. "What are you doing?"

"This will help ease the pain for a while," I told her. She whimpered as the needle slid into the flesh of the burned Sathé. "That is all I can do for him. Do not worry, it is only to stop the pain. I swear it."

Seconds after the shot, the Sathé began to relax, sleeping deeper. I packed away the medkit, grabbed my pack by its strap and limped back to the wagon where I would be sleeping. Tossing the pack over the tailgate, I clambered in after it.

The moon sent shafts of blue light through rents in the canvas top and the open flaps at the back of the wagon. Outside I could see the sky was clear, with the milky way spilled across it, a lot like a stream of crystallised milk. The sounds of the night and Sathé were all around.

After the events of the day, I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. My leg throbbed and itched as I lay there and stared at the sky, a cloak and sheets wrapped tightly around my shoulders. I don't know how long I watched the heavens revolve before I started to drop off.

"K'hy, are you awake?" someone hissed.

Oh, shit! "Huh? What?" Blinking, I sat up, pulling the cloak around me.

The wagon rocked slightly as a black figure vaulted up onto the bed. All I could see were the eyes. "Who are you?"

"Sorry, I forgot. It is Remae." She moved until she was sitting in the pool of moonlight just inside the flaps. "Is that any better?"

"Yeah, I can see enough." I could just see the shifting patterns of her face and ears as she spoke, enough that she was more than just a voice in the blackness. "What did you want?"

"Do you know that female?" She moved her hand in a vague pointing gesture. The guard must have reported what I had done.

"The prisoner out there? Yes, we have met before."

"How? When?"

I explained how I knew her, how she had been my guard, and a bit of company; even if she hadn't exactly been a sparkling conversationalist. Out loud, I recalled how she had touched my hair. When I had finished, Remae hesitated before speaking.

"Why did you aid her mate?" the Marshall finally asked.

"I was going to help him before I saw who she was. I did not know she was a prisoner until then."

"But you still helped when you did know."

I sighed. "He was in pain. His arm is badly burned and I am not sure he will live, but there was no point in his pain. Besides she did not treat me too badly; she did help me when I needed it."

"But after what they did to you . . . and they are the enemy," her tone was the one I had seen Sathe using on their children.

"That does not mean they need to suffer," I protested. Hell, I was the root cause of a lot of the wounded's suffering; me and my weapons.

Remae was quiet for a second. "You are strange, K'hy."

"I am human."

"H'man . . . you are so different from us. You seem to think differently," She moved further into the shadows, all I could see was a blot of moving blackness, slightly more solid than its surroundings. Something touched my head, my hair, and I started. A hand stopped mine as I reached up.

I didn't know what to do. I just froze while she ran her hand through my hair, around my ear, and down the side of my face. When she finished, she retreated back to the moonlit patch.

"Why did you . . . ?" My voice died out before I finished the sentence.

"I wondered what it felt like."

I found I was trembling. My pulse pounded in my ears, there was a tension in my abdomen and my breath caught in my throat: Fear blossomed inside. "Please, Remae . . . please do not do that."

Her eyes opened wide. "Did I hurt you?"

"No . . . no. It . . . I . . . Please, do you never sleep?"

She took the hint: "I am sorry."

The wagon shook almost imperceptibly as she left. I curled up under the cloak and blankets as I tried to get my breathing back under control.

I rubbed a fingernail along the slight scratch in my helmet while watching the detachment of soldiers from the Citadel as they formed a cordon around the prisoners. This was as much for their own protection as to prevent them from trying to escape as they were taken through the streets of Mainport.

It had been a slow trip back. The prisoners who could walk did so, surrounded by Sathe soldiers on llama-back; the badly wounded - there were

several of them - rode dispersed among the wagons. The one in our wagon was a male Gulf Sathe whose leg had been shattered by a bullet.

A bullet. In wars back home, anyone could have been hit by a bullet and never know who had shot him, but here it was like a signature. I knew I had done it, and he knew I had done it. Many times I turned to find him glaring at me. He would have cheerfully slit my throat given half a chance.

Now inside the city gates the prisoners cowered on the back of a wagon as they were carted up to the Citadel. As the word spread, more and more Sathe appeared on the sides of the streets to jeer, snarl, and hiss at them. I watched it all from inside another wagon with the hood of my cloak pulled well down so my face was - I hoped - hidden by shadow.

Wheels clattered and slipped as the procession made its way up the switchback road to the Citadel. Soldiers and staff watched from windows, doors, and battlements as we passed from bailey to bailey until we reached the courtyard around the huge central keep.

The prisoners were chained together at the wrists and neck and led away, the wounded carried by Eastern guards. The burned Sathe had survived, even though I had not expected him to. I watched as he was supported by his mate, his arm was badly twisted and I doubted it would ever totally heal.

"K'hy, are you coming?" Rемае called.

"No, I always walk this way." I slung my pack over my shoulder and jogged over to where she was waiting on the steps outside the massive wooden doors to the Keep. "Where are they being taken?" I jerked a thumb in the direction of the Gulf captives.

"Downstairs . . . the dungeons of course."

"Oh . . . of course." I had never wondered if this place had dungeons; not too surprising to find it did. "What will happen to them?"

She greeted a pair of Sathe we passed in a corridor before answering. "Well, they will have the choice of pledging their sword, their allegiance, and their lives to the Eastern Realm, or they keep their honour and lose their lives."

"They become slaves, or die?! Is that not a bit . . . harsh?"

"What else could we do with . . . why are you looking at me like that?"

I ran my hand through my hair. "I am sorry, it is a . . . um . . . different way from the way I am used to. We used to do it your way, but that was hundreds of years ago. The custom now among my people is to hold the prisoners until after the war is over, then they are released. Usually."

"But that is ridiculous," Rемае said in disbelief. "How much effort is needed to keep them fed and guarded? And what happens when they return home, surely they would just take up arms again?"

"A lot of effort is needed to keep them, but after some of the things that went on in our last world war . . . things occurred that no sane human would ever want to see happen again, so the effort is made."

Her claws clicked as she tapped her fingertips together. "If they really wish to live, they will join us, and some of the strongest may be lose their claws and be sold, but they will almost certainly all choose to die."

I blinked stupidly at her while what she said sunk in. "Why?"

"They are elite soldiers, even if they are Gulf Realm. They could not disgrace their clan by turning traitor to their Realm. Their Families are bound to their lords by oath; to break that oath would be to destroy the honour of their clans."

I stopped and leaned against the wall. I hadn't know this . . . I'd had no idea. I'd been in Gulf hands, would they have given me that choice? IF I'd refused to help them, they probably wouldn't have sold me as a slave.

In a alcove in the wall in front of me was a small, blown-glass sculpture. Slightly greenish glass in an abstract pattern of teardrops connected together by gracefully arching tubes . . . A thing of beauty, a delicate thing; fashioned by those same hands.

Oh, they rewarded me for what I had done. Like all the other soldiers who had been in that expedition, I came out of it a bit richer. Actually, in my case it was a lot richer. My previous net wealth had been exactly zilch.

I stood in front of the window in my room and weighed the ten gold pieces in my hand, a lot to be paid by Sathé standards. Now, whereas before I had nothing, I at least had some money to my name, but what could I do with it? The guards outside my door were adverse to me even touching the latch.

Bright, warm sparks of lamps and fireplaces showed that there was life down in Mainport. The lights were alluring, and I stared at them, wondering what kind of night-life the place had. Below, a Sathé guard strolled along the parapet, paused to stretch and yawn, then moved on.

I looked down at the battlement, it was about six metres down, and a grin spread over my face. "Why not? I need the exercise . . . "

The wind whipped around me as I hung from the windowsill, tugging at my jacket. Don't try this at home kids . . . I took a breath, and let go. The flagstones of the parapet hit my feet hard and I lost my balance, rolled onto my shoulder, coming up in a crouch. The bundle that was my rolled up cloak containing my knife lay in front of my nose, the flashlight was tucked into the waistband at the back of my pants.

My boots thudded dully against the worn stones as I walked along parapet, staying close to the wall. When I found a small iron door, I fumbled with the latch until it swung open. On the other side was a long hallway, several torches along its length casting pools of twisting light. Two Sathé engrossed in conversation were passing one of those lamps, the features clear and familiar: Remae and Tahr. Coming this way.

Of all the fucking places to run into them. . .

As carefully as I could, I shut the door and ducked behind a buttress, gathering my cloak close and shrinking back into the shadows.

The door squealed as it opened and a pair of shadows were cast against the battlements opposite. Their voices were blown to me by the wind.

" . . . here in a few weeks. It takes so long to get reports."

I think it was Tahr who said that. I peeped around the buttress, they were leaning against the ramparts, looking outwards, their backs to me.

"Does K'hy know any way to send messages long distances quickly?" asked Remae.

"He has never mentioned it," Tahr said. "Still, there is quite a lot about himself he has not told me."

Remae snorted. There was a silence over which I could hear distant shouts, laughs . . . other everyday night noises. Then Remae's voice asked, "What is it about him?"

"K'hy?" Tahr asked.

"Your strange one, yes. There is something about him that . . . I just find it attractive. I see it does the same to you . . . and there is a Gulf prisoner, a female, she has been asking after him."

Tahr wrapped her arms around herself. "A Gulf Warrior. How does she know of him?"

"She was among those who kidnapped him. K'hy helped her Mate who was injured in the fighting."

I saw Tahr stiffen and there was a long pause.

"He used a concoction of his own that stopped the pain for a time," Remae continued.

"On a GULF warrior?!" Tahr asked, incredulous.

"Yes."

Tahr raised her head and sighed into the wind, then slapped her hands against the stone of the battlements. "It is times like this that I feel I will never understand him."

"Then why are you so close to him?"

"Saaaaa ," Tahr breathed again. "I am not sure. He is rather clumsy and slow, and there are definitely better looking males around." Remae hissed her

laughter at that. "Maybe it is his sentimentality; for someone so large and grotesque, he is kind, caring. Maybe it is his eyes, they always appear to be so afraid."

"I noticed. Yes, sometimes he does look like a lost cub," Remae agreed thoughtfully, "but he is definitely no coward, he fights like a bear."

"Why did you ask about him?" Tahr asked. Remae turned around and I ducked back behind the buttress.

"I visited him after the fighting, at night. I . . . ah . . . touched his fur and . . . "

". . . And you probably scared him to moult." Tahr laughed. "If he does moult, that is."

"I must have. He asked me to leave," Remae replied.

"Huh . . . He is one of the shyest males I have ever seen. He embarrasses easily. It seems his people - or at least he - think mating is a completely private thing." The voices were growing fainter. I stuck my head around the side of the buttress and saw only their backs as they ambled away from me along the parapet.

"You have coupled with him, have you not?" Remae asked. My eyebrows shot up. Come on, surely Tahr wouldn't tell her . . .

"Ah . . . that. Yes."

"What was it like?"

"Huh, you agree never to let him know I told you? I can just see his face changing color if he found out. Hah!"

Remae also chortled. "Agreed."

"Well, he is different . . . " Then the wind and night swallowed their voices.

I leaned against the damp stone of the buttress, tilting my head to follow the line of the sheer wall up to where the ghosts of clouds raced before the moon.

"You bitch, " I told it.

The guards at the main gate were busy inspecting a wagon by torchlight, so, thankfully, they hardly spared me a glance as I strolled out. My hood masked my face in shadows, but my height and gait still marked me as different from Sathe.

The road down to the town was almost deserted. Apart from a band of drunk Sathe soldiers headed up towards the Citadel, the only other life I saw was a raccoon that dashed across the road, pausing to stare at me, then disappearing into a snow-covered bush on the roadside.

Dirty snow lying on the cobblestone squeaked beneath my boots I walked between the dark buildings. The moon was almost full, with wisps of cloud scudding across its face, so there was enough light for me to see where I was going. A cool breeze wound through the narrow streets, and the tang of the sea was stronger.

The waterfront was also dead, an empty stretch of dock littered with bits of rope, fish, and other such trash. A forest of masts from the boats that were still in the breakwater stood out against the night sky, and underlying everything was the steady murmuring of the sea and the groaning of the boats' timbers. I threw back my hood and ran my hands through my hair, relishing the fresh air, feeling more alive than I had for some weeks.

With my hands jammed into my pockets, I wandered along the waterfront staring out at the sea. Somewhere out of my sight in the darkness, waves crashed against the breakwater.

The only thing to mar the evening was the thought of Tahr's conversation with Remae. Damnation! Why did Remae seem to be developing an interest in me as well? I couldn't handle two of them!

When I reached the southernmost end of the dock, almost at the town walls, another kind of crash made me jump. Close behind me, a group of Sathe

spilled out of a door that had been thrown open. From the opening came Sathes voices and yellow light, dimmed by the amount of smoke that also spilled out; the smell of cooking food was strong on the air. The door slammed shut again, obviously an exclusive club ejecting some of its more . . . rowdy customers.

I hastily pulled my hood back up again as the Sathes that could walk gathered up their pissed friends and helped them stagger off. One of them careened off my shoulder and clutched at my arm, peering into the shadows of my hood and blinking, then recoiling. I ducked out of sight into an alley before he could bring me to the attention of his friends.

The city at night was like a termite mound: On the outside it was quiet, just superficial signs of life: a guard dozing beside a brazier, lights in a bakery as Sathes bakers prepared the next day's dough. Underneath, I guessed, the silent town had its own nightlife, the pubs and the brothels. I think the Sathes had them, I personally had no reason to seek one out.

As one neared the centre of the city the back streets narrowed, divided, became a warren of alleys, cul de sacs and tunnels beneath houses arching over the streets. The cleaning of the streets seemed up to the tenants of the buildings around them as some sections of paving were fairly clean, whilst others abounded in filth of various indescribable types.

The disjointed rooftops and chimneys threw shadows on the grounds that grew sharp, then faded away into darkness again as clouds swept across in front of the moon. Windows were holes of darkness, the few that had glass in them glinting in the moonlight. I walked the deserted streets as quietly as I could, my cloak flapping around my heels like dark, enshrouding wings.

There . . .

I halted in mid stride.

Lit from below by light escaping a small window in a closed door, the sign depicted a sloop with oversized flame-red sails billowing. Red Sails. Could only be that place R'R'Rhasct and Chirthi had described. A trio of Sathes approached and simply walked in. As the door opened and closed I could smell warmth and food and smoke on the tangy sea air.

For a time I lurked in the shadows a couple of buildings away, nervous and indecisive, then shrugged. Why not?

That front door opened easily onto a small, Spartan chamber, another door in the far wall. Music, the clatter of metal and glass, Sathes voices sounded through. I pushed that door open and stood on the landing at the top of a wooden stair. Down below, the smoke-filled basement room was filled with a snug gloom. Oil lamps hanging from massive rafters added to the hazy atmosphere. Brass fittings and copper utensils rippled and glowed with reflected firelight. Wooden furniture: tables and benches in secluded alcoves, wooden floor, the bar counter along the far wall, all boned and burnished until they shone with that soft glow of natural wood. The strong, slightly unpleasant smell of mingled Sathes and food.

Many Sathes.

The room was full of them. At tables and at the bar, in the heat of the room most of them wearing only their pelts, almost giving the illusion that the room was carpeted in patched furs. As I stepped down the stairs more and more of them began to stare at me, surprised silence spreading like ripples in a pond. At the foot of the stairs a pair of burly Sathes glanced at each other, then hesitantly moved to block me off, their ears back.

"Alright! Joke's over! What get of a diseased goat let THAT in here?!"

A Sathes was pushing his way out from behind the bar, mad as hell, fur bristling as he glared at the crowd. He stopped at the foot of the stairs, behind the bouncers: "WELL?!"

There was hesitant laughter hissing from the crowd.

I cleared my throat. "Good sir," I ventured. He whipped around to stare at me. "I let myself in," I smiled. "You are the owner of this place?"

He goggled. "You . . . you . . . you . . ." He sounded like a stuck record.

I leant against the railing. "Yes, I can talk. I had noticed. I am not

looking for any trouble, all I want is a drink and some food . . . however if your employee who is trying to sneak up on me tries anything, he will be wearing his asshole as a necklace." I turned and levelled a finger at the startled Sathe bouncer frozen with one foot raised on the stair behind me: "Got that?"

That was bluff, pure and simple. I don't know if I could have handled the muscle, especially if the other two piled in, but there was more laughter from the crowd and the Sathe bouncer hastily backpedalled up the stairs.

The barkeep was still staring. I stepped down - the bouncers retreating before me. "Nice place you have here," I said, glancing casually around.

"You cannot . . ." the tavern master began to protest, then noticed the three gold coins in my hand. He goggled again.

"Change of mind?" I asked.

There was the briefest hesitation before he snatched the golds from my palm, claws barely nicking my skin. Oversized canines dented the soft metal and meticulous eyes examined it. "Very well," he finally said. "If you can pay, you can drink, eat."

"Thank you," I said. Hell, capitalism is universal. Whatever you are, if you can pay they don't have any objections.

"Uh . . . wait," he stopped me as I began to head for the fireplace at the far end of the room. "Do you have any weapons?"

I stopped and stared at him for a time, watching him squirm. "Perhaps."

"You must check them at the bar."

I kept staring.

"Please."

None of the other patrons appeared to be carrying any hardware. I couldn't see any knives or swords. Difficult to hide weapons; many of them wore only small pouches for valuables.

The bartender - a small female with dark fur spattered by droplets of liquid and patched in a couple of places, scars showing - froze like a rabbit, panting hard, as I unstrapped the knife and set it on the bar. She took the combat knife, turning it over in her hands and stroking curious finger pads along the rubberised waterproof sheathing.

"I am going to be wanting that back," I warned her. "It had better still be here when I get back."

"Yes . . . sir," she said, uncertain as to my gender, then hastily tucked the weapon under the bar.

Covert eyes and a wake of silence followed me through the tavern.

The minstrel hunched over his instrument, completely absorbed in his playing. His tongue poked forgotten from his lips as claws in lieu of picks danced across strings. He was acceptably good and the worn leather satchel on the floor at his feet had a sprinkling of copper coins dusted across its battered surface.

I idly toyed with the mug. The single candle on the table in the small alcove was guttering, barely a centimetre of stem with the wick flickering. I stared moodily into the flame reflecting on the twists and turns my life had taken, trying to find a path for the future. I'd seriously debated leaving Mainport, just slipping away one night and trying to make my own way. Harder to hit a moving target.

But then I'd have the hunters of two Realms after me, perhaps five if the others got wind of the hunt. This land is big, but I couldn't hide forever. All it would take would be a careless glimpse, a farmer or villager reporting to the authorities and I'd be running again. Even Tahr, even with what we had between us, she would be duty-bound to find me.

And behind the other door . . . staying here in Mainport, with a roof over my head, food, and a sitting duck for assassins. Tahr had told me on the night of the Choosing that I was a prize. I was the one who had precipitated

the killing in the Circle. I was the one who had so nearly - however indirectly - caused the death of my friend and lover.

My reverie was interrupted at that point by the arrival of one of the tavern staff bringing my meal. I tipped her and she stared incredulously at the gold coin, then made it vanish into the empty-looking pouch that swung lightly from her belt.

The meat was rare; cut into chunks that took me forever to chew and swallow, but the rich gravy and the vegetables were excellent. The minstrel paused to scratch vigorously at his mane, then began on another solo. Most Sathes just ignored him. Just muzak.

From my little recessed alcove all I could see of the room was the fire, the musician, and a couple of other tables discreetly tucked away in nooks and corners of the room, so when Sathes voices began to raise down the other end, I poked my head around the corner of the booth for a look-see, then hastily pulled back again.

Five, six guards in their blue and silver livery were having a heated debate with a group of the locals. Looking for me? I glanced around again. Those two guards . . . Shit! I knew them! Chirthis and Wasshername . . . R'R'Rhasct? Yeah, that's it. What the hell were they doing here? Looking for me already? They'd checked their weapons. Perhaps they were just in for a meal or a drink.

A yowl of pain rose above the general hubub. I looked around in time to see a small-scale riot breaking out - the Citadel troops were tussling with disreputable-looking Sathes who were either naked or wearing tough leather breeks: labourers or fishers I guessed, but they outnumbered the troopers three to one. Two of the combatants rolled onto a table that promptly collapsed under their weight, scattering wooden bowls and patrons left and right. A trio of locals were working a trooper over; two holding him while the other went to work on his ears: tearing with claws. Chirthis decked the one he was grappling with, then turned to help. The fallen dockhand clambered into a crouch, then reached into the back of his waistband.

I had his arm bent behind his back before he could draw the concealed knife from its sheath. "Naughty, naughty," I growled in his ear as I confiscated it. A wicked thing, like an icepick, with a slender blade designed for slipping in through chinks in armour. Nice balance too. A flick of my wrist and the dirk was imbedded in a wall.

Now the Sathes I was holding twisted around and yelped at what he saw. Two of his friends - perhaps drunk beyond caring - tried to jump me. I shifted my weight and kicked out at one of them with my right boot, catching him on the hip and sending him sprawling. The Sathes in my hands was a burden; I shoved him into a chair, spun and crouched in time to avoid a slashing sweep from the other Sathes. He didn't manage to dodge a straight line-drive to his stomach and doubled over as the air was knocked out of him.

Another male faced me, crouched low in a fighters stance, arms curled with all claws extruded. Too cautious. I twisted my face into a mask of rage, roared, then while he was still startled, introduced his groin to my combat boot; right on the penile sheath.

He just grunted, lunged forward and tried to open the side of my face.

Someone landed on my back and hooked a muscular, furry arm around my windpipe, legs around my waist. I stumbled backwards under the unexpected weight, then lunged forwards, trying to send the Sathes flying. Claws scrabbled for my throat. I punched a fist back over my shoulder. Damp, leathery tissue gave way, the Sathes yowled and collapsed.

I tripped on something and went over backwards, landed on a furry body that yelped and gasped. In the resulting tussle a fur-covered elbow filled my vision and pain exploded down the side of my face. I swore and kicked out again, feeling my boot strike solid flesh, another yelp amongst the cacophony of snarls, growls, and howls filling the room. Toe claws raked at my side as one bastard tried to slice me open while I was down, then he was tackled by a

blur in blue armour. They landed with an almighty crash on a table in a booth, fur flying in clouds as they battered at each other's head and neck.

Then another civilian tried for me, claws snagging in the heavy material of my shirt as he clawed at my neck. I caught that hand, blocked the other, spun him, then snatched him up by the belt of his breeches and strung him up from a lamp sconce on a nearby post. He thrashed and squealed as the breeches bit deeply.

His friends had had enough.

Pads and claws thudded against the wooden stairs as the gang of dockhands high-tailed it. The door slammed and suddenly the room was very quiet, my laboured breathing and pounding blood inordinately loud in my ears.

Other patrons had retreated to the walls of the room, watching the fight from a distance. Not a one of them had abandoned their drinks. Several Sathe - blue armour, naked fur, and civi breeches - were sprawled about, some semi-conscious and nursing wounds, others dead to the world. The Citadel troops in their blue armour stood looking around uncertainly as they came down off their adrenal high.

Another sound: a creaking and metallic click.

I turned to see the barkeeper raising a crossbow above the bar, levelling it at me. The quarrel nestling in the groove was fitted with a triangular hunting tip. I stared at the pinpoints of light gleaming from the head of the quarrel, frozen as my guts turned to ice.

Her finger was tightening on the trigger . . .

"Stop!" a Sathe cried. "Hold!" Chirthi pushed in front of me, a bleeding ear, holding out a hand to the bartender. She lowered the weapon with pure, undiluted surprise scrawled across her face. "Wha . . . "

"He did not start this!" Chirthi began to explain.

"That one over there had a blade," one of the other patrons called. "The animal stopped him using it."

Now the innkeeper pushed through the door behind the bar. He froze at the sight of the damage and his hands went to his head in a melodramatic display of horror. "Saaaa . . . My life! I am ruined! Aiiii, I am but a lowly merchant! How am I to pay for such destruction?!"

There was some laughter from the room, flattening ears and hisses from the troopers - the equivalent of rolling their eyes.

"You find this humorous?!" The tavern master raged at the patrons. "I should throw you out, the lot of you!"

"Get real, Chaereth," Chirthi chuckled. "They can pay the usual amount for damages," he gestured at the prostrate civies on the floor.

"And I suppose you didn't have a claw in this?"

"There are forty witnesses here who can vouch for us."

The innkeeper - Chaereth - snorted. "Very well, but if they do not have enough, you shall make up the difference. Your commander turns from brawling amongst his troops."

"Agreed," Chirthi signed consent with a twitch of his ears. "And good sir, would your employee mind pointing that thing somewhere else. I think she is making my friend here slightly nervous."

"Friend?" Chaereth inquired with a wrinkle of his muzzle, then, "Very well." He waved a hand and the bartender reluctantly lowered the crossbow, taking out the quarrel then pulling the trigger. The bow released with a sharp snap sounding like a small-calibre pistol shot.

"Thanks," I told Chirthi, then asked, "Get real?"

"I heard you use it before," he said with a slight flash of teeth.

"Sounded good. I have been waiting for a chance to use it."

A hand touched my shoulder, claws tickled my skin through the shirt; friendly. "We had wondered if you would show," the small female said.

"Rhasct . . . " I began.

"R'R'Rhasct," she interrupted; laughing. "You will never learn to say it, will you."

By now their friends had gathered around. Sathe in blue armour, silver

trim. None taller than five and a half foot, all of them scuffed, several bleeding from scratches, cut ears and muzzles. "I have seen this around the Citadel," one of them said. "You know it?"

"Him," R'R'Rhasct corrected. "His name is K'hy. He is . . . what are you again?"

"Human," I provided.

"H'man, that noise," she grinned at me. "I have not seen any sign of you since that Sand Circle affair. What are you doing down here tonight?"

"I was looking for a drink, and a bit of peace and quiet."

There was Sathé laughter. "You are not such a good hunter," Chirthi said as he dabbed at his torn ear. "This is not the best place to look for peace and quiet."

"Drinks, however," R'R'Rhasct said, "perhaps those could be found here. Do you need help looking?"

I grinned back, making those Sathé who weren't familiar with my expression of amusement shift back uneasily. "I would welcome the company."

"Lonely, a?" R'R'Rhasct gave me a thoughtful look, then patted my shoulder. "Not too surprising. Come on, we will get you that drink."

The bed was warm, the sheets coarse, the furry body beside me soft, pulsing gently with breath. I closed my bleary eyes again and cuddled up close, feeling fur rubbing softly against my naked skin.

There was shouting from outside, the rattle of iron-bound wheels on cobbles. The noise went right through my head.

I groaned, rolled over onto my back, and threw an arm across my eyes, wincing at the pounding behind my temples, the gummy taste on the roof of my mouth. Eventually I took my arm away and squinted at the ceiling.

Somehow it seemed different that morning . . .

Perhaps because it wasn't my ceiling.

Low, peaked ceiling of huge slate shingles with rafters of old, black wood; warped and twisted. Walls of rough wood, small window with slats missing from the shutter, a faint, blurry light outside. Black floor polished smooth to a gleaming finish.

This wasn't my room! I didn't recognise it at all!

Beside me the Sathé muttered and chirred in her sleep, in waking. I stared. Her fur was brown, a dark van dyke brown with faint stripes of white and black on her ribs.

Not Tahr.

I'd never really understood that term, 'your heart skipping a beat'. Not until then, that is. If I hadn't been lying down I'd have collapsed. This isn't happening. I just froze, staring. She abruptly rolled over and opened her eyes, meeting mine.

With a yell I was out of the bed and against the wall by the window, wide-eyed and gasping and stark naked as I stared at her.

"K'hy?" she asked.

"Oh my god!" I squeaked.

"What was that?" she smiled and stretched out. "You know I do not understand those noises."

"W . . . who are you?" I croaked. "Oh Jesus! What happened?! Where am I?!"

She stared at me, speechless, then sat up; one arm looped over a knee. "Saaa! You do not remember? Last night?"

I shook my head miserably, trying to remember what happened. "I . . . I had some drinks . . . Rhasct and Chirthi. After that . . ."

After that . . . nothing. Some confusing emotions maybe, otherwise zilch.

A scratch at the door. I jumped as another female poked her head around. "I heard . . ." R'R'Rhasct began and trailed off as she saw the tableau: Me

naked, in a defensive crouch, facing off the strange female I'd woken up with.

At that moment my exposure was the last thing on my mind. I rounded on the female guard: "Rhasct! What the fuck is going on here?! What happened?! We were drinking, then I wake up here . . ." I looked at the female on the bed again, saw the scars on her pelt. "Shit! You were at the bar. Took my knife, then nearly speared me with a crossbow."

"I did apologise," she retorted, almost insulted.

"Uhhnn!" I grated between clenched teeth, turned away and leaned spread-eagle against the window frame. Dawn was trying to creep between the slats of the shutter. I took a deep breath: "Did anything . . . happen last night? Between us?"

There was hesitation before she answered. "Yes. Yes, we coupled. I do not . . ."

"Oh God!" I hissed with my stomach tying itself in knots. "She's going to kill me!"

"K'hy?" R'R'Rhasct ventured. "What is the matter with you?"

"WITH ME?!" I spun on them in a flaring rage that made both Sathe start, then gasped air as I fought to calm down, my head pounding. "Oh Jeez, Rhasct, what happened?" I pleaded, then looked to the female in the bed with abrupt horror: "I did . . . I did not PAY you, did I?"

"No," the wide-eyed female replied.

"You had quite a few ales," R'R'Rhasct volunteered.

"How many?"

"Oh, I am not sure. About three tankards I should imagine."

"Three . . ." I rubbed my forehead. The stuff they brew here is far from potent. Hell, compared with that ale, even Coors - the piss of the lager industry - packs a punch. Three tankards; not including the few I'd downed earlier. Damnation! I'd drunk more than that before and still been able to thread a needle.

I didn't get it.

R'R'Rhasct's ears trembled and again she glanced between me and the recumbent female on the sheets. "Does it . . . does simple sex really upset you so much?"

"Rhasct," I said, then sighed, fighting to think clearly. "I do not have anything against simple sex. Could you enjoy it if you wake remembering nothing of it? Also, she and I . . . I am too different to make it simple sex. Our differences are not just physical. Sex to me is . . . emotional." God, I'd had a hard enough time coping with Tahr's advances. Now I was fooling around? My head was throbbing again and I heavily sat down on the edge of the bed, rubbing my temples. "Thank you, Rhasct. Please, leave us?"

She quietly closed the door behind her.

I jumped at a touch on my shoulder. Leathery finger pads and furry knuckles pressed against my neck and down alongside my spine and across my shoulders, rubbing, pressing, kneading. Slowly, my tension drained under the backrub. The pain in my head subsided.

"I taught you this?" I asked.

"Yesss," she spoke that monosyllable in English, drawing it out into a hiss. "The last night you were not so touchy. "

I groaned. "The last night I was not exactly myself."

Again she laughed.

"You are not afraid of me," I said, aware the instant I spoke of the foolishness of the question.

"How can I be," she softly rebuked.

"Huhnn . . . I did not . . . hurt you?"

"No," she said. Warm, insubstantial breath hovered against my shoulder as if sharp teeth hesitated, then moved away again. "No, never." Her hands described small circles over the region of my kidneys, traced the ridge of my vertebrae upwards. "It was a lot of fun actually; for both of us I thought. There is another female, is there not? Another Sathe?"

"How did you know?" I asked; surprised. "Did I talk about her last

night?"

"No," she said and I felt the bed move as she resettled herself. Her hands pressed at my shoulders, each squeeze bringing the claws partly out to kiss my skin. "You knew me too well for this to have been your first time with a Sathe."

"Ahhh," I nodded. The fur of her stomach rustled against my back as she pressed up closer. It was then I realised what was happening.

"Hey!" I yelped and yanked away. "What are you doing?!"

Startled, she knelt on the bed with her feet tucked back beneath her.

"You ARE different this morning."

"I am SOBER this morning!"

"Saaa! I think I prefer you drunk. You were not afraid to have fun then." She cocked her head to one side. "I know you enjoyed yourself as much as I did."

"That was then, this is now," I growled.

Her ears and muzzle dipped in annoyance: "Do you have the same trouble with your female?"

My female . . . Holy Shit!

I dashed to the shutters and wrenched them open. There - to the east - the velvet sky was lightening, high streaks of cloud glowing with the coming of the dawn.

"Shit! I have to get out of here! Now!"

"What? What is wrong!"

My clothes were scattered around the room. I began to hunt around for the various bits and pieces. "Look," I tried to explain as I caught my underwear up from the 'foot' of the circular bed. "I am not supposed to be here."

"Where?"

"Here!" I waved my arm as I hopped on one leg trying to get into the shorts. "In the town. In Mainport. If I am not back at the Citadel before they know I am gone, I am going to be in a lot of trouble." I found my boots and shirt.

"Trouble? With whom?"

"Damnation! The Shirai!"

"The Shirai! You know her?"

"Know her! Huh!" I half-laughed. "Listen; that other female . . . that's her."

"Oh!" Her eyes went impossibly wide. "What would happen . . . "

I shook my head. "No idea. She does not seem to be the type to get jealous, but I do not want to risk it."

She hissed and wrinkled her muzzle at me. "It was not jea . . . "

I couldn't find my pants. "My breeches! Damnation! Where are my breeches?!" I demanded. She stared at me, then flicked an ear and pointed up.

There, draped over a rafter, were my pants. I cursed and snagged them down. Now my socks . . .

"You are looking for these?" she asked, sticking a foot out.

The trio of bored guards lounging around outside my door had kittens when I appeared. Hands shot to sword hilts, fur bristled.

"Hey guys!" I smiled and waved at them.

"You . . . How . . . " they stuttered with jaws dropping. "Where have you been? What have you done?!" the senior howled.

"I got tired of the view and took a walk," I said. "Now if you will excuse me . . . "

"A walk!" The guard started to hyperventilate. "The Shirai will have our hides for this!"

"What she does not know cannot hurt her," I pointed out. "I am here, I am safe. Just keep your mouths shut and nobody will know."

He gaped and was about to argue when his associates caught his shoulder and drew him aside to put their heads together. Eventually they came to a solution that was of mutual satisfaction to them all. The trio returned to their posts, staring past me. "If anyone asks, we never saw you leave your room."

I grinned and opened the door.

From the rampart below my window a bird was singing its respects to the morning sun.

"Oh, Jesus . . . Why haven't they invented coffee?" I moaned to myself, clasping my head between my hands. Water had to do instead. I took a mouthful, swilled, spat, then drank.

Nah, it's just not the same.

Christ on a crutch! How much had I drunk last night? R'R'Rhasct had said it was only three mugs. Bullshit! I'd never feel like this after only three beers. It reminded me more of the after-effects of Thamil. Still, whatever it had been, it had been more than enough to persuade me to go all the way with yet another Sathe female, one I didn't even know! "This is a habit I've got to break," I muttered, then dropped back down on the couch, nursing my water. My head was still aching, even when I put my head down and closed my eyes for a second . . .

Five localised points of pain lanced through my shoulder. I yelped, rolled over, and fell off the couch. From my position on the wooden floor, I looked up at Remae leaning over the back of the chair, her claws still poking from her fingertips. "Oh, sorry," the Marshal apologised, "I forgot how thin your skin . . . what has happened to your face?"

"Huh?" I touched my cheek and winced. "Oh, I just had a small accident last night. Fell over. Nothing serious." Outside, the sun was high in the sky. How long had I been asleep?

"Good to hear. Have you looked at yourself?"

There was a mirror in my room, a tiny square of smoky glass. Unfamiliar features stared back at me. Every time I caught a glimpse of myself in the damned thing, I looked. . . wrong, and this time I looked even worse than usual. My left eye was almost swollen shut and surrounded by black and blue skin, a real shiner. I touched the tenderised meat and winced. "Ouch. That's going to be a beauty. "

Reflected in the mirror, I saw Remae standing behind the couch, staring at me. The contrast between the brilliance of her eyes and the darkness of her fur was incredible; like the catseyes down the middle of a road, shining in a car's headlights. It made me nervous.

"Fell over," she mused. "Did you trip over someone's claws?"

"Huh?"

"Those scratches down your side."

I glanced down at the tears in my shirt with the red scratches showing through. Shit! I'd forgotten . . . "Was there something you wanted?" I snapped and turned to face her.

"The guard said that you were asleep when he brought in your food, that you had been all day. I just stopped off to see if you were all right."

I bent over to pick up the mug I'd knocked over when I fell off the couch and set it back beside the pitcher of water on the desk. "Oh, thanks . . . I would be better if I could get out more often, but that is not possible is it," I said with a meaningful glance in her direction.

She rubbed behind one triangular ear; amused. As if she knew something . . . "No, I am afraid not."

I rolled my eyes, sighed, and she turned to leave. "Hold on a sec," I stalled her. "Can I see that Gulf prisoner? The female, the one whose mate was injured."

She stopped in her tracks. "What in the Name of the Clan do you want to

see her for?"

I shrugged. "There are a few questions I want to ask her."

"Are there?" she stared at me, her ears tilting back. "Why? She is the enemy."

"Remae, to me she is a Sathe . . . as are you, Tahr, and Rehr. I find it very difficult to hate any of you because of your backgrounds and histories; they do not mean as much to me as they do to you . . . Please, can I see her?"

Remae's hand was resting on the door latch but she made no move to open it. She stood there for a few seconds, her muzzle wrinkled in puzzlement and those unblinking eyes fixed on me.

I swallowed.

"We shall see," she said, then she swept out and the door was swinging shut behind her.

I watched the door after it had shut, thinking about what I had heard Remae and Tahr talking about the night before. What had Tahr told her about us? Judging from the way she had been staring at me, I guessed it was a lot.

"What is it with them? We're different goddamn SPECIES!" I wondered if talking to yourself really was a sign of cracking up.

Papers on the drawing board fluttered in a draught coming straight through the closed windows. Sparks danced up around the stew simmering over the fire, the smell wafting around the room.

As the papers rustled again, I jotted down a note in the margins: DOUBLE GLAZING.

They hadn't let me see that Gulf prisoner, but I'd got my drawing board moved in. Those long winter evenings dragged on, working was one way to pass the time. I spent hundreds of hours at that desk with quill and ink, scratching away, putting ideas to paper. Technical works for the most part, tools and machinery I tried to recreate from memory, but tucked away in a drawer were a few sketches of a more personal nature.

One slow day I'd found myself doodling, sketching a line drawing of Tahr's face. It just went from there, drawing the faces of the Sathe I'd met, trying to catch the individuality of the alien bone structures and furry faces; emotions expressed in ways a human couldn't; ways a human found difficult to relate to. I never actually showed the pictures to anyone - embarrassed they might just laugh at my interpretation of Sathe. They were something to do when I was bored or when I needed something else to think about. I kept them tucked away in a drawer and slowly - over the months - their numbers grew.

On the board in front of me at the moment were rough notes for part of a wind-powered sawmill, the mechanism that would move eight saw blades while pulling a log through them; not too difficult to put down on paper, but I wondered what the gears and ratchets could be made from . . . it looked like it would have to be wood. Steel would have to wait until I got a Bessemer converter - or a satisfactory analogue - worked out.

There was a scratch on the door. "Come in," I called out absently in English, my mind really on the paper in front of me. No matter. Remae came in and shut the door behind herself.

Without preamble she said. "I have the person that you wanted to see. She is outside . . . Do you still wish to see her?"

I tossed the quill I was writing with on the drawing board and leaned back in the chair. The sharpened feather made a small blot of ink as the tip touched the yellowish paper. "She is here? Sure."

She stared at me then started to open the door.

"Remae," I got her attention again. "Why do you keep . . . ah . . . looking at me like that. Is there something strange about me? More than normal I mean."

She favoured me with a smile. "Apologies. I did not mean to stare. It is

nothing." She disappeared into the corridor.

I cleared the papers off the desk. "Nothing . . . right. Sure."

What HAD Tahr said about me?

When I looked up again that female Gulf soldier was standing in the doorway, a pair of armed and armoured guards flanking her. Remae hovered behind them.

"Can we be alone?" I asked her.

She gave the Gulf trooper a dubious look, then asked me, "Will you be all right?"

Of all the stupid . . . "Does she look as though she can hurt me?" I snapped.

That was true. It looked as if she was having trouble standing; her wrists were chained and her fur was matted and bedraggled, tufts missing with patches of cut skin showing through. With dull eyes she watched me, but her nose was twitching. I saw her glance at the fire and the pot of stew simmering on the hearth.

Remae and the guards left.

"You do not look so good," I said.

She just stared at me.

"Have a seat." I sat down in one of the armchairs and gestured at the other one. She just stood there.

"Come on. You can sit down now, or I can carry you to a chair when you collapse . . . Look at yourself, you can hardly stand."

She seemed to wilt even more, if that was possible, and settled in the chair nearest the fire, tucking her feet up and lowering her head, her eyes still watching me.

"I do not even know your name," I realised. "Do you want to tell me?"

She didn't say anything.

"Listen, please. I am sorry about what happened to you and your mate. I wish we could be meeting under different circumstances, but I am afraid I really have no say in the matter."

"Kass," she said.

"What?"

"My name is Kass . . . Kass ai Shila." Her head lifted slightly.

"Kass," I pronounced the name correctly and looked at her sitting there, small, defenceless, scared, but with a spark of defiance burning within her. I saw the dirty muzzle, fur stretched taut over her ribs, and I saw her furtive glances at the pot of stew steaming softly beside the fire. A thread of saliva hung from her mouth and she licked her chops.

"Hungry?"

Startled, she looked back at me and pointedly clamped her mouth shut.

I shrugged, picked up a clean bowl and ladled a generous helping of stew into it. Beside the fireplace a spoon I had carved for myself hung alongside Sathe spoons; I took one of the long Sathe ones. "Here, take it." I offered the bowl to her.

She hesitated, but was soon shoving spoonfuls of stew into her mouth as fast as she could, holding the bowl awkwardly because of her chains.

"Careful." She flinched when I touched her hand. "Go slowly." She kept eating, but at a more sedate pace. When she finished, I gave her a mug of water. "When was the last time you ate?"

She belched and looked surprised. "I told you to take it easy," I said.

She snorted then looked at me suspiciously. "What do you want?"

"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

"Huh?"

"I just want to ask you a few questions."

Her eyes narrowed as a guarded look crossed her face: Obviously she had been asked some questions before.

"No, no," I hastily assured her. "You will have nothing to lose by answering . . . at least I do not think you will. I just want to know what happened to the family at the farm."

She still looked wary and scared.

"For Christ's sake . . . Look, I just want to know what happened to them. I will not hold your answer against you." I hoped.

"Can I ask you a question first?" she countered.

"You will answer my question if I answer yours?"

"Yes, I swear it."

"I will take you on your word. What is it?"

"What ARE you? Those months ago I was told we go to capture a strange creature aiding the Eastern Realm. We do this task," her chains rattled as she clenched a fist. "The creature talks, it seems to burn to death, then it returns to capture US!" She sagged and stared at the black chains around her wrists, then almost pleaded: "What are you?"

I couldn't blame her for wanting to know that, but should I tell her? What could it hurt? "It is a long story."

"I am not going anywhere."

Well then. I poured myself a mug of water, settled and began to tell her my tale. She listened attentively.

"That is true?" she asked once I had finished.

"Yes, every word. Now I have answered your question, it is your turn."

She took a deep breath that hissed like steam escaping from a kettle and tucked her feet in closer. "They were executed."

"Oh, God . . . You fucking . . ."

She cowered back, wide-eyed in terror as I stood and took a step toward her, jaw and fists clenched in fury. All she could do was cringe back, like she was trying to push through the back of the chair. She raised her hands toward me off, the chains rattled, and the rage abruptly faded. I sat down again. She couldn't read my expression, shrinking away as I raised my head from my hands, moisture streaming from my eyes.

"We had to do it," she gabbled. "We had to! If we didn't, he would have had us impaled and skinned for disobeying his orders if he had found out!"

I half-listened to her. Why hadn't he come with me!?

He had his family.

"Why are they any concern of yours though? You never knew them."

That snapped my attention back to the present. "Oh, I knew them! I knew them. They gambled everything to save my life, and they lost."

"I owe them everything, Kass!"

Bewildered by my outburst she gaped, then stuttered, "You . . . cared for them?" it was an unbelieving question.

"Yes, I cared. I can care you know. I can love and hate, laugh and cry . . . everything a Sathe can feel, so can I. When you had me chained, did you think I enjoyed it?! Did you think I LIKED being tortured?! What did you think I AM?!"

"I still do not know," she mumbled.

My anger abruptly died. As tired as if I had been running for my life, I sagged and ran my fingers over my scalp. "You were asking the guards about me; why?"

"I wanted to know more about you. What . . . who you are."

"Have I answered your questions?"

Her chains rattled as she waved a sign of acknowledgment. There was a silence, then: "You are alone? There are no more of your kind?"

"I do not know," I replied. "You have not heard any stories or rumours about anything like myself?"

"If you listen to enough tale-weavers you will eventually hear anything you like," she said, "but I have never heard tell of anything like you."

I sighed to myself and stared out the window. Droplets of water impacted against the wavery glass as the sky outside began to open. "Alright, Kass. Tell me about the Gulf Realm."

Instantly her ears went back and she clammed up.

"Hey! No. My mistake. All I wish to know about is what your life in the Gulf Realm was like. Where you were born, what your Clan and family is like. I

know nothing of what life outside the Eastern Realm is like."

Kass stared at me in surprise, but the hostility was still there.

"Okay," I shrugged then got up, took her bowl, refilled it, and handed it back to her. "You do not have to tell me anything you do not wish to."

She looked at the steaming bowl she held and I could see her nostrils flare. Saliva glistened on her thin, black lips. A time of thought, then she started speaking.

Her Clan was not prominent. They hailed from a fairly insignificant settlement in the western borderland of the Gulf Realm. Farming and herding was a major part of their lifestyle. She described in wistful detail the small outpost and the countryside about it: the golden prairies that 'vanished beyond a glowing purple horizon', the rivers and glades.

She was a long way from home.

Six years ago, at the age of thirteen, she had been drafted into the Gulf military forces to do her time as all able-bodied Sathes were required to do. She had seen action on their north-western frontier against the nomadic tribes of the Open Realm when the Gulf Realm carved itself several thousand square clicks of new land. She returned to their capital a vet and was initiated into the Guard where she had earned the trust and recognition of her superiors.

Although she had fond memories of it, she really harboured no wish to return to her little backwater town. She'd found a job that offered to let her see more of the world than she could ever see swabbing out llama stalls.

"However I did not realise that the world would include the inside of an Eastern dungeon," she finished wryly.

While her story was doubtless biased, what she had told me gave me a picture of how her Realm functioned. To begin with, while the Eastern Realms form of blanket government was what could be coined a benevolent monarchy, the Gulf Realm was reigned over by a militant dictatorship.

For generations now, the Clan leading the Realm had been the Mharah Dynasty, of whom Hraasa ai Mharah was the current Born Ruler. They had the Gulf Realm in a stranglehold, stifling opposition by ensuring that the other Clans in the Realm were all firmly under their control.

There were the compulsory draft regulations. Clans must send a certain number of their young to serve in the Gulf military for a time. That left the Mharah Clan with a standing army of immense size under its almost exclusive control, funded by taxes from the other clans of the Realm.

I also saw how the Gulf Realm had been nibbling at its neighbours, taking tiny bites from here and there. And now there were Gulf troops infiltrating the Eastern Realm; pushing far beyond the borders nearly undetected. The Eastern Realm knew they were there, but couldn't find them. Like fleas on a dog.

Their push was going to turn to shove real soon.

I turned from my ruminating back to Kass: "Thank you. You have been most helpful."

Her catlike ears went back flat and the green eyes she shared with the rest of her kind, regardless of their Realm, widened in alarm. I could almost hear her thoughts: what did I say?!

The guards came when I called them and yanked Kass to her feet. I growled at them to be gentle and they took their hands off her, but they still kept a hand on their sword hilts.

"Hold it," I said before they carted her away. The guards stopped and she looked around at me. "Kass, one more thing. You know the choices available to you. Make your one count. I do believe that no ideal is worth dying for."

"I will in no way dishonour my Clan or my mate," she said. "I will make my own choice."

I shrugged. "Spoken like a true fanatic."

She bristled. The guards hissed.

"I hope I see you again," I said sincerely, then waved for the guards to take her away.

Remae drifted in, turning in the doorway to watch the Eastern Warrior being taken away, and sat down in the chair that Kass had just vacated. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

I glared at her. "Cut that out. I found out what I wanted to know."

Remae idly scratched at the arm of the chair with a claw, "What was that?"

"A little about the Gulf Realm."

"We could have told you anything you wanted to know."

"I know," I shrugged, "But I wanted to hear the other side." From the horse's mouth, so to speak.

"Then you see what we fear. Do you think we are right or wrong to desire your weapons to protect ourselves?"

"Christ, Remae, I do not think I am the right one to make moral decisions of this kind. I can only hope I am doing the right thing."

"Believe me," she said. "You are!"

"Thanks a lot," I said dryly, then dropped down in the chair behind my desk: "What she said as she was leaving . . . I think she really would rather die than surrender to you. Are all Sathe like that?"

Remae's eyes hardened: "Gulf they may be, but they are also Guard. They are the most trusted of the Clan Lord's followers for good reasons: They are good, and they are loyal. It is a code: Loyalty, courage, and honour above all else. Why did you not believe me when I told you that they would live and die by this code?"

"I guess I was thinking like a human."

"Would you not die for your Clan and Realm?"

"Ah . . . we do not have Clans like you do."

"Would you?"

"I do not know." I couldn't explain all the differences between our two cultures. "I do not think so."

Remae's head rocked back as if my words had been a slap in the face.

"But you are a warrior. It is your duty to defend your Realm!"

"A duty I can perform much better if I am alive," I countered. "I will follow my superior if he leads me to Hell and back. I would fight for my . . . Realm, I would not betray it, but I would not give my life. Shit, I do not want to die; nobody in their right mind does. No honour is worth that."

"Saaa! K'hy, honour is everything!"

To you, Remae, perhaps.

To me it just seemed like another name for pride. A means of inflaming youthful imagination to do the bidding of those who would use them.

But when in Rome . . .

I sighed and nodded vaguely.

She stared at me, then shook her head as though dispelling a cloud of midges. I didn't hear Remae step up beside me, but I felt it when she brushed against my sleeve.

"I am sorry, maybe you are right," I apologised, then changed the subject: "I have not seen much of Tahr lately. Is she too busy to see me?"

"You have not heard? . . . No, of course you would not have. The old Born Ruler is much worse. She has been seeing as much of him as possible." The black velvet of her muzzle wrinkled slightly. "I do not like to believe it, but I do not think he has long to live."

"Oh," I said.

She laid a black-furred hand on my shoulder. "Do not worry, she has not forgotten you."

"I understand. She has a life to lead as well." I astonished Remae by putting an arm around her shoulders and giving her a hug, "Thank you, Remae. For everything."

Something disturbed me that night: The creak of a floorboard, scraping

of furniture, I don't know what it was, but I rolled and opened my eyes to stare up at a raised thread of steel, glittering like the startled Sathes eyes behind the mask.

The face reared back even as I yelled and kicked out, sending sheets flying up at the figure standing over me, sending it reeling back, flailing at the cloth and I rammed into its midriff, feeling something like an icicle push into my back, then we both slammed into the wall and slid to the floor. Her head was in my arms and I was about to break her neck when pain ripped into my shoulders and tore down my arms. Reflexively I lurched backwards with a cry of pain and tripped over something in the dark. My arms gave out when I tried to cushion my fall and I hit the floor hard. Agony shot through my back, the cold feeling turning to paralyzing pain.

She pulled the blankets off, her claws glistening oily with steel and blood, snatched something small from her belt and cocked her arm ready to throw. In the turmoil the black mask had been torn off and I saw her face.

"Hymath?" I gasped, eyes wide, trying to focus while arching away from the pain.

She hesitated, and at that moment I heard the door in the other room burst open. A blur in the darkness, she turned and disappeared.

There was shouting, a cry of pain, the sound of furniture being overturned, then guards were milling around me and I was lifted and laid facedown on the bed and my back was throbbing and everything whirling, then a claw moved in my back, below my shoulder blade, a grating of bone on . . . something. I began to scream, hands held me and jammed something that tasted of leather into my mouth. I bit down hard as a cold length was pulled out of my back.

A Sathes doctor fussed over me. Salves and paste on my shoulders, on my back. I shuddered weakly as it burned and stung, then burned again, like a poker in my trapezius. I was able to mumble a warning and someone grabbed a chamber pot, holding it while I puked my guts out. Hot water was brought in, they cleaned me. The surgeon mixed powders from various small vials on a single piece of parchment, then tipped them into a mug.

I was almost eager to drink the sedative, my bolt-hole from the pain.

They kept me drugged for three days, half-waking me only to give me food and water and the chamber pot. The last of the antiseptic from my medical kit was used to keep the sutures clean.

I dreamed, or so they said. I would cry out in my sleep and toss around, threatening to tear the stitches open. Whatever those dreams were, all I can remember are flashes of fire and teeth and bloodied steel.

I awoke with that hangover usually characteristic of Thamil. My head was throbbing and I couldn't move either arm without feeling pain in my shoulders. The sun was streaming in through the window, water was dripping off the eaves outside, and Tahr was there; back turned to me as she stared out the window.

"I will break the legs of the next person who gives me that stuff." I growled, then sputtered to get fur out of my mouth as Tahr hugged me.

"You are sure it was her?" Tahr asked.

Perched on the edge of my bed, she was turning a dagger over in her hands. It was a wicked-looking piece of steel, with a long, polished blade and an ornate wooded handle, finely carved in minute detail to resemble a Sathes head. It was the dagger they'd pulled out of my back.

"It was Hymath. She was as close to me as you are, and she recognised me as well. She could have killed me then, instead she ran away."

Tahr flicked the knife and it became a silver blur in the air before thudding to rest in the doorframe. She went to retrieve it. "It could have been her. She was a Scirth Warrior, the weapons are those favoured by them," she said as she pulled the dagger from the wood. "This is a ceremonial dagger, used for assassinations, and the wounds on your shoulders were probably caused

by Iron Claws."

"Iron Claws?"

Tahr extruded her claws; sharp, black crescents. "They are pieces of sharpened steel that fit over one's claws . . . like so. Only Scirth Warriors use them."

"I am sure that it was her," I stated adamantly. "But if she was going to kill me, why did she not go through with it?"

"She is a mercenary," Tahr reminded me. "She may have been hired to kill someone, but was not told who. She did not seem to be the type who would kill a friend."

"You have got to admire her, it was a brave attempt."

Hymath had broken into the apartments directly below mine and cut a hole in the roof, the floor to my room. When the guards burst in, she dropped back down through the hole and lost them in the corridors of the Citadel. The scratches she'd left me in my shoulder were deep and painful, but not life-threatening. Her knife, that had gone in at a sharp angle, scraping against my shoulder blade and sinking deep into the muscle.

"Someone tries to kill you, and you admire her," Tahr's muzzle wrinkled. "I simply do not understand you, K'hy . . . Well, she has given you enough scars to remember her by."

"I am starting to look like a map," I looked down at the tracks of old scars beneath the sparse hairs on my torso. "If I get any more punctures, I will start to leak." I saw her worried face and hastened to clarify: "That is a joke Tahr."

"Huh, you have a strange sense of humour."

"You should talk," I retorted, then yelped as her claws pinched my arm. "Alright! I take it back! No fair," I grumbled, "picking on a helpless invalid."

She gently stroked my arm with the pads on the tips of her fingers. "I am sorry," she grinned, looking anything but. Then, while I couldn't retaliate, those hands ran up my arm and caressed my face. "What happened to your eye? That was not from Hymath."

"An accident."

"You are very accident prone," she smiled and patted my cheek, which she knew annoyed me, but there was nothing I could do about it. I threw a few light hearted insults after her as she left.

It was a clear night, but the moon had chosen to hide behind the only cloud in the sky. The air was cold and a stiff wind had blown up, howling down corridors like a banshee. There was no snow on the ground, the rain of the past few days had washed it away.

The Keep walls surrounding the central courtyard where the Circle lay rose away from the courtyard like giant steps, each tier made up of walkways, buttresses, balconies, and archways. It was plain for all to see that this face of the Citadel was not intended to be a fortress: the masonry was artistic and intricately carved, letting the walls soar.

Five floors above the courtyard I huddled into my cloak. My wounds still ached, the stitches itching, but I couldn't miss this. My two Sathe bodyguards stood like statues, not noticing the chill. On either side of us along the length of the cloistered corridor Sathe were standing silently, watching what went on below.

Beneath the gaze of thousands of Sathe around the walls and the watchful squinting eye of the quarter moon appearing from behind its cloud, the old King lay dead on a litter carried by a small entourage of Sathe as they headed across the frozen ground toward the stone circle.

In the centre of the circle, in the centre of the arena where the Candidates had fought, the litter was placed upon a rectangular stack of logs. The Sathe moved out until they formed a circle with the deathbed in the

middle, then several Sathes stepped forward with torches.

The pyre burned slowly at first, a flickering glow around the base, but it quickly grew until a tower of flames leapt up into the night, sparks ascending until they faded from sight. Light danced and wove among the Sathes, playing with their long shadows and finally losing itself in the darkness. A single figure stepped toward the pyre and a mournful cry of loss and sorrow tore up into the night.

The cry was echoed.

From a thousand Sathes' throats, the same sound reverberated, sending electric shivers up and down my spine. Every Sathes' head I could see was thrown back, howling like coyotes baying at the moon. Their eyes were shut tight and their ears plastered back against their skulls. The fire settled, the collapsing timbers setting a shower of sparks to dancing above the Circle.

Slowly the sound faded as Sathes started to drift away. After a time, only one Sathes was left standing by the pyre that blazed in the circle. Even from that distance, I could see the grief in the way she stood. I stood there and watched her until a guard touched my arm, telling me it was time to leave.

Back in my room, I sat and stared into the fire. Tahr had lost her father now, the last person whom she had been very close to. I didn't know how I would take it if I found out that everyone I used to know was dead . . . Hell, I didn't know if they were still alive, I just kept myself sane by telling myself they had to be, but how could I be sure . . .

I tore my thoughts away from that track and tried to think about something else, but my mind kept drifting back to the funeral and that eerie howling. All the Sathes I could see had cried out at the same time with no apparent prompting. I wondered if it was a custom that went on at all their funerals, then decided it couldn't have been. There had been no howling on that night after we had captured the Gulf forces. The Eastern Realm soldiers had mourned the loss of their comrades with silence. No, it was another ritual, something reserved for their nobility.

There were voices in the corridor outside, then a scratch on the door. "The Born Ruler sent for you," a guard told me. "We are here to escort you."

I nodded and went with them.

Tahr's quarters were dark and cold. I hesitated inside the door, waiting for my eyes to adjust. "Tahr?"

There was a movement near the window, a flash of emerald eyes. "Hello, K'hy," the voice was flat, emotionless.

I picked my way across the dark room, feeling ridiculously clumsy as I bumped against furniture. "I am sorry," I said. "I am as blind as a bat."

Perhaps she smiled. "But bats do not walk into things."

I shrugged. She reached out and took my hand, her much smaller one almost engulfed in my paw. "K'hy, I just wanted someone to talk to."

"Me?"

"I know you."

My eyes had adjusted to the faint moonlight coming in through the window. I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her against my side. "I am sorry about your father," I whispered.

She tensed under my arm. "I can remember what he was like when I was a cub," she finally said. "Before I was sent to the estate, I remember we would go to the market. I always loved that. The strange Sathes, their wares. I could eat sweetmeats, enjoy myself. Sometimes we would go to nearby towns by ourselves for a few days, get away from the court. He was much stronger in those days, able to take care of himself," she was staring out the window, trembling violently. "I remember . . . I . . ." she broke off, shivering, chattering.

I'd never seen a Sathes cry before.

I held her close, resting my head against the fur of her mane while she shook against me. By involuntary reflex her claws dug deep into my back; I gritted my teeth and did nothing. I just held her until she cried herself out.

"Why?" she gasped. "Why is it like this? We mourn their death, but it is

we, the ones who live, who suffer. We mourn for them, but they no longer care." She leaned her head against my chest again and I gently rocked her back and forth.

"I know . . . I know," I murmured softly and gently scratched her behind the ears. "Among my people, there is a belief that a person lives even after death. The body might wither and die, but the thing that is the person, the essence, the soul lives on."

Tahr stirred against me. "Is this so?"

"I do not know. Many people like to believe it is so . . . and nobody has every proved it not true," I stroked her muzzle with the tip of one finger and smiled at her. Inside I felt a tinge of regret, I might have just made a big mistake. At best Religion is a touchy subject.

"It is a nice thought," she murmured and snuggled in close, looking out the window. I ran my hand through that long fur that made up her mane. Slightly coarser than human hair, it was still warm and soft. "Will you stay with me?" she asked.

"I am not going anywhere," I reassured her.

I stayed there, holding her, stroking her mane until her eyes closed and she relaxed against me. Then I set her to bed and watched her until I also dozed off.

The sword swung at me again and I managed to block it with the edge of my thin blade. Deflected, it somehow snaked around and came at me again. I blocked the one as well, then swung a stroke of my own. The Sathe snarled and lifted his blade, sagging under the force of my blow. Then my sword skittered off his blade and he leapt forward. Frantically I moved to parry.

It'd only been a feint. While I was off balance the Sathe slipped under my guard and slammed his blade into my unprotected left side.

"Ow!" I yelped.

"Alright! Stop!" S'shar snapped. "You are dead!" He flipped the weighted blade of his wooden sword over his shoulder and wearily rubbed at his facial fur, then rounded on me. "What by all the Plagues were you doing?! Using the edge of your blade to parry!" He gave a disgusted snort. "Are you seriously trying?"

Doubled over, gasping air and with sweat running down my neck, I nodded. My introduction to swordplay was not going well. During my regular lessons we attracted a small crowd of Sathe who lounged around on the grass growing on the balcony garden, having a great laugh at my expense.

I put my hands on my hips and leaned back, taking a deep breath and squinting at the chattering Sathe watching us. "We should charge admission. Could clean up."

S'shar was not amused. He ignored that and slung the mock-sword over his shoulder. "I do not know!" he spat air in disgust and frustration: "Teach you to use a sword! Huh! It is hopeless! You are slow. You favour your right hand too much. You cannot guard your left side correctly. You have enough strength behind your blows . . . but first you have to hit me . . . and even then I think there is a chance you would break your blade or get it stuck!"

I looked at the battered imitation scimitar in my hand. Sathe held theirs' in a two-handed grip, but I could manage one-handed without difficulty, something S'shar often chewed me out about. He couldn't seem to understand that I was built differently. The mock-ups weren't as dangerous as the real things, but they could still bruise. With his fur S'shar didn't bother with protection, but the body armour the Sathe had issued me with was leather, and on that day in May it was hot enough in that sweat-suit to fry eggs. I sank down in the shade of a tree making the windbreak that sheltered the garden from the wind off the Atlantic. The Citadel landscapers did good work.

The swordsmaster loomed over me: "K'hy, most cubs are better than you

are."

"Gee . . . thanks for the constructive criticism," I snapped. "I cannot move as fast as you can. If you would just stand still, it would make everything a lot easier."

"I doubt that many opponents will stand still for you to take pieces out of him," he gave a rumbling laugh, then glanced past my shoulder. "Company. Saaa . . . she will not be pleased."

I looked to see who 'she' was. Oh, Remae. She was brushing through the wild grasses that Sathe preferred to close-cropped lawns.

"Oh shit!" I closed my eyes and groaned. "Report card time!"

"S'shar," Remae said in way of greeting, stopping beside me and reaching down to ruffle my hair. I patted it flat again. "How is your pupil doing?"

S'shar gave me a single, despairing look, then said, "Not well. I fear that I can never see him being any good at all with a blade."

Remae looked astonished.

"Hey! I am not superman," I said grudgingly.

"He is just a beginner. He is really that bad?"

The swordsmaster took a deep breath, then launched into a litany of my faults. While she listened the Marshal stared at me: I leaned back against the tree, propped my head up with a hand and tapped at my cheek with a finger, trying to hide my embarrassment.

"K'hy," Remae finally said when the vet had finished, "pick up your sword." She in turn took up S'shar's wooden scimitar and swung it experimentally. I groaned and struggled to my feet. I was still tired from my previous rounds with my tutor, my muscles aching from days of non-too-gentle whacks and jabs that signalled I had lost the match.

The creature duelling with the Marshal . . . Sathe out enjoying the sun sat up to take notice.

Remae touched her blade to mine, took a few steps back.

. . . and the rounded tip of her blade was spearing for my guts. I danced backwards and knocked it aside with a Clack of wood on wood. Again and again.

Step by step she was forcing me backwards. As sweat dripped down my face I realised with shock that she was playing with me, pushing me just so far that she could see what I could do. Goddamn, she was even better than S'shar.

And I fought back to the best of my ability, for all the good that did. S'shar had taught me to fight the way he had been taught: grip the hilt with both hands and rely upon nimbleness to be your shield. It worked for Sathe. It didn't work for me.

Air whistled as my sword passed through the space Remae had occupied a split-second earlier.

"You are slow," she hissed from a compact crouch, then she blurred forward. You really have to see it to realise just how fast Sathe are; just snap your fingers and they're . . . there. Frantically I twisted to cover my left side, but there was a stinging slap against my arm, then I was facing Remae down a lacquered wooden blade at my throat.

From his comfortable seat in the shade of the tree S'shar waved his hand philosophically at Remae: "You see?"

"I see." Remae's ears went flat in disgust. She practically threw the sword at the veteran who deftly caught it in one hand and ran a finger over the notched blade. "You really have never even SEEN a plague-touched sword before, have you? Did your army teach you nothing about swordplay?"

"No," I shook my head, "Never needed to. In one of our wars they would only be good for chopping firewood."

Remae's muzzle rumped in disgust. "There is no honour in your kind of fighting."

"There is no honour in any kind of fighting. If you want to pussyfoot around, you should not be fighting!"

"You are farting though your mouth!" she bristled. "Fighting should involving meeting your enemy face to face and defeating him, watching his eyes

when he dies."

I cast an exasperated look heavenwards. "Oh, of course. How foolish of me! That is what honour is: Seeing a fellow Sathe holding his entrails in with his hands, watching him coughing blood on the end of your sword? Better . . ."

"EXCUSE ME!" S'shar bellowed. Both Remae and I halted our tirade in mid-broadside to glare at him. "I apologise," he said in milder tones, "but I think that the point of this was not the discussion of personal philosophies.

"K'hy, are you trying your utmost? You do not think you can improve?"

"I am trying, but these are your rules we are playing by. I cannot match you there."

"Then do you have any of your tricks that might help?" Remae inquired.

Almost I said no, then paused with my mouth open and thought for a second or two. "Perhaps," I finally admitted. "Perhaps I may have an idea or two . . ."

Shrouded from head to foot in heavy leather apron and mask, the Sathe blacksmith resembled some extra from an Italian B-grade sci-fi movie. White-hot glare exploded around him as he pulled the door of the furnace open. Shielding his face with a leather-clad arm he poked a hook into the scorching heat and slowly swung the miniature Bessemer converter out on its arm. The converter was shaped like an inverted bell, scored and coated with carbon, spitting sparks of molten metal as apprentices continued pumping high-velocity compressed air through the viscous ore.

The smith wrapped a paw protected by an oversized leather glove around a handle on the converter and tipped it, directing a cascade of orange-white metal and sparks into the mould, letting it envelope the thin core of brittle, low-carbon steel. An assistant swung the converter back into the crucible, leaving the smith free to turn his attention to the liquid steel in the mould.

Before it had cooled the smith was passing the glowing rod through the trip hammer, more sparks flying and rebounding from his apron as the length of metal was pounded and folded around the slat of the central core. A hand-held hammer knocked off extraneous pieces of metal, crudely shaped it.

The metal hissed furiously as the smith quenched it in a trough of oil.

Now the Sathe smith turned to where I was standing out of his way and held the blade up to the light spilling from the furnace. With a claw he pulled the mask from his face.

You can always recognise a Sathe blacksmith: the fur around the eyes, crown, ears, and mane - unprotected by their masks and aprons - has been curled, withered by heat, blackened by soot.

From that mask of soot, green eyes gleamed as the blacksmith ran a critical finger over the black bar, still glistening with oil: slivers of carbon peeled off, metal gleamed and wavered.

It was the final draft, the finished copy. The other lumps of ore, the small daggers and blades that had been forged in the weeks before were dry runs, practice. I was giving the Sathe a quick way to produce large amounts of high-quality steel much faster than they could produce with their conventional smelting and manual metal-folding techniques. I think it was fair enough that this be the first finished article to be produced.

The practice hall was almost deserted, the occasional couple of Sathe sparring with hands or weapons, their feet raising dust from the straw mats. Cold midwinter sunlight from those small windows high in the walls threw puddles of light against the opposite walls.

S'shar held the new practice sword I'd built in both hands, turning the long wooden blade over and over as he scrutinised it: the crosspiece, the hilt

moulded for the contours of a completely different palm. The captain tried to wield the sword with one hand, swore as his grasp slipped and weapon's blunt tip dropped to the mat, missing his foot by mere inches. Unlike the curved Sathé scimitars the sword was based upon the two handed broadsword: longer, heavier, and definitely meaner looking. "You actually intend to use something like this? And . . . that?" he jabbed a finger at the buckler I was strapping to my arm.

"I am going to try."

"I will believe it when I see it," he hissed, then tossed the sword to me. I caught it in one hand, slipped the strap over my wrist, then spun it in a blurring figure eight before settling it comfortably and stepping onto the mat.

"Alright," his sword leapt from sheath to his hand, he padded into a ready stance. "Surprise me."

Remae touched her blade to mine in salute, then lunged. I barely had time to parry her first blow with the shield before she was coming around again, sword raised and teeth bared in a white grimace. This time her practice sword hit mine and she was staggered, knocked back as my heavier weapon waved hers aside. She scuttled back a couple of steps and began circling.

"That is better," she said.

I didn't waste breath answering.

Now she dashed forward again and barely dodged the tip of my longer blade as I jabbed at her, again forcing the Marshal to retreat. Now she began to look interested.

Her toe claws were out, digging into the grass as she sidled through the long grass. Dry stems crunched under my boots as I pivoted, watching her, then defending as she feinted left, moved right, then to my left again. I couldn't bring my sword around to block that, but my shield dropped and deflected the blow Remae had aimed at my legs. At the same time my sword was driving at her right side. She wheeled to stop that, again staggering back a step, then coming in again fast and low.

I hit her with the shield: hard.

There was a commotion from the watching Sathé as the Marshal was knocked over onto her back, then I was over her with sword raised.

Before I had a chance to bring the weighted practice blade down, she kicked up and planted a foot in my stomach. I felt needles dig through my shirt and into my skin and froze, afraid of how deep they'd gone and what might happen if I tried to pull away. On her back on the ground Remae grinned up at me, then hissed. "Much better, but there are weapons besides swords."

I looked down and swallowed.

"Alright," Remae said with a smile, ears fluttering against the grass that framed her. "K'hy, could you untangle my claws please. They are caught in your clothing."

I winced as she moved. "Ahhh, shit! . . . That is not my clothes."

It took a while to untangle her claws. A crescent of five bloody pinpoints began to seep through the shirt where it touched my skin.

"Oh," Remae said with a sheepish look. "Sorry. I forgot."

"No problem," I grimaced. "Shit."

Remae had been convinced that all that paraphernalia wouldn't help me improve and in a way she was right. At first it didn't. It took time and practice to learn to use the shield and heavy blade to their full advantage. Slowly, but surely, I improved.

Holding my own against S'shar took work, many hours of his time, but he

was a good teacher. At first he invariably beat me black and blue. When the end of the day dragged around I would collapse on my bed, my joints so stiff I imagined them squeaking.

I exercised. To help build up my arm muscles I began to wear several kilograms of lead in leather bracelets on my wrists. The added weight made my arms and shoulders ache even more, but after a week I stopped noticing the hindrance, and when the handicaps came off, my sword felt as light as air.

And often, during her spare time, Remae would come to practice with me.

As time passed I stopped making a complete asshole of myself and graduated to mere incompetence. Sometimes we even had a small audience watching the Marshal and her unusual partner sparring. It was obvious that compared to a Sathé I would never be much better than mediocre at swordplay, certainly never as good as Remae. But then she was one of the best.

Spring dragged on.

"HAHHIIIRRR!"

Remae's sword danced around the side of my shield as she yowled in my face. I batted it aside with the edge of the shield and lunged with my wooden blade, straight at her padded chest.

Surprised, she danced back a step, then retaliated with an attack again absorbed by my shield. I made a feint with my sword, and lashed out with the shield, never expecting to hit her.

She gasped as I caught her a solid hit on the shoulder and went over backwards, taking me with her. Cursing seconds untangling ourselves, then she called time. I sat down on the grass beside her while she propped herself up on her elbows.

"What happened?" I asked. "That was too easy . . . or am I too good for you now?" I grinned at her.

"Ah . . . you were lucky," she panted, licked her chops and stared at me - suddenly disturbingly intensely - then blinked and shook her head. "I think we had best stop now."

"But we have only just started," I protested.

"That will be all!" she snapped and began to bustle with her equipment, intent on what she was doing. As if she didn't want to look at me.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked.

"Not your business," she snarled with bared teeth.

"Alright," I said, taken aback. "Sorry I asked." I got up to leave.

"K'hy!"

I stopped and looked at the Eastern Marshal. She blinked, then furiously scrubbed at her face with her hands as though trying to wash off something I couldn't see. Was she cracking up?

Remae stopped her rubbing and stared at her hands. "I had hoped this would not happen yet," she muttered angrily. "It is my Time, K'hy."

I rocked back on my heels, "Uh-oh."

Well, it had to happen. Spring was well and truly there, and things were hotting up . . . in more ways than just the weather. Spring was the time when Sathé females had their first Time of the year, and the number of females I had seen walking around the Citadel with a horny male entourage in tow was growing. In some places even I could smell the scent of heat in the air, a spicy musk that did nothing for me. I hadn't really thought about Remae having her Time, and now it was here, I was a bit nonplussed.

"Do I make you so nervous?" she asked, wiping her sword down.

Yes, she did.

As we headed back through the corridors of the Citadel, I was aware of how closely she was walking beside me. Once, a male going in the opposite direction stopped and stared at her, his nostrils flaring as they worked overtime. Remae turned and rumped her nose in a grin that bared teeth. He

hurried on his way and Remae huddled a little closer to my side.

I'm with HIM! was the message she was broadcasting to all and sundry.

"Remae?" When she didn't answer I nudged her. "Remae!"

"Huh?" She blinked in surprise, and moved a hasty step away. "I am sorry . . . I did not realise," she paused, and I caught a whiff of something . . . familiar: a faint, musty scent which was quickly wafted away. We moved on down the corridor and she was silent, lost in the turmoil that oestrus brings them.

Until she suddenly grabbed my arm. "K'hy, stay with me tonight."

Oh, shit. I'd been hoping she wouldn't ask. "Oh, Christ on a . . .

Remae, WHY?"

She let go of me. We stopped outside the door to her quarters and she met my gaze with her huge eyes. "I like you," she said. "And I want to. I wanted to ask you that night in the wagon, but you seemed afraid of me."

Was it that? Or was it curiosity, something new, something the Shirai had told her. I reached out and stroked the dark fur on the side of her neck. It was soft, but not like a human woman's hair; slightly coarser. She twitched slightly as my fingers touched, ran down her mane and along her jaw. "Shit . . . Please Remae. I like you - a lot - but I cannot. I mean . . . You are Sathe, I am Human . . . Look at me: We are as different as it is possible to get. I saw how that male back there looked at you. He could respond in the right ways. And there are plenty more Sathe males: plenty of fish in the sea. Please, understand." I leaned forward and kissed her gently on her muzzle.

She regarded me with ears drooping slightly. Maybe she was the Marshal of the Eastern Realm; maybe she did have fur and fangs, but she also had feelings. "What of you and Tahr?" she asked.

"We have been through a lot together," I tried to explain. "She has helped me, she has been my guide, my friend, my teacher . . . and my lover. It just . . . happened. I do not really know how. Circumstances I suppose. She told you what it was like."

Remae flinched. "How did you . . . ?" she blurted, then bit the question off and looked embarrassed. "So Tahr was the lucky one."

"Hey! No! Remae, she and I are too different. I cannot give her cubs, and she is not . . . right for me. In a way, I love her, but it can never be love as I would love another human, or she another Sathe.

"Remae, it is nothing personal, it is just . . . I . . . I suppose it is the relationship. I mean, you might be able to have sex and maintain a casual friendship, but I do not think I can do that. I like having you as a friend, but if I stayed with you that would change. Do you understand?"

She hesitated before answering. "Yes . . . I think so," Her ears flickered in a smile. "Well, as you say, there are many more fish in the sea."

I watched the door of her apartments close and sighed. With my armour feeling like it weighed a ton I trudged back to my rooms.

"Do you think you did the right thing?"

"I just do not know. That was why I was asking you. Did I hurt her feelings?"

The fire crackled. Tahr was warm against my side as we sat together on the couch. She had her feet drawn up behind her and was leaning against my shoulder, wearing only her fur. There was a faint musky scent hanging around her. Familiar. "You did what you thought was best . . . Did you mean what you said about relationships?"

Hesitation:

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Tahr, it is true. Someday you will find a male you are attracted to . . .

. "

"I am attracted to you."

"You know what I mean! You will find a Sathe male who is right for you

and you will settle down together."

"Settle down?" Tahr cocked her head, puzzled.

I chuckled. "Start a home . . . a family. You know, the patter of tiny feet and all that."

"Cubs." She flinched, then stared fixedly at the fire and said, "You are right. The years are running by and I am not getting any younger. Soon, a cub."

"Why only one? Have a few."

Again she twitched.

"I mean one would get lonely all alone . . . "

She looked right at me, her face clouded over, her pupils turning to black pools and wrinkles marching up her nose. I trailed off.

"Hey, what did I say?"

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. Her ears went back up, but still they trembled slightly. "No . . . I am sorry. I over-reacted." She raked her hand through my hair and I was aware her claws were not completely pulled. "It is difficult to talk about . . . some things during a Time."

I was still confused. "I am sorry, I do not know what I said."

"Cubs. Birthing. It is not something that is to be taken lightly." She heaved several deep breaths. "You said several cubs . . . Why?"

"Why, because that is . . . " I swallowed. "Do not tell me: that is not normal for you, is it."

She clenched her fists. "No! It is wonderful, it is what any female dreams of, but never normal."

I blinked. I'd always taken it for granted they had litters, like cats would. "But your breasts . . . " I blurted.

"What about them?" she inquired softly.

And for my next trick, I'll put my other foot in my mouth. "Ah . . . you have six. I thought that would mean that . . . you would have many babies."

Her ears started to lower again, but she pulled them up with an effort. "You are right. We have . . . five, sometimes six cubs." Her claws flexed in and out of their sheaths as she spoke, like a sharp heartbeat.

I touched her shoulder, "If you do not want to talk about this . . . " I said, but she cut me off.

"No . . . It is better I do, before you get torn to pieces by a female who does not understand you." She took another breath. "K'hy, is it easy for a human female to become pregnant?"

"Yes. Sometimes all too . . . "

She kept on, as if I wasn't talking. "It can take many Times, many matings, sometimes several years. When it happens, we have four or five cubs . . . But only one . . . rarely two, only they are normal; the others, they are . . . they are animals in the shape of Sathé. They cannot talk, eat, or think." I gritted my teeth as her claws sank through my pants and into my leg. "The mother she has to . . . to . . . she has to kill them. She . . . " shaking violently she broke off, then suddenly rounded on me, ears down tight against her skull, her eyes all dark pupil, and her teeth bared in an open-mouthed snarl.

I jerked away, throwing up an arm to protect my face.

And Tahr changed again, the fury evaporating and horror replacing it. "Saaaaa! K'hy! I did not . . . " Her hands shook as she held them up before her, the claws retracting. "It is hard to talk . . . "

There was nothing I could say. I reached out and put my hand to her bowed shoulder; she flinched under my touch. Her fur was standing on end, like filaments of wire. I stroked, smoothing her ruffled pelt. Beneath that she was tense: coiled springs of her muscle to the wire of her fur, like she was ready to fight for her life.

She shifted slightly as my hands moved, the stroking turning to rubbing. Like ice melting under my fingers she relaxed, luxuriating in the massage. There was a remote buzzing in her throat when she craned around to gently nuzzle my neck. I moved my hands down, down her back, tracing the ridge

of her spine, until I was stroking the spot just above her buttocks, that spot that sent shudders through her body. She gave a moan of pleasure, her breath warm against my neck.

I slowly stood, gathering her into my arms. She rubbed against my face and neck, running her hands through my hair as I carried her into the bedroom, then her hands were clenching against my back, claws scratching lightly . . .

When we were finished, she curled up against my side and immediately fell asleep, twitching occasionally in her dreams. I lay back in the warm bedclothes, aware of her musky scent covering the linen and myself. With the tip of one finger I drew small swirls in her ruffled fur and stared at a patch of moonlight on the stone wall beside the door.

I wasn't sleeping. I couldn't stop thinking about what she had said.

They kill their children! They kill their goddamn children . . .

The morbid litany plagued my thoughts. Little more than animals, she had said. Their mothers had to kill them, 'She cannot help it'.

My mind went back to that day I had played with those cubs in that stream outside of Bay town. I remembered their teddy bear-like cuteness, their friendliness, and tried not to think about what had happened to their brothers and sisters. Tahr stirred in her sleep, and I wondered if she ever thought about what her siblings may have been like.

Over the years, piece by piece, I would find out that for their females childbirth was a fever much like their Times. Uncontrollable; instincts trying to run rampant over their thoughts. They would want to be alone, and most times they would leave their homes to find solitude for the birthing: a hollow beneath a tree, a basement, a barn or hayloft . . . anywhere they felt alone. There the female would litter, and always, just after they were born, she would kill most of them.

I don't know how they choose. Maybe scent, maybe maternal instinct, but somehow, they choose them. I have since read old Sathe texts where attempts have been made to save cubs - usually if the mother dies in labour. If they are taken while she is alive, she goes berserk. None of those attempts have met with any success. As Tahr had told me, most of the cubs are severely retarded, little more than animated lumps of flesh and bone.

I had no idea of that while I lay there beside my impossible lover. I touched her soft fur and a heavy lump settled inside me. This could not go on. I'd already told Remae that, I had told Tahr that, then I went right ahead and did it anyway.

"Fucking hypocrite," I cursed myself: soto voce.

Beside me, Tahr rolled over and nestled closer into my side.

I stood beside the window and finished my breakfast, looking through the open door at Tahr lying sprawled out on the rumpled sheets in the bedroom. It was already the third day of her Time, and it showed no sign of ending. I sighed and remembered her last one, it had only lasted about a day, but this one . . .

God, I was exhausted.

There was something going on in the Citadel. Banners were flying above the gates and Sathe in polished armour paraded the walls. Some kind of holiday?

I was just about to take Tahr's breakfast through to her, when there was a scratch at the door. "It is open, come in." I called.

A young Sathe guard hesitantly stepped into the room. I thought I recognised him. "Sir, a message."

The penny dropped. "I know you. H'rrasch? is it?"

He bowed his head. "Yes sir."

"I thought I told you not to call me that," I told him. Last time I'd seen him he seemed to be pretty much head over heels for Tahr. I fought back a grin. "Alright, you said you had a message."

"Ah . . . The High Lord's adviser requests your presence. He asks that you wear . . . the things you had when you first came here." H'rrasch's tufted ears flicked in apology. "I am afraid I do not know what that means."

"S'okay, I do. Any idea what he wants to see me about?" I asked while opening the chest that held my camouflage fatigues. I hadn't worn them recently, saving wear and tear by wearing Sathe clothing that had been altered to fit me. They were folded and stacked neatly, the Kevlar helmet perched on top. Would I need that too? To be on the safe side I tucked it under my arm.

When I turned around, H'rrasch was staring avidly at Tahr through the open doorway. She was still asleep, sprawled naked on the bed. He saw me watching, and quickly ducked his head.

I pursed my lips in amusement, then had a thought. Would it . . . ? Nah . . . But still, he didn't seem a bad sort and surely she could make up her own mind . . .

"You like her?" I asked.

He didn't say anything, but his left ear drooped before he caught it. "Do not worry," I laughed, "I do not blame you." I pulled the pants on and wrapped the web belt around my waist.

"Sir, may I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead . . . and stop calling me 'sir'!"

"Why does she sleep with you?"

Such a straightforward, direct question; just what you have to expect from a Sathe. I sighed again, "I'm afraid that you would have to ask her that."

The camouflage jacket was a little tight across the shoulders, but I shrugged into it. After pulling on my socks and boots, I inspected myself in the mirror; I could have done with another haircut.

In the bedroom, Tahr turned over and gave a small sneeze before settling back again. I saw H'rrasch glance her way, his ears drooping.

Should I do it?

"Ah, H'rrasch," I cleared my throat. "Would you like to meet her?"

"Sir?"

"Just take her breakfast in." I gestured at the tray. "You can also tell her where I have gone."

His eyes widened. "I . . . I cannot. It is her Time . . . she will want too . . ."

"Exactly," I grinned.

"But . . . but she is yours."

"She belongs to nobody but herself," I said. "Please. I think she needs you more than she needs me."

He hesitated, and I could see the indecision on his face. He licked his lips, glanced at the doorway again, and asked, "Is that an order?"

"Yes," I grinned and he flinched. "Now, where is Rehr?"

"There are warriors outside who will take you to him . . . and sir?" He stopped me as I was about to leave.

"What?"

"You would have time to bathe before you see him." He taped the claws on his index fingers together nervously. "Sir, you smell like the Shirai."

I blinked in surprise, I had forgotten about their noses . . . I smelled like . . . I laughed at that. H'rrasch's muzzled was wrinkled in puzzlement as I closed the door, still laughing.

When a guard told me to go in, I pushed the door open and stepped through. The room suddenly went very quiet.

Intricately woven tapestries full of vibrant colours covered the stone walls, portraits of Sathe made from woven thread. An exquisite deep, dark-blue carpet covered the floor, wall to wall, it must have been incredibly expensive. In the centre of the room there was a table with a top that looked

like it was carved from of a single chunk of obsidian, scraps of paper scattered around on it. The attention of the Sathes who sat around the table was riveted on me as I stood in the doorway, at a loss as to what was expected of me.

"Here," Rehr ordered without looking around, and I ducked my head to the staring Sathes and went over to take position beside his chair at the head of the table. He'd never even glanced at me, watching the four others as they stared at me towering over his chair, his ears canted in vague amusement.

I stared back at them, memorising the patterns and texture of the fur that helped me tell Sathes apart. They were all fairly elderly males. All of them looking wealthy and important in their fine robes and jewellery. All of them staring back at me with various odd expressions.

"My lords," Rehr addressed them. "This is K'hy, a h'man. I know he looks . . . unusual, but despite his appearance, he is probably as intelligent as any Sathes." He waited for that to settle in. "Twice now, he has been abducted by outland warriors, once from within Mainport itself, and there has been a direct attempt on his life. Of course, these attempts failed." He was scratching a claw back and forth on the shiny table top. "However, he has had some excellent opportunities to get good looks at these outlanders. K'hy, would you please describe the warriors you saw."

I wasn't sure what was going on. Was this some kind of court of inquiry?

"Yes, sir." I saw it the instant I spoke; all around the table there were those involuntary twitches, the flaring of nostrils and irises. I saw it in all of them, with the exception of one - as if he already knew what I was. Reddish-brown fur streaked with grey, especially around the tufted fur in his ears. Not especially unique, but his gorget was made out of what looked like alligator hide.

He began to bristle under my scrutiny. The others were beginning to wonder what I was staring at. Turning away I cleared my throat and began to describe what had happened, the armour and weapons of the troops I'd had run-ins with before. I told them about the ambush on the wagon train from Traders Meet, the attack on Tahr and I on our journey from Bay Town, and the Sathes who kidnapped me from the Citadel. I also told them about the bandits I'd killed when I first met Tahr, although I couldn't say whether or not they were more than they had seemed.

They were staring at Rehr when I finished.

"You expect us to believe this?!" It was that Sathes with the grey tufted ears. He was glaring at me. "This . . . You would believe something like . . . like THAT?!"

"So you do not deny having warriors in our Realm," Rehr replied.

"I do deny it!" the other spat. "I would say that if the Eastern Realm cannot handle bandits within its borders, then that is none of our concern. However, the fact that our lands and trade routes are threatened by your inability to deal with your own internal affairs compels us to act."

His ears rose with his spirits as he felt that he was taking control of the situation. "The Gulf Realm is willing to send warriors to aid the Eastern Realm in ridding themselves of this . . . bandit problem."

Four . . . No, five of them. Ambassadors from the other Realms. Judging from what he had said, Tufted Ears would be from the Gulf Realm. The others would be from the three other Realms: Open Realm, and the alliance of the Lake Traders.

Rehr bared his teeth slightly. "My lords," he addressed the other three Sathes at the table. "Do you really believe that the Gulf Realm would send troops to HELP us? I doubt that very much. I am sure that you all remember that Daycross River incident in the Open Realm."

That didn't mean anything to me, but it obviously did to the other Sathes. The one with a very light fawn pelt sitting opposite Tufted Ears fleered his lips back in a grin. I took a stab in the dark: that was the emissary from the Open Realm.

"Lord Samth," Rehr said to the Gulf emissary, "you deny having warriors

in the Eastern Realm?"

"Most vehemently."

"Then would you please explain this."

On some signal that I didn't catch, the door opened and with a rattling of manacles, several prisoners were led in, still in their red and black armour; officers who had been captured. They were all battered, bloodied, and tired. They saw me, then the Sathé gathered around the table and they sagged, as if something inside them had died.

Rehr grinned at the emissaries. "You recognise them? Good. Honoured ones, you may ask them questions. They will answer. K'hy, thank you."

Rehr was alone in the conference room when I returned. It was dark outside, the only light coming from a dim lantern on the paper-littered obsidian table top. He had his head buried in his hands.

"Sir?" I ventured uneasily. I felt like I was intruding on something. "They said you wanted to see me about something else."

He looked up at me waiting for him and sighed. "Ah, K'hy . . . I am getting old and tired . . . Please, sit down." He gave me a wan smile; the barest twitch of his ears. "Yes, I have some news that may interest you." He handed me a crumpled and stained piece of vellum marked with Sathé ideograms in black ink.

"Uh . . . I cannot read," I confessed.

"No?" he looked vaguely surprised. "Well, I guess one cannot expect everything . . . You know that while the Born Ruler is . . . indisposed, I take over her duties?" He waved his hand over the piece of paper, cream in the flickering orange light.

"That would figure."

"Well, this was brought in from the village of Singing Rock, a small village. It is not too far, but well away from the main routes. It would seem they are having trouble with a strange creature."

My heart leapt into my throat. Rehr continued.

"Apparently it is two legged, leaves very strange tracks, steals food, and kills wolves with 'a loud noise'. Sound familiar?"

I nodded dumbly.

"They want some help in tracking it down." He folded the paper carefully and handed it to me. "Would you be interested in going there and finding out what is going on?"

My mouth worked silently for a couple of times before I asked, "How soon would I be able to leave?"

He twitched his ears in amusement. "I can have an escort ready for you by morning. Be ready then."

I turned to the door, still staring at the paper in my hand, and hardly daring to hope. Could it be possible . . . ?

I had my hand on the latch when I remembered. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"May I ask how the conference went?"

"You may." He drummed his claws on the obsidian. "It looks as if we may be at war."

The door to my quarters creaked as I closed it behind me, but there was no sound from within. In the dimness, I half-felt my way across the room and peered through into the bedroom.

There were pieces of armour and clothing strewn everywhere. Two figures were curled against each other, lying in an errant patch of moonlight in the centre of the bed with rumped sheets surrounding them. I mouthed a silent 'oops' and started to close the bedroom door.

"K'hy?"

Tahr had lifted her head and was blinking first at the figure lying beside her, then at me. Smoothly, she extricated herself from beneath his arm and slid out of bed. He made a noise, smacked his jaws and settled down again, never quite waking.

Once the bedroom door was closed behind us I smothered a smile and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Tahr settled cross-legged into a chair, still naked. "Confused . . . WHO is he?" She jerked her thumb at the closed door.

"You do not remember?" I shook my head. "Well, you needed someone to look after you; his name is H'rراسch." I squatted down beside her.

"I have coupled with him?" she cast a bemused glance down at her groin. It was quite obvious what she'd been up to.

"It would look like it," I said. "You do not remember?"

Her muzzle wrinkled. "You were there, then suddenly he was there . . . "

Her Time. Jesus, what went on in her head while it was going on? It was like she became something else; like there was a deeper, more animalistic side to her that ran closer to the surface than in humans. Despite the intimacy, she scared me sometimes; holding her, looking into her eyes to see the pure hunger staring back and for a second SHE wasn't there. Perhaps some thing were never meant to be.

"You seemed to be getting along well enough," I observed with nod towards the bedroom door.

"Yes, but . . . I mean this should not happen. He is just a soldier."

"So am I."

"K'hy, how can you ever be just a soldier?" she chuckled and reached up to stroke my face.

I smiled and touched that little tuft of fur on her chin, then remembered the note in my pocket. "Tahr, I am going to have to go away for a while. Out of Mainport. Tomorrow."

"What? Where are you going? What has happened?"

"Hold it, slow down," I touched her lips and she was quiet. "Rehr has let me go at my own request. Here . . . " I produced the message and handed it over. Tahr scanned it, then read it over again.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked eagerly.

She shook her head quickly, then stared down at the paper. "It could be anything you know . . . a trickster, bandits, maybe an animal of some kind or . . . " She trailed off when she saw my face.

I took a shuddering breath. "Oh God, I hope not . . . "

When Rehr had said that the village of Singing Rock was off the beaten track, he hadn't been kidding. One day west by wagon, then another two and a half days on foot.

The main road had been a joke, but this one . . .

The parallel ruts someone had felt like calling a road were overgrown with bushes and weeds, near nonexistent. There were felled trees across the track, and in places young trees were actually growing in the road. Getting a wagon through that lot just wasn't worth it. The equipment we needed we carted in on llama-back.

Wary of 'bandit' activity in the area, Rehr had provided us with an escort: fifteen Sathe troopers altogether, all armed and all male. It was that time of year, and a female coming into season could cause a few problems amongst the troops. The commander was a Sathe I already knew: the scarred veteran S'sahr.

Singing Rock itself was a small village, self-sufficient. With that road it wasn't surprising. The buildings were mostly wood, just a few built from what looked like fired clay bricks or adobe, arranged around a larger central home. Streets were just dirt and dust, riddled with rain-worn gulleys and

ditches. Fields surrounded the entire village, surrounded in turn by forest, thinned by woodcutting and clearance for pastures. Away on the edge of the fields a shallow river glittered invitingly.

It was late afternoon when we trooped into the village, escorted by a few gawking cubs who had intercepted us almost a kilometre out, alerted by their own information network. Most of them had never even seen a Sathe soldier before, let alone anything like me. Older Sathe working in the fields and around the village paused in their work. A pair working at loading a kiln stopped their work, exchanged some comments and began following us. There were females, just a few who must have been in their last days of estrus skittering nervously. I saw soldiers' heads turn and nostrils twitch distractedly. Thankfully nothing more.

The Clan lord met us at the door to his home in the middle of the village; A big Sathe, just starting to turn grey about the ears. He gaped at the procession in front of his house.

"My lord Scrai," S'sahr bowed his head. "We are here at your call."

"By my ancestors!" the Sathe lord scratched at his heavy mane. "I did not expect they would send so many!"

The three-quarter moon was creeping above the trees on a ridge, huge and shining. Somewhere a wolf howled and was answered with a more distant cry that wavered and echoed between the hills.

I shivered and tossed another branch on the fire that burned outside the tent flaps. Beside me, a Sathe soldier lying on his blanket muttered in his sleep and scratched vigorously at a hitchhiker. Other tents were scattered around in a rough circle, many of them with tired Sathe sprawled asleep outside, taking advantage of the mild weather.

From where I was sitting, I could see other warriors with more stamina enjoying themselves with the villagers. Music and shouting drifted on the air. The incredible silhouettes of Sathe weaved and bobbed in front of a bonfire.

There was a noise behind me; the sound of feet rustling in grass. Five cubs - most of the small village's complement of kids - were standing half-hidden beside the tent, staring at me.

"Hi, Hello," I greeted them.

They stared at me.

"It is all right; I do not bite. See, I do not even need a leash."

They muttered and shifted, pushing each other forward until one of them took a hesitant step. "S . . . sir, Lord S'sahr wants to see you."

"Oh? About what?"

"I . . . I . . . I . . . I . . ." One of the others hit him in the back and he blurted out, "I do n . . . n . . . not know."

Did the kid have a stutter? or was it just fear?

"Alright, I will be right with you." I started pulling on my boots. Their ears pricked up in surprise and they watched in fascination as I tied the laces. "Lead on."

S'sahr turned in his chair when I literally ducked in through the door. "We have been waiting," he said simply.

"I am sorry," I apologized.

Lord Scrai, sitting opposite under a flickering lantern, tapped the goblet he held with his claws and invited me to make myself comfortable. He studied me for some time before saying, "So you are K'hy . . . Honoured S'sahr has told me why you are here . . . You can understand me?"

"Well enough, Sir."

He stiffened and his tongue flicked at his lips like a nervous little snake, "You speak very well."

"Thank you."

He cast a glance at S'Sahr, then leaned back and asked me, "Do you really think that this animal could be another . . . uh . . . another one of you?"

"I had hoped . . ." I stopped, glancing down at my clenched fists. I made a conscious effort to relax and started over. "High one, I had hoped. I

do not know for sure, that is why I came; hoping to find out. Please, could you tell me more about what has been going on?"

"Most certainly. Ah . . . we first saw it about four weeks ago. A farmer heard something disturbing his stock, he went to investigate and caught a glimpse of something running across the fields. He thought perhaps it was a Sathe, but the tracks he found were like nothing he had ever seen before."

"They would not still be there?" I asked hopefully.

"Unfortunately not. We have had some heavy rain. They were washed away," he said, lowering his ears in apology. Of course they never thought to cover a couple.

"Things also started to disappear. A farmer found that some of his grain and meat stocks had gone, and also a crossbow was taken, along with quarrels." The lord cocked his head at me: "We are not wealthy and those things mean a lot to the farmer that lost them. Does your kind steal a lot?"

I shrugged. "Sir, it would depend upon the circumstances. If that is one of my people out there; he is probably hungry, cold, scared," I remembered how I had felt when I saw Traders Meet; that hollow feeling when the world dropped out from under my feet, "and lonely."

"There was something else as well," S'sahr scratched his muzzle.

"Yes . . . It was two nights before you arrived. A wolf had killed a goat. The farmer who owned the animal was in time to see the wolf dragging it into the forest. A short time later there was a noise - like a small thunderclap.

"Several Sathe went to investigate the next morning. They found the body of the wolf, the head had been split open by something that had gone straight through it. The goat had been dragged off and was nowhere to be seen. After seeing what had happened to the wolf, they were reluctant to follow the trail."

Probably just as well.

"They did find this." He reached into a pouch hanging from his waist and pulled out a small object that flashed dully in the light. He handed it to me. "Do you know what it is?"

I turned the small brass cylinder over in my hands. On the baseplate, for all the world to see, there was a tiny dimple and the legend 'FC 60 MATCH'.

Someone was using a 9mm pistol round manufactured in Wisconsin.

All the Sathe were panting hard by the time we got to the top of the ridge. S'sahr barked an order and there were groans, but the troopers spread out keeping eyes open for any traces or tracks. Way below us the village nestled in the elbow of the river bend, looking like a model.

"Good view, a?" S'sahr panted, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. "You do not even look tired."

They were fast, unbelievably so, but they little stamina.

I glanced at the swords and crossbows. "Perhaps if you didn't have to carry those . . ."

"There are things out here that do not like Sathe," he grunted and turned to watch the Sathe troopers searching the ridgeline, shading his eyes with his hands. "You heard the wolves last night."

"I would bet they like chasing Sathe." I grinned. In joke: he wouldn't understand.

"At a scent. Vicious creatures."

"You have never tried to tame them?"

He looked disgusted at the mere idea. "Tame them? What for? They cannot pull wagons or ploughs. You cannot even eat them! Stringy meat."

Difference in priorities. Why would natural predators need help?

We kept moving, following the ridgeline looking for tracks, leftovers, anything. It took a while, but finally a warrior hit paydirt: "There is spoor

here!"

I scrambled across to where he was using a stick to trace out a shoe-shaped impression in the dirt. He looked up at me, "Sir, could you just put your foot here."

I planted my foot where he indicated, right beside the marks. He compared the prints. Whoever had left the tracks was wearing sneakers. Reeboks.

"Smaller than you are," the soldier said. "And quite recent. Perhaps this morning. Obviously went off that way." He pointed along the top of the ridge, in a southerly direction.

"Alright," S'sahr said. "Lead the way."

The soldier glared at him, but complied. I wondered if they had been hearing tales about the dead wolf. That would make them a bit leery about charging around hunting for a creature that could do that.

The spoor crested the ridge, then started down the far side of the hill, into a gully carved by a stream running down to the river, almost hidden in the dappled shadows beneath the overhanging trees. The Sathé tracker stopped to examine the tracks where they appeared to cross the stream. "These are more recent than I thought . . . a few hours at most."

He poked a stick at the tracks, measuring their depth, then started poking around on the same side of the stream. "Hah!" he grinned, showing an impressive array of dentures. "Tried to fool us . . . look, you can see where he stood on the rocks to hide the tracks." There were flakes of mud on the rocks, and some looked like they had been moved, but I wouldn't have spotted it if it hadn't been pointed out to me. The tracks began again, heading upstream.

S'sahr snorted and flicked his ears as a sandfly tried to settle. "Looks like whoever it is does not want company." He turned to the archers, "Load up."

"Hey!" They were cocking the bows. "No! What are you doing! We are not here to kill him!"

"And we are not here to sacrifice our lives," he replied as he shifted his sword around. "K'hy, I put the lives of my troops first. We will not do anything unless our lives are threatened. All right?"

I forced myself to think, to try and see it his way. It wasn't easy; another human, so close!

"All right," I reluctantly nodded.

We pushed on. In some places we had to force our way through heavy undergrowth, while in others we could walk unimpeded on a carpet of pine needle between the huge trunks of ancient conifers. The tracks turned into a distinct path through the grass alongside the river.

"Whoever it is comes this way a lot," S'sahr said and pointed to a prominent footprint. "And he is not very careful."

"He is probably watching the village a lot of the time," I replied. "From that ridge. It is the best place around here."

"See here!" A warrior called, pointing at something on the ground a little way off the track.

A rabbit was hanging dead in a nylon snare.

"We may be getting close." S'sahr said. "I would not put a trap too far from my camp. Cut that down and bring it with us."

One of the soldiers grabbed the cord and tugged, trying to snap the deceptively thin string. Of course nothing happened. He tugged harder.

"Cut it," I suggested.

He glared at the thin cord, but pulled out a small utility knife and sawed through it, hanging the dead rabbit from his belt.

We walked for another fifty metres before the soldier on point yelped and fell on his face. Cursing, he rolled over and squinted at something like a thick spiderweb stretched across the path at ankle height.

"Plagues! What is it?" the soldier asked, squinting at the fine stuff.

I knelt down and squinted at it. "Fishing line. Well, whoever it is, now

he knows we are here." I flicked the line with a finger, it was stretched taut, looped around a tree-trunk and headed off in the direction we were going. Probably tied to a bell of some kind.

Fifty metres down the track we found the camp. The clearing at the edge of the river was broad and warmed in the midday sun. A lazy breeze stirred the grass around the wheels of the red Toyota SR5 pickup and stole the smoke from the fire smouldering in front of the blue Alpine tent. The wailing of a slide guitar sounded faintly from the cab of the truck, but otherwise there wasn't a sign of life.

"He knows that we are here alright," I muttered. "Nobody around."

"What about the noise from that thing," S'sahr whispered, pointing at the truck with his sword pommel.

I sighed. I wasn't about to try and explain stereos to him at that time. "Don't worry about it. It is just a machine making the noise . . . and will you put that goat-sticker away!" I hissed at him. He stared at me, and reluctantly sheathed his sword.

"Thank you. Hold this," I handed him the M-16 then pushed aside the bushes, stepping into the clearing.

"Hi!" I shouted in English. "HEY! Anyone here?"

I slowly walked across to the Toyota. From a sophisticated stereo system in the dash came the voice of Freddie Mercury, the almost operatic strains of the Bohemian Rhapsody wailing above the sound of the river. I reached in and punched STOP. The silence was deafening. There was a Sathe crossbow in the footwell, a few books on the dash: Ben Elton, Roget's Thesaurus, a college text on Revolution and Triumph, a Shell road atlas. I popped the glovebox: a flashlight, a box of 9mm shells: half empty. Hmmm. A glance in the backseat and I saw the underwear.

Scanty, lace.

I swallowed:hard.

"HEY! HELLO!" I stood in front of the truck and scanned the edges of the clearing, seeing nothing but leaves moving in the wind.

"Hey! I know you're out there!" I called again. "It's all right; I'm here to help."

Nothing.

"Listen. I can help you, but if you don't want it, I'm out of here. Okay? Your choice."

This time the shadows under an old oak moved.

She stepped into the clearing.

I'd swear my heart stopped. She. It was beyond anything I could have dreamed of, the most beautiful thing in this world. Short, almost on average with a Sathe, with angular, elfin features, bright blue eyes contrasting sharply with aburn hair.

Those baby blues were staring at me over the barrel of a pistol; incredible those small hands could hold a cannon like that.

"Hey! Hold it lady," I backed into the grill of the truck, holding my hands in front of me. "I'm not armed."

She slowly straightened, lowering the gun. I caught a glimpse of the grip of another weapon tucked into the waistband of her blue jeans and concealed by the bomber jacket she wore. "God! At last. Where the hell have you been?"

"Huh? What?" That was not what I had expected.

"I've been waiting for weeks for somebody to show up!" she stormed over and jabbed a finger at my chest. "Do you realize there's a town full of fucking ALIENS over there!" She jabbed the gun in the direction of Singing Rock.

I couldn't believe this.

"What? Lady, I hate to break this to you . . . Do you think we're . . . HEY!" I threw out my arms as the gun pointed at me again.

"SHIT! They're here!"

Not me. Sathe were emerging from the bushes behind me, S'sahr and the

others. "NO!" I lunged, hitting her wrists just as the pistol went off, the slug whining away into the treetops. "No! Don't, dammit! They're . . . "

That was when her knee came up, fast and well aimed and I dropped like a rock.

Doubled up on the ground, clutching myself and choking on bile. Ohshitohshit . . . Phosphors exploded behind my eyes, muscles went to jelly. Worse than torture. Blood pounding in my ears, cries and screams that I scarcely heard, closing my eyes and grasping my aching balls.

"You are all right?" S'sahr knelt beside me, his sword in hand.

"Gnnnnnaggh . . . " I moaned.

"What is the matter? You are hurt? Where?"

Through gritted teeth I moaned, "Shit! Where do you think! Oh, shitohshitohshit!"

There were more of them around me while I lay there, biting back the vomit. They didn't know what was wrong with me, searching for a stab wound and finding nothing. When they finally twigged to my problem I didn't get a whole lot of sympathy. The minutes that passed before I could move without threatening to toss my cookies they spent laughing. As if my pride also needed bruising. Troopers grinned and snickered as I limped across to where the soliders surrounded the human girl lying crumpled face-down in the grass with blood seeping into her hair. "She dead?" I asked.

"She? That is a female?" He looked at her again, "She looks even stranger than you do . . . No, she is not dead."

I sighed in relief.

Lying in the shade of a sycamore tree, the girl twitched in her sleep. Another one.

The third human to drop in here since I'd arrived. The third in a year. Why'd this link between the worlds choose to start up now? How much longer was it going to continue? Had this happened before in Sath history? Maybe Humans had come through before, long ago. If so, what had happened to them? Were there any records or stories of strange animals? Maybe some of the other Realms would know something. And there were other continents. That thing, that portal, whatever it was, seemed to like metal: First the truck, then that helicopter crewman, now a pickup, one out at sea the others scattered around on land. Would there be more?

If I said I wished there would be, would that be too selfish? It's not a fate I'd want someone to wish on me. At least now there was someone else, someone I could actually talk to in my own language.

I watched her, just trying to figure my emotions out; On one hand I found her beautiful, but on the other, she seemed wrong . . . alien. I'd been seeing only Sath for so long, they appeared to be the norm. This human girl didn't have enough fur . . . hair, except for the thick crop of wavy hair on her head. The face was the wrong shape, and those breasts . . .

I sighed.

She was beautiful, but strange . . . Much as Tahr had seemed the first time I saw her.

I turned my attention to the pair of firearms in my lap. The one she'd had tucked into her waistband was a Walther PPK automatic. The other one was a pistol I'd never seen before.

Heckler & Koch VP70Z, Made in West Germany, 9 9400 ts, or so the stamp on the side read. Streamlined. The thing had no right angles on it, just rounded metal and a flowing, synthetic grip. No safety either. I buttoned the magazine out and checked the rounds. 9mm. Eighteen of them. When I hefted it, the gun felt solid in my hand and took definite pressure on the trigger before the hammer clicked.

I dropped the guns and stared at them. Why was she packing artillery like this?

She stirred and muttered something.

I uncapped my canteen and cradled her head in my lap. "Hey you alright?"

She blinked up at me, still not focusing.

"You took a nasty knock," I told her. "Here, try this. It's just water." She groggily gulped the water, then her eyes widened and she knocked the canteen out of my hand.

"You bastard!" Nails slashed at my face. I ducked back and caught her flailing wrists.

"Cut that out! God's sake, I'm trying to help you."

She struggled against my grip for a second, then slumped back against the tree. I let her go and retreated a couple of steps. She looked at me, then reached around to touch the back of her neck, wincing. Then her face froze when she saw the two Sathe guards watching us.

"They won't hurt you," I assured her. She stared at them, and they stared back. "Look, you can have these back." I handed her the pistols, with their magazines out. Grabbing them, she rammed the clips back into the wells and actually cocked the weapons, then hesitated, glancing from me to the motionless guards. Slowly she lowered the guns and I could see the suspicion written all over her face.

"Who the hell are you anyway?" she demanded.

"My name is Kelly . . . Kelly Davies. From New York. Pleased to meet you."

"Maxine Wayne," she replied automatically. "What the fuck is going on here?!"

I shook my head. She really didn't know. "I don't know exactly. Didn't you notice things were a bit . . . different? What happened to you?"

She shrugged. "I was camping out, just getting away from home for a while. I don't know, I was driving at night, on a back road looking for a campsite. There was one hell of a weird lightning strike and I just about drove into the river. The road was gone and everything was different." She gestured at the wilderness around us. "I waited around for days, but no-one came. I couldn't get anything on the radio. I tried to walk out down the river, until I found that . . . village. I was just about to walk into it when I saw them. What the hell are they?"

"They're called Sathe."

"They bite?"

"I told you they won't hurt you. You don't have to be scared of them."

She looked at the guards and at the other Sathe who were resting in the sun, talking, looking in the Toyota's windows. "Why? For Christsake, how could you not be scared of things that look like casting rejects from The Howling?! AND they shot me."

"What?"

"They shot me! I went down there to see if I could scrounge up some food . . . Hey, I was starving, okay? I turned a corner and just about walked slap bam into one of them. It tried to shoot me with a crossbow. It missed. I ran before it could reload."

I frowned. They hadn't told me about that. "You scared the farmer as much as he scared you. They're really just like humans . . . Well, some of the time."

"How do you know? How long have you been here?"

"I've been here about a year," I told her.

Her nostril dilated as she sucked breath and there was a hesitation. "A year?" I could see the panic building and wished I'd kept my trap shut.

"Yeah . . . Well, anyway it looks like we'll be spending the night here. I think the commander would be interested in meeting who he came all this way to find. His name is S'sahr. Don't worry: he acts tough but underneath he's really a pussycat."

She wasn't amused.

Several of the Sathe soldiers jumped backward with fur bottling when the pickup's engine started up. S'sahr himself nearly bolted, taking a couple of steps back with teeth bared before composing himself.

Through the windscreen I could see Maxine grinning at their shock. The engine revved as she gunned it, then inched it forward and down over the bank onto the solid gravel beside the water. There she stopped and waited, engine idling.

"It is impossible!" S'sahr tried to assure himself.

"No, it is a Toyota," I grinned.

The ute moved down the river in midstream, its wheels flinging water left right and centre as it powered its way downstream. Over their initial shock the Sathe taking their turn on the bed laughed and shouted ribaldry at the others sloggng their way through the water. They got used to the truck quickly enough, and like most cats, Sathe aren't overly fond of cold, running water.

The sound of the engine carried. By the time we arrived at back at the village, an armed reception committee was waiting for us. Farmers armed with farm implements and a few crossbows retreated as the truck hauled itself out of the river, its wheels churning the loam. Maxine parked on the edge of the village and turned the engine off, then just sat there staring out the windows. The truck rocked as Sathe leapt off the bed. Outside, villagers were starting to gather around. "What now?" she asked.

"Stay close. They aren't going to hurt you."

Sodden troopers gathered around us to escort us to the village Lord's central house. Villagers gathered around to stare at the pair of us while Maxine stared back, jumping in alarm when a group of cubs scampered across in front of us. Several farmers pushed through and started shouting at S'sahr, demanding recompense for the damages done to their stocks.

I stood beside Maxine and S'sahr in the Lord's home. Maxine was nervous, flinching as Scrai made a sudden movement. Unconsciously, she pressed up against my arm. "What's going on. Are they talking? What are they saying?" she whispered, referring to the discussion going on between Scrai and S'sahr.

"S'sahr is telling the chief there that you didn't mean any harm and that the Shir . . . Uh, the government will reimburse for any damages done," I translated quietly. "I'm afraid you caused a bit of a stir around here."

She hung her head and shuddered. I could feel it.

That night I lay awake in my tent, listening to the snores of the Sathe around me. After the day's activities I was exhausted, but still had a buzz singing through me. I couldn't sleep.

The night air was cool on my bare skin as I pulled aside the flaps of the tent. A Sathe inside stirred, rolled over, and went to sleep again. A piece of wood dropped on the dying embers in the fire soon burst into flame.

Across the way was a dome-shaped tent; un-Sathe. An electric lamp blazed steadily inside, a silhouette cast upon the side of the tent: Maxine was sitting in the middle of her tent, head in her hands. I think she was crying.

The light went out after a few more minutes.

"K'hy, " S'sahr quietly acknowledged me as he sat down and looked across at the dark tent, then back at me. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I sighed.

"You have been doing nothing for quite a while now," he said, his one ear tilted back. "Something the matter?"

I picked up a stick and idly poked at the fire, then in the direction of the dark tent. "She is . . . she is. I do not know how to say it." I rubbed my face. "I have been waiting for a year, and now . . . I do not know. I feel as if I am whole again."

"That sounds serious," he gave me an amused smile.

"It is," I grinned back. "I never dreamed this would happen . . . A female human."

His claws gleamed black as they slid out. He clicked them together

softly. "She looks so different from you. That fur and breasts," he cupped a hand over his chest to emphasize and I also chuckled, ". . . and those eyes . . . Do all female h'mans have blue eyes?"

"No, there are other colours: greens, browns, greys . . . "

"It looks so . . . strange." He suddenly stared intently at me. "Is she with child?"

"What? . . . I doubt it. Why do you say that?"

"Females' breasts grow when they are pregnant . . . Sathe females to be more specific," he said. "H'man females?"

I shook my head, "I guess so, a little, but I did not know about Sathe."

He looked into that fire. "That is right," he murmured, seemingly to himself. "Tahr has taught you, has she not? . . . Yes, well she would not have spoken much about that."

I remembered the look in her eyes, the wildness, when I asked her about Sathe childbirth. I shuddered. "She told me never to ask a female Sathe about that. I found out why."

There was a moment's silence. "They change," he said eventually. "I knew a man. He accidentally came across his mate in the hayloft while she was giving birth . . . he still has the scars."

The scars across his own face stood out in the firelight. I decided not to say anything, to change the subject, "Tahr told me that you were her teacher once."

"Huh . . . a long time ago. For her swordcraft. She was still a cub."

"What was she like?"

He blinked, then smiled. "Mischief in fur. She was everywhere she was not wanted and never where she was." Emerald eyes turned to the stars, "I taught her how to hold a sword, and she was a natural at it . . . which was just as well. Every chance she had, she was down in the town playing with other cubs.

"I remember a particularly unsociable farmer who caught them playing on his land. He punished several of Tahr's friends," S'sahr grinned; half-humour, half-something else. "He returned home from market one day to find his house and barn had been painted the most hideous shade of pink imaginable."

"Tahr did that?!"

"Nobody could ever prove it."

"Oh, God!" I laughed. "That I cannot believe."

"You have never played jokes? done something like that?"

I smiled at a memory, "Once, a long time ago."

Senior high-school days, the end of term.

There were always pranks played at that time of year. It had come to be a sort of ritual; loved by the students and feared by the teachers. Sticking the Head's furniture to the ceiling, a car in the corridors, Cherry Kool-aid in shower heads, crank phone calls. . . all those had become mundane, we wanted to go a step better, bigger. . .

The staff are probably still trying to figure out how we got that bus onto the stage in the auditorium. After I explained what a bus was, S'sahr laughed:

"YOU playing jokes? Just the idea of you going to a school is strange."

"Sometimes we are not so different."

There was a silence which S'sahr used to toss another branch upon the fire. Sparks jumped.

"Who was her mother?" I asked.

"Ah . . . her mother." S'sahr gave a sad smile. "Looking at Tahr, it is like seeing Saja in her youth all over again: same eyes, fur . . . " He broke off and trailed a finger in the sand, the clawtip drawing patterns I couldn't see through the fire." She died when Tahr was at the Manor . . . An illness that the physicians could not cure."

God, she would've only been in her mid twenties. Their lives were so short, less than half a human life span. Not even just a modern human life span: there was that guy back in the eighteenth century who lived to one hundred and thirteen. I would probably live to see the Sathe I knew grow old

and die, their children, and maybe even their grandchildren.

There were a few Sathe moving around the tents. Dark shadows, their sibilant voices carrying even though they spoke quietly.

"I will have to do some teaching of my own," I said absently.

"Teaching whom?" S'sahr asked.

"Maxine," I replied. "She will have to learn to speak Sathe, to learn your ways. That will be difficult, I am not sure of them myself. Just as I think I understand you, something comes up to confuse me." I pursed my lips, "It is not going to be easy."

There was no sign of movement from her darkened tent.

"A year!" Maxine Wayne didn't sound enthused. "You've been stuck in this hell for a year?! Haven't you TRIED to get out?"

"Tried? Sure, how?" I rolled the smooth stone in my hand, then snorted and hurled it. The rock skipped eight times across the water before vanishing into the bushes on the other side of the river. I turned to Maxine. "What, exactly, could I do? I don't have any more idea of how I got here than you do!"

Maxine dropped onto a rock and hugged her knee up against her chest, biting on her knuckles.

I swore to myself and felt like tearing my hair out. Crouching down beside her I said, "Miss Wayne, I know what it's like. Believe me. When I came here I had absolutely no idea what was going on. It was pure fluke I was able to make friends with a local. I had to learn everything firsthand, including the language, the customs."

"Tough shit!" she shouted. "That's supposed to help me?!"

"Look. It isn't that bad . . ."

"Not that bad. . . Not that bad?! They don't even have electricity for Christ's sake! You think I don't know my history? I KNOW what medieval societies were like, and I DON'T want to live the rest of my life in one!" Now she clutched at her leg again, rocking back and forth. "And they aren't even human, they aren't even fucking HUMAN!"

After her outburst the countryside seemed quiet. Distant birds still sang, the river flowed, lapping at its banks. Smoke rose from chimneys in the distant village, the tracteries of smoke vertical in the crisp morning air. A few farmers in their fields glanced over our way.

And I could understand the girl's anger. She'd been scared, disorientated, confused, now angry. I sympathised. How had Tahr seen me those first weeks? The day we spied Traders Meet? I'd been in much the same way.

"I know," I said. "I know. I've been through it."

"Why the hell should I go with you anyway?!" she demanded. "Why shouldn't I just take off and find my own way home?!"

"If you really want to . . ." I waved a hand in a sweeping gesture taking in the wilderness around us. "All I can offer is a warm roof over your head and regular meals."

But for how long?

I didn't tell her about the dark clouds brewing over the Gulf Realm.

S'shar was a veteran warrior. He'd been in skirmishes ranging in size and viciousness from simple brawls up to full-blown battles. He had killed and had many an opportunity to see his own blood.

However the ride back to Mainport had him scared to death.

Along with another guard who'd been hyperventilating in near-panic, he sat silent in the back seat, staring wide-eyed out the window and digging his claws into the seat's upholstery.

The sight of the pair of them in their blue and silver leather cuirasses

and segmented kilts, strapped into human-sized seats with seatbelts and surrounded by plastic, glass, and rubber was incongruous to say the least. Hell, it was downright bizarre.

Already we had left the rest of the troops far behind. They'd take two days to reach their wagons, but that rutted track didn't pose too much of a problem for the pickup and even though we had to take it carefully, we could still travel much faster than foot infantry. Holding the truck back to their speed would be tough on both the engine and fuel consumption. There were two jerry cans of gas in the back: both full. We didn't have to worry about running out before making Mainport.

Maxine was driving. She'd insisted and, well . . . it was her truck. I glanced sidelong at her. Her window was down a little, the breeze blowing through ruffling her hair, her eyes hidden behind wraparound Bollé cycling glasses tinted like oily water . She kept the vehicle on the narrow, winding track with the languid ease born of long experience. I wondered how old she was. I wondered where she had come from.

"You done ogling me yet?" Maxine asked dryly.

"Huh? What?"

"You've been staring at me for the past five minutes." She frowned behind the glasses savagely worked the shift, changing down.

"Sorry," I said. "I was thinking."

"I bet," she said. "You've been here a year. No women. I bet you were thinking."

"Hey! No!" I protested. "Not about that! I swear!"

Ummm . . . well, not entirely about that.

An eyebrow arched. "What then?"

"Ah . . . who was first man on the moon?"

"Armstrong, of course."

Uh-huh. That fit.

"Okay . . . What was Martin Luther King's famous speech?"

"'I have a dream'," she said instantly. "What is . . ."

"How many died in the Challenger disaster?"

"Seven. Hold it soldier! What's with the Mastermind routine?"

"I was wondering whether your USA is the same one I'm from."

"Huh?"

"You familiar with the parallel universe theorems?"

"Other earths in the same place but not the same universe, like in that TV series, what was it called? Otherworld? Something like that." Her knuckles whitened on the wheel. "I'd usually call it sci-fi crap . . ." she dropped the sentence with a shrug.

"This is earth," I said, waiting for a second for that to sink in. "I've seen Sathe maps and the eastern United States - that's all they've really charted - from Lake Ontario down to the Florida Keys is pretty much identical. Only difference is that here the big cats evolved."

She was looking a bit white. Perhaps she should pull over . . .

"You sure it's the same?" she asked.

"Miss Wayne. From where we're going you can look out your window and see Long Island as it was before the settlers."

"Oh joy," she laughed bitterly. "And you think that we could actually be from different worlds. Did my answers satisfy you?"

"No," I shook my head. "Not really. Your world could be identical to mine in every respect but one. One tiny, insignificant detail. Hell, you could be from a world where I never got into this mess in the first place!"

"Or perhaps I'm just dreaming all this," she said.

"Want me to pinch you and see?" I asked.

The glasses turned my way, like a tank turret traversing. I couldn't see her eyes but I could imagine a glare fit to freeze methane.

"Sorry," I flashed her a smile in return.

She didn't answer. Instead she reached over to the stereo, turned a dial, and pressed PLAY. I found myself busy trying to stop our Sathe

passengers from bailing out as Joe Satriani began blasting the cab with quadrophonic sound. Surfing with the Alien: appropriate.

We passed through two more settlements on the way back to Mainport. Neither was large, little more than villages. Too small to warrant walls.

Of course we drew stares as we passed. Villagers - farmers and merchants and tradesmen - gaped as the ute slowed to a crawl to pass through their hamlets. Even cubs were reluctant to trail behind us.

Each time we left the boundaries of the towns Maxine would put her foot down in a surge of acceleration. I noticed her face: chalk-white, jaw set so rigid the tendons in her neck stood out.

Damnation! this would be even harder for her than it had been for me! I'd travelled with Tahr for weeks before I stumbled across that first Sathe town. I'd had time to acclimatize. Here she was, barely twenty four hours since learning what had happened, travelling through three alien townsteads, soon to come to a capital where Sathe numbered in their thousands.

How would she handle that?

Finally we topped one last rise, the one where so long ago I'd caught my first glimpse of Mainport.

Mainport sat beside the bay on the point that had been Staten island, the towers of the Citadel looming over it. Massive guardians of granite. Several errant beams of sunlight flickered through the heavy cloud, spearing down upon the town and spotlighting it in patches of shifting light.

"That's it?" Maxine finally asked after a stark silence.

"That's it," I confirmed.

"Jesus," she finally said, staring at the sprawling edifice and the dark skies behind it. "Is Dracula in?"

I knocked on the door and waited. There was no reply. I tried again, "Ms Wayne?" I called in English. The two Sathe guards looked curiously at me.

There was another pause, then the latch clicked. I pushed the door open. Maxine was backing away from the door. Before she turned away I saw her eyes.

"You've been crying."

She sank down on the sofa in front of the cold fire. I crouched down on the floor beside her, "Hey, you've only been here a day. I felt the same way when I first arrived. You get used to it."

"How?!" She grabbed my shoulder. "How the hell can you get used to them?!"

"That's what really bothers you? The Sathe?"

She nodded.

I gently took her hand. She made no move to pull it away; glad for the human contact. The bare skin felt . . . strange. "Listen, Ms Wayne. They're not bad, not at all. In some ways they're a lot like us . . . only hairier."

She only shook her head.

"You know, you're going to have to make a start on the language. You'll at least have me here to help, I had to learn on my own."

"Why are there guards outside the door?" she muttered.

"I've got them too. They're there for our protection. Look, there are some things I'll have to tell you about the situation here . . ."

But I didn't have a chance to, there was a scratch at the door. "Who is it?" I called in Sathe.

"Tahr . . . may I enter?"

I looked at Maxine. "It's a Sathe called Tahr. She's the . . . umm . . . I guess you'd have to call her the queen." I grinned weakly. "Pun not intended . . . Can she come in?"

Maxine looked scared, then swallowed. "I guess I have to get used to

them sometime . . . It's not a bad dream is it."

"'Fraid not."

Tahr moved slowly, keeping her hands in sight, as if she were dealing with a skittish animal. If she was trying to make a good first impression, she probably succeeded: Finely woven green and blue cotton breeks came down to the top of her calves, an intricate golden armband wound around her upper-right arm; two lengths of gold, winding and entwining around each other, embracing a dark blue opal. The silver earring she habitually wore glinted as her ear flicked.

"She's always been a snappy dresser," I confided to Maxine.

Maxine blinked at me, then stared at Tahr. "Do I have to bow or something?" she asked as Tahr slowly sat down in a chair opposite her, drawing her legs up so they were curled under her.

"No, she's a friend," I replied.

"F'nd," Tahr echoed, trying an English word she knew.

The two females stared at each other across a gulf that was far larger than the couple of metres physically separating them. Finally Maxine broke the silence: "Can I touch her?"

That surprised me a little. I asked Tahr and she mutely nodded; a human gesture Maxine could understand.

Kneeling, Maxine reached out and gently touched Tahr's wrist, running her fingers through the fur on her arm. "Soft," she murmured. "But not like my cat back home."

Tahr lifted her other arm. Maxine just bit her lip as a clawed fingertip moved toward her face and traced her jawbone. "She has no face fur like you do," Tahr said; puzzled.

"That is quite normal," I smiled.

Tahr's hand moved down. Gently she touched one of Maxine's breasts. Maxine stiffened, pulling back slightly. "Hey!"

"Tahr," I touched her shoulder. "Don't. Not there."

"Oh," The Sath dropped her arm. "Sorry."

Maxine looked down at herself. "What'd she do that for?"

"Curiosity. They don't have the extra padding . . . She said she's sorry."

"Oh."

There was another uncomfortable silence while the two females stared at each other.

"Is she comfortable?" Tahr asked. I translated.

"Well, she wonders where her possessions are. She would like to have a change of clothes."

Tahr looked at the dirty and worn denims and shirt Maxine was wearing, "We can give her breeches. Satin. And a cloak."

"I think she will want her own clothes. She will want to keep her breasts covered. Custom."

"Oh," Tahr said. Then: "I will have them sent up here."

I passed that on to Maxine. She looked a bit relieved, "At least they don't lose the luggage . . . Can I get cleaned up as well?"

I grinned. "Well, that's one luxury you won't have to go without. They've got baths here. Hot springs actually. Sort of a cross between a swimming pool and a jacuzzi. Better than some motels."

Maxine had gone off for her bath, guided by her guards who had orders that nobody was to go into the baths while she was in there. They had accepted their orders deadpan. They would have time later on to wonder at our weird idiosyncrasies.

"Do you think she will be able to adapt?" I asked Tahr.

Tahr clicked her claws together. "You managed."

"I am not her. She seems so . . . uncomfortable with Sath around."

"Give her some time." Tahr stretched. We were in the corridor near my rooms, and she leaned up against one of the walls, heedless of the ancient and expensive tapestry draped there. "A year ago, you were very hesitant to touch me."

"A year ago you were ready to claw my eyes out if I came too close!"

Tahr's ears drooped sadly, but her eyes were laughing. She reached out and cuffed me lightly on the cheek. "But you have managed to change . . . H'rراسch is a very surprised and pleased male indeed. Some of those things you showed me can be used on a Sathe."

Laughing, she nudged me as I blushed.

"I must thank you for introducing us. He is a most charming person, although, like you, he is a bit shy." Still grinning in good humour, she disappeared off down the corridor with a spattering of claws.

Oh God. I stood in the middle of the corridor and watched her leave, running my fingers through my hair. If Maxine found out about us, then it would really hit the fan.

Absorbed in the ramifications of this, I automatically lit a taper from a lamp in the hall and carried it through to light the oil lantern that hung in my room. Sitting down at the desk, I absently leafed through the papers I had left there over a week ago, then paused at one particular sheaf.

On the flip side of the sketch I had done of Tahr, there was another picture, one I hadn't done. Despite the odd bone structure, the oversized eyes with slightly oval pupils, the hair that looked more like fur, the picture was unmistakably of me.

I shook my head, sending beads of sweat flying from my face, then crouched back behind my shield and squared off with Remae.

Panting, she held her scimitar upright in front of her, both hands clasped around the hilt. Luck was the only reason I'd been able to hold off her last onslaught. I'd improved a lot, enough that we were using real blades that would really hurt, but not nearly enough to make it an even match. "Had enough?" she managed between pants.

"Not likely," I gasped back.

"Your face is leaking water."

"Careful you do not trip over your tongue," I retorted.

She grinned, then her gaze went over my shoulder and she stood up, lowering her blade. "Is that your female?"

Sure enough, Maxine was sitting on the grass, watching me and trying out her limited Sathe on the guard beside her.

In turning my head to watch her, I almost lost it. Remae's sword hit my shield and stuck in the wood for an instant, giving me the time I needed to recover.

"Dirty trick," I swallowed as we faced off again.

"Old trick. Foolish to lower your guard." She fleered her lips back in a full grin and came at me again.

For a few seconds we bandied back and forth, my shield turning her tricky blows and her superb blade work redirecting mine. Moving to dodge the shield as I shoved it at her, she made a stupid mistake, brushing against my arm. She yelped as I grabbed and swung her around, holding her in a firm half-nelson with my sword at her throat.

"Now," I grinned. "Had enough?"

There was a sudden stinging pain in my stomach. She craned her head around and grinned at me, needle-sharp teeth gleaming. "Look down," she suggested.

I did: "Shit! Where did that come from?"

In Remae's left hand was a slim dagger, its tip digging through the cloth just below the edge of my armour. "A draw?" she suggested.

While tucking the dirk back into its sheath under her skirt she reamed

me out for what I had done. "Any good warrior carries more than one weapon, and is not afraid to use it . . . My ancestors, with your thin skin, I would have been able to shred you with my bare claws. K'hy, never, NEVER try to hold a Sathé like that! She could gut you before you knew what was happening."

I wiped my brow and unlaced my cuirass, hauling it off over my head. My tunic was drenched, dark sweat-stains under the arms and across the back. I bundled my weapons and armour together while Remae finished her tirade.

Maxine was looking confused when I dropped down beside her. That was the first time she had seen me practising . . . probably the first time she'd ever seen a sword fight.

"Hey, it's only practice," I reassured her as I flopped back on the grass. A pair of seagulls were promenading along the balustrade that ran around the perimeter of the balcony garden, watching us with beady eyes.

"Only practice?" Maxine brushed her hair back and looked across at the Sathé Marshal. "It looked like you were trying to kill each other. How often do you do that?"

"First time for a while, Ms Wayne. I need the practice."

"Max," she said.

"What?" I squinted at her, the sun in my eyes.

"My name. Call me Max." She was watching the seagulls watching us.

"Oh . . . Okay then; Max it is," I nodded.

"Who's that cat you're fighting with anyway? It came to my rooms the other day, just to stare at me."

"'It's' a she. Remae. She a sort of military liason to the Shirai."

"You've got friends in high places."

"Yeah, one's a window cleaner on the Empire State."

She grinned, then asked, "Why's she doing it? I'd have thought she'd have better things to do than give fencing lessons."

I shrugged. "Dunno. I guess you could say she's got a vested interest in me. Someone said I'd never be any good with a sword. She's trying to prove him wrong."

"Was he?"

"Well, she can still kick my ass most of the time," I confessed and looked around to see just where Remae was. She had her kit rolled up and was just leaving. I returned her parting wave just as a servant in messenger livery sprinted up to her, throwing a salute as he passed a scroll over.

Remae popped the seal. The messenger was dismissed with a casual wave of her hand.

"Davies? What is it?" Max was asking me.

"Just a sec," I shushed her.

Remae read the note, then read it again, then she seemed to cave in.

"Remae?" I called.

She didn't even notice. With the scroll dangling forgotten from her hand, she walked over to the carved stone railing and collapsed against it, shoulders bowed.

"Oh Jesus!" I muttered to Maxine as I scrambled to my feet. "Something's happened."

Remae didn't answer when I spoke her name, but she flinched when I touched her shoulder. "Remae?"

Her claws actually left scratches on the granite balustrade, one of them snapping. She held her hand up and dully watched the blood start to flow from the stub. "Gone," she whispered, then turned wounded eyes on me: "It is gone . . . all gone."

"What is?"

She just handed me the scroll. I held it helplessly, the complex symbols meaningless. "Remae, I . . . I cannot read this."

Her muzzle twisted in a snarl, then she began telling me. Hunter's Moon . . . A small town in the southern Eastern Realm, near the upper reaches of the Borderline River. It wasn't that much, just rural community, not even on the main trade routes. All it had to warrant the presence of the small

garrison was its value as a border post. It was also Remae's hometown. Her Clan home.

Was her Clan home. The attack had razed it. The garrison barracks had burned, along with most of the town. Most had died, only a few escaped to the surround hills . . . just a few. The rest, the males, females, cubs were slaughtered.

Remae's home, her clan and family.

Under Maxine's uncomprehending and shocked gaze, I held the Eastern Marshal close while she shook.

Tahr was sitting at her desk, head buried in her hands. She looked up when I came in.

Without saying anything I walked over and unslung my rifle, dropping it with a clatter on the desk in front of her. "There are more weapons. I can get them. I can train Sathe in their use."

She didn't seem at all surprised. "What made you change? Something to do with Remae's misfortune?"

I didn't say anything.

"Or maybe now you have something else to protect . . . Hmm?" If she'd had eyebrows, they'd have shot up.

"Tahr, I do not like what I am doing, but under the circumstances I believe it is the right thing. What happened to Hunter's Moon will happen again. I know that I can help prevent it."

"Why did you not tell me this earlier?"

"I had hoped that you would be able to settle matters at the conference table."

Tahr tucked her legs up. "So far, I am sorry to say, that has come to very little. The Gulf Realm is prepared and we are not and they know it. Of course they are not passing up such a chance." She sighed and turned back to the assault rifle on the desk: "Where are these weapons?"

"About two days walk from where we met. I would have to go along to find them. Nobody else would have a hope."

"That is quite a journey," Tahr said. "Long - and with all the trouble brewing - dangerous. Are you sure that you have to go?"

I shrugged. "As I said, nobody else could find that place, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Cute metaphor. A h'man proverb?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "Also I have a promise to keep."

"A promise?"

"Just something I said I would do for a friend," I said. "A long time ago."

"What? You are referring to the other h'man? Your friend?"

"Yes."

She looked puzzled. "He is dead, is he not?"

I nodded slightly. Even after this time, thinking of Tenny touched a sore spot. "Tahr, it is my business. Our way of showing respect for the dead. I really do not want . . . I think it would be best not to discuss it."

"Huh." Tahr was confused, one ear canted back. She was silent a moment, then shook her head and huffed again. "Very well. You said something about training Sathe?"

I told her what I needed: A dozen intelligent Sathe who were capable with crossbows and willing to take orders from me. No xenophobes. I also wanted to take them on the journey to collect the hardware; it would give them time both to become accustomed to me and to get used to using the weapons."

"A tall order," Tahr studied me, a claw tapping on the desk, then she smiled. "Very well. You shall have them."

An hour later, I was wandering the corridors on my way back to my room. Even though I had become a familiar sight around the Keep, Sathe still spotted

me from a distance and either found another route to their destination, or decide that it wasn't really worth going to in the first place.

Damnation! The guns again . . . Was there any other option? I had weighed the choices - few enough of them - and made my decision.

Giving Sathe gunpowder was out.

The modern weapons they could use, but they couldn't copy them. The machining was beyond them and the ammunition was a far cry from primitive blackpowder. I doubted that even the Sathe - despite their surprisingly advanced chemists - could duplicate it. Perhaps they could find a substitute: compressed air, springs, maybe develop their own powder, but I'd be damned if they'd get any help from me.

Distracted, I recoiled in shock as a strange figure abruptly rounded a corner before me.

"Kelly!" Maxine spotted me and her face lit up.

"Christ, Ms . . . Max," I caught a breath to settle my heart, then smiled. "Lost, eh?"

"Hey!" She looked dour. "It's not funny."

"No, sorry. You're right. It's easy to do," I sympathised. "Here, I'll walk you back."

After a time, she spoke. "What was going on today? Between you and that . . . Sathe? She's important isn't she?"

"She's a friend who's hit hard times," I said. "She needed someone."

"I'll bet," Maxine muttered.

I stopped and glared at her. "Ms Wayne. She is one of the only friends I have got here, one of the ones who actually LIKES me." My voice was rising. "Today she just found out that her home town was burned to the ground. Her family, all of them, dead! Alright?!"

"Hey!" she protested. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"You . . ." I began, then broke off. "No . . . You couldn't."

We continued in silence.

And I had something else to worry about.

Despite her denial, I'd heard the disapproval in her voice. She was a borderline xenophobe. If she reacted like that over a simple hug, then what would happen when she found out about Tahr and I?

I glanced sidelong at her. Auburn hair and smooth, hairless face and breasts. Petite nose, wearing human clothing: worn and faded blue jeans, printed sweatshirt, leather bomber jacket with the Eagles' logo stencilled across the back.

Could she change? Could she accept their ways? Could she learn to see Sathe as people beyond their fur and claws? Damnation! She had to!

My footsteps flagged as we approached a staircase. I stopped. "You'll know the way from here," I told her. "Straight ahead, second on the left, first on the right, then up the stairs."

"Hey!" She called after me as I started down the stairs. "Wait up! Where're you going?"

I stopped and turned. "I, Ms Wayne, am going to go down to Mainport to find a certain establishment I know of where I intend to get myself totally and absolutely pissed."

"It's been one of those days,huh?"

"You said it."

"Mind if I tag along?"

That got me. I blinked at her, "You sure you want to? I mean, the place will be full of cats."

She grinned. "And you think I'm prejudiced."

"Do I?"

She stuck her hands on hips and cocked her head: "C'mon!"

"I had wondered," I confessed, then grinned back at her. "Alright. You're on."

"You'll have to buy," she said. "They don't take Visa, do they."

The massive rafters of the Red Sails were low, with wisps of cooking smoke winding their way around the hanging oil lamps. The warmth in there was a pleasant change from the chilling night wind blasting its way through the streets outside. The smell of mingled food and Sathe was something you had to get used to.

It was a busy night. With nothing else to do many Sathe chose to while away the evenings down at the local watering hole and the basement room hissed to the sound of conversation and the chanting of a Sathe bard weaving a story about the hopeless affair between two lovers from different Realms. Over behind the bar the female bartender had caught my eye as I came in and flashed me an unmistakable wink that I prayed Maxine didn't notice.

Many were the times Sathe patrons turned in their chairs to stare at Maxine and I sitting at a table in a secluded alcove with a single lantern hanging above it. Some of those patrons knew me from the last time I had been in there; they didn't pay us much attention, but the newcomers really had something to gawk at.

"Don't stare," I told Max after a mouthful of ale. "It's not polite."

"Don't stare?" She reached for a knife and fork that weren't there, scowled, then resorted to her fingers. "I can't believe you can be so blase about this. God, it's unreal. Salvador Dali would have had a ball here." She sniffed the food: "And this meat is almost raw."

I pointed the way to the kitchen. "You can complain to the chef if you like, but don't be surprised if he decides to make you into a side dish. You're lucky you don't have to hold your meal down on the plate. That's the way they like their meat."

Again she glared at the platter, then resignedly picked up a rib and began working at it with juice running down her chin.

"Hi, K'hy."

I jumped at the english greeting. The dun-furred bartender, the one with whom I'd had my one night stand, stood by our table wiping a tray with a towel that looked like it could do with a little burning. She flicked me a smile. "You come by without stopping to spare some greetings? You wound me, K'hy."

I grinned at that. "Sorry, but there was a mug of ale with my name on it. Anyway, you looked busy."

The female smiled and grinned back, like a piranha trying to be friendly. She had learned a lot from me in that one night. "Hah! Excuses! I will always have time for you, K'hy. Now, who is your friend? Not very talkative." She peered curiously at Maxine. "She, is it? Your mate?"

"Ah . . . no," I hastily corrected. "I mean, she is a female, but she is not my mate."

She looked surprised. "Then there is another female like that around here?"

"No," I admitted. "But . . ."

"Ah!" she swatted me on the arm. "Then with the way you react to sex with Sathe, I think you do not have much choice!"

"Very funny!" I fumed. Thank God Max couldn't understand.

She laughed. "I trust the Shirai was not too harsh on you after last time."

I shook my head. "I think I managed to get away with it," I said, then glared at her. "You have not been spreading stories?"

"I? No. I gave my word, did I not?"

Yeah, she did. I only hoped I could hold her to it.

"Kelly," Maxine interrupted me in english. "What's going on? Who is this?"

"Just a second," I told her. "She's a friend."

Maxine looked up at the Sathe who stared back at her, then twitched her ears.

"I have never seen anything with blue eyes before," said the Sathe. "Is

that the way you talk? How can you make those sounds?"

"Believe me, it is much easier than speaking your way," I said. "I sometimes wonder how I make THESE sounds. That can really dry you out."

"Ah, a not-so-subtle way of saying you need another drink. Very well," she flashed an overdone genuflection and a grin and vanished back into the crowd.

Maxine had a peculiar look on her face. "Who the hell was that?"

"She works here," I explained vaguely. "I met her last time I down in town."

"She seemed to like you."

"Ummm," I nodded and toyed with my near-empty mug. How clean did they keep things here? I'd bet my eye-teeth there wasn't a health inspector. Things probably went on in those kitchens that'd have one tossing his cookies in the back alley.

Maxine frowned and pushed the dish away. She propped her chin up with her fist, elbow resting on the table-top that had been scarred by hundreds of sets of claws. "What happened, Kelly? What's going on here?"

I looked at the food on her plate. "Finish that. They don't chuck stuff out here. It's not the Waldorf you know, but the food cost about the same. Now what are you talking about?"

"That cat . . ."

"Sathe."

"Whatever . . . up at the castle, when you hugged her. Also all the soldiers around the place, the crossbows and swords being forged. What's going on?"

"Oh, shit. Complicated." I sighed and watched the dregs of ale in my mug as they turned lazy circles. Then I started to try and explain the situation she had fallen into; about the fine balance of power between the five Realms and the weight that was trying to tip that balance; the Gulf Realm.

She listened attentively, but I could see that she was confused about some points . . . as was I. Rubbing my eyes, I was just about to launch into an explanation of the Sathe's low population growth when activity at the steps that led down to the basement tavern caught my eye.

Someone had just come in, and was receiving a welcome much like the one Max and I had got. A wake of silence marked the black-cloaked figure's progress between the tables, then she was standing in front of us.

"Hymath." I swallowed, my finger tightening on the trigger of the M-16 under the table. "You are the last person I expected to see around here."

She held her hands in front of her, in clear view. "May I sit down?" she asked.

Maxine made a choked noise when I set the M-16 on top of the table, so Hymath was staring down the muzzle. "I should repay your favour and drill you full of holes . . ."

She didn't even blink. "I want to explain."

I stared at her. That female could easily have killed me that night . . . I clicked the safety on and set the gun down. "Sit."

Hymath glared at the watching Sathe around us. They hastily averted their gaze and business in the tavern went back to normal. She snagged a chair and sat down. "I am glad to see you are still alive . . . I did not know how badly I had hurt you. There was a lot of blood."

I nodded. "I have a few new scars to remember you by. So, why did you do it?"

"K'hy, you have made yourself some powerful enemies." She tossed her head, throwing the black hood back. "I was only doing my job."

There was a pause during which the bartender stepped forward to place a mug of ale before me, grab my empty one, then hastily retreat without so much as a word. Now THAT wasn't like her. She was as wary of Hymath as the rest of the surrounding Sathe, as if the Scirth warrior was someone none of them wanted any truck with. I took a sip of honeyed ale before asking, "Your job. Meet interesting people, then kill them, ah?"

She looked pained at that. "I do what I am paid to do. No Scirth Warrior makes many friends, but the ones we do, we would never deliberately harm them. I did not know it was you"

While I was digesting this, she turned to Maxine who probably had been able to follow only a word in fifty, maybe less. "Who is this?"

I hesitated, then introduced them to each other. "A female?" Hymath asked.

I nodded: she was a Sathe who could understand that.

"Strange . . . blue eyes," the mercenary mused.

I tried to find out who had set her on to me, but she confessed that she herself did not know. A masked intermediary had given her half her fee in advance, the rest forthcoming when she had completed her assignment. She had never tried to find out the identity of her client. I wondered that they would not try to cheat her.

"Nobody would cheat a Scirth Warrior," was her response, as if that explained everything. "K'hy, I know apologies cannot really make a difference, so perhaps this will help."

I tensed as she reached inside her cape, but all she produced was a small, silver circlet that she tossed onto the table where it rolled to a stop before me. "A gift. Take it."

I took the trinket: a small earring made of silver; intricately woven silver threads that wound around themselves, all coming together in a tiny silver Sathe's head. "What is it?" I asked.

The answer she gave me didn't translate. She had to elaborate: "If you ever have trouble that you cannot handle yourself, show this to any Scirth Warrior. They will do what they can to help you." She reached over the table and cuffed me lightly on the cheek, then she was gone into the crowd.

"What was that about?" Maxine was asking.

"Huh?" I rolled the ring in my fingers, then tucked it into a pocket. "Oh, just an old friend."

"Another?" her eyebrows arched. "Female also . . . You must be popular."

"Let's just say I stand out in a crowd," I said. "I think we've attracted a bit too much attention around here."

If Hymath could learn of our whereabouts in Mainport, probably just from local scuttlebutt and word of mouth, then anyone else could also find us. Maybe they wouldn't be as friendly. "Finish your meal." I told Max. "I think we'd better make tracks."

"Why? Something wrong?"

"I hope not," I said.

I held the door open for her as we ducked out onto the street. The moon had hidden itself behind a cloud, and the Sathe who passed spared us only a glance as they hurried to wherever it was they were hurrying to. Nobody followed us outside and there didn't seem to be any untoward interest in us, so I relaxed a bit. Perhaps that should've alerted me in the first place.

"This place is incredible," Maxine said, rubbernecking at the buildings. "It's just like the small places in France and England, without the street lighting of course."

"You've been there?"

"Sure."

"Oh. That's something I'd been wanting to do. Never had the cash though."

"My parent's paid for most of it."

"Well off?"

"Pretty much. Daddy's the managing director of Integrated Solutions."

"Oh, yeah. . . Integrated Solutions. Never heard of it."

"What?" She blinked at me. "You don't know anything about software? Computers?"

I shrugged. "Not really."

"Oh," she looked somewhat surprised. "Well, anyway, it's a big company, so we've got the money to travel."

I shouldered the rifle. "Lucky. I wanted to see Europe, but the money always seemed to go to more important things . . . You know: college books, food, gas . . . Hey, but not many people can say they've had the chance to see another world."

"Who're you going to tell?"

"Good point. So what's Europe like?"

We turned off into a side street, the Citadel visible above the rooftops at the end of it. "The big places like Paris and London are nothing really special," she said. "They got some attractions, but after a while they all look the same: big and dirty. You know, not much different from Chicago, except the buildings are older. But the small European towns, they're really something you shouldn't miss. There's a place in Normandie, that's in France, Mont St. Michelle. It kind of looks like the . . . do you have any other friends that you might bump into tonight?"

"What? No, I don't think so. Why?"

She stopped suddenly and turned around, peering at the shadows. "I think we're being followed."

I stopped to look and saw nothing. Nevertheless I tightened my grip on the rifle strap. "You're sure?"

"Uh . . . I thought I heard something." She looked doubtful.

The darkness of the narrow uphill street with its low steps, dim light gleaming from wet cobblestones, the occasional black slit of an alleyway. If there was anything there, I couldn't see it.

"Don't worry about it," I told her, trying to reassure her. "It's probably some drunk trying to sneak in the back . . . Unghhh!"

I didn't get to finish my sentence when something struck me across the back hard enough to send me sprawling face down in the muck on the street with lights exploding behind my eyes. Hands were trying to pull the rifle away. I grabbed at the strap in desperation, the Sathe at the other end drawing his sword and swinging. I rolled. The blade struck sparks from the cobblestones beside me, but he wouldn't miss a second time.

I hauled back on the webbing, toppling him off-balance. On his way down his head met my boot going up. There was a wet crack and he dropped like a stone.

A Sathe was levelling a crossbow at me.

Gunshots slammed through the narrow street. The archer squalled and went over backwards. The Walther in Maxine's hands looked huge. It cracked and bucked again; a howling Sathe with raised sword doubled over clutching his guts, the sword clattering to the street.

More Sathe, bolting from alleyways, some snarling and sprinting toward us. Maxine was pulling the trigger again and again and again, shifting from one Sathe to another, the retorts blending into a single roar in the narrow alley. Running Sathe twitched and fell under the impact of the 9mm rounds.

I grabbed the M-16, locked and loaded in one move. Kneeling, I fired from the hip, hosing at Sathe figures milling in confusion. Muzzleflash strobed in the darkness, the hammering of the rifle and cracking of the pistol merging and rolling of the alley walls in a roar that could probably be heard on the other side of the city.

Finally there were no more targets.

Maxine and I were back to back in the darkness. I could feel her gasping air. My own nostrils burned with the stink of hot brass, lead, and propellant. Faint groans and mewlings sounded in the darkness.

There was a scratching of claws on cobbles at the far end of the street and a single Sathe darted from the doorway he'd been hiding in. He made it to the end of the street before the pistol cracked twice more, sending him sprawling, clutching at his upper leg. Max stood with the gun aimed, then lowered it again and just stood there staring at the Sathe writhing in agony.

"Jesus . . . Max," that was all I could say.

She waved the gun a bit to cool it, then tucked it back inside her jacket while I hauled myself to my feet. The Sathe who had been about to

skewer me was lying on his back near me, jaw slack and eyes glazed over in death. Broken neck. I'd kicked harder than I thought.

Maxine was nudging a corpse with her foot. I touched her shoulder. "Come on. We'd better get out of here."

She didn't speak all the way back to the Citadel. I could sympathize with the way she felt; I'd been through it before.

"You are mad!" Tahr was aghast. "You must be! Going into the town like that. With no escort and without telling anyone! Were you LOOKING for trouble?"

"No, it just found us. I-am-sorry Tahr, I did not mean for anything to happen, it just did."

Tahr sighed and drifted over to the window. Her profile stood out against the light flooding in through the panes. "Seven Sathe dead and four wounded, and it was not even you who did it. Do all h'mans draw trouble upon themselves like iron flakes to a lodestone?"

I shrugged. "Most humans do not find themselves up to their eyeballs in situations like this. Who were they, anyway?"

"Debris," she snorted. "Dockers, criminals. Someone filled them with ale, then paid them to get you. They did not know what they were getting into."

"Not Gulf?"

"No, but do not worry about that."

"I wasn't, particularly."

"Ah," She shrugged. "What about Mas?"

"Max." I corrected automatically, before realising the uselessness of it. She had gone straight to her quarters and I hadn't seen hide nor hair of her for the past several hours. "She is upset over what happened . . . I think." I said.

Tahr came over and batted me gently on a cheek. "I do not think that your relationship is off to a very good start."

"You can say that again." I muttered. She had become used to that little anecdote and only laughed.

"Why do you not go and see her?" She said. "I have got a . . . what did you call it? . . . A date with H'rراسch and I am sure that Mas would be grateful of some company."

There was no answer when I knocked at Max's door. I persevered and eventually she answered. Her room was taking on personality, in fact it was starting to look like a second hand shop with the stuff she had Brought Through with her cluttering it up.

There were a few paperbacks on the shelves. The desk was cluttered with scraps of notebook paper and pens, also several college textbooks. A Coleman lantern stood on a table alongside a useless radio while a blue Rockgas cylinder squatted in a corner. An almost new Kathmandu rucksack sat on a worn, tooled leather chair and modern cotton clothes hung from hooks on ancient panelled walls. Throughout the room, human trinkets and technology stood out against Sathe craftsmanship.

Counterpoint.

"You alright?" I asked. She said nothing, just stared at out the window. "I know it's tough," I said, "but you'll get over it."

"Get over it!" she spat the words out, then turned on me. "Fuck it, Davies! They tried to KILL me last night! Fucking furballs! How do you 'Get Over' something like that! Huh?"

"It's hard," I agreed. "I'm sorry, but I don't have any easy answers." She blinked at me, choking back her rage.

"Ms. Wayne, this is a tough culture. The Sathe are like we were a few hundred years back. They have a low rate of childbirth, plus high mortality, plus primitive agriculture, with no room for those who can't contribute. It's

not quite survival of the fittest, but it's close, and it is a violent culture. There's something you haven't seen . . . Here, look."

I unbuttoned my shirt. Her face went slack at the sight. The scars on my torso stood out: white worm-tracks making twisting tangles across my chest. The marks that a vindictive Sathe named Tarsha had gouged into my chest were still very visible; almost making patterns. My ruined left nipple was a twisted piece of scar tissue while the much more recent marks on my shoulders and upper arms were red and swollen. "Before I came here I didn't have a scratch on me. That wasn't much over a year ago."

"Let's see now . . . These ones on my arms and this one on my back were done by that Sathe in the tavern, and that was a mistake. If she had finished her job, you would probably still be out there, with the village hunting you. The others . . . I picked them up here and there. I repeat; this is a tough place."

She tried not to stare at the scars, but I saw her eyes flickering to them as I rebuttoned my shirt.

"Have you killed many of them. . . I mean, besides last night?"

"Yeah."

She turned away and was quiet for a while, then her shoulders started shaking. Feeling helpless I touched her arm. "Hey, it's okay."

"I just wanted to get away from it all for a few days," she blurted, then raised her fists to the ceiling. "Goddamit, I want to go HOME!"

The hoarse scream rattled the windows.

I couldn't say anything, promise anything.

Eventually, she quietened down. "Please, get out. Leave me alone for a while."

I didn't move. "I've felt like that a few times. Feeling lost and alone and scared. You won't do anything stupid will you?"

She didn't answer.

"You know," I said, "guns are the best method for a suicide. They're more stylish than a razor blade and drugs are too chancy; you might get the dosage wrong and just have a good time."

Max looked at me strangely. "You're mad."

I shrugged and grinned. "Probably, it's the only thing that keeps me sane. Come on, cheer up. There is a cure for depression."

"What."

"A long, hot bath."

"Get serious."

"Hey, it's always worked for me."

She laughed and it was like the sun coming out. With the tears still damp on her cheeks, she cocked her head at me. "You're something else, you know that?"

A woman's moods; they change with the wind, with the seasons. She stared at me, then cleared her throat.

"How did you survive?"

I shrugged. "Luck mostly. I guess I've always been a bit of a loner. It wasn't too hard once I found out what was what. . . and Tahr helped me a lot."

"You like her?"

"She's. . . special to me." I wasn't sure if she caught the hesitation, but there was an awkward silence. I broke it. "I'm going to have to go away for a while. Maybe a month, maybe longer, I'm not exactly sure."

"Where?"

"Down south." I gestured vaguely. "Some stuff the Sathe want, and I gotta show them where it's at."

"Do you have to go?"

"'Fraid so."

It took four and a half weeks, round trip.

At first we travelled by sea, on a three-masted ship; a fat-hulled cross between a trader and a warship that looked like something out of an old pirate film. I almost expected to see the Jolly Roger flying from the masthead.

A larger vessel than Hafair's, with more crew, it was both faster and could sail twenty four hours a day. The prevailing winds bore us southwards against the gulf stream while the coastline was a cloud-covered blur on the horizon.

A few seagulls found us and floated lazily alongside the ship, resting their weary wings in the rigging for a while before moving on again. They didn't hang around with a beady eye out for food, nothing edible was wasted.

It took us a week by sea to get from Mainport down to another port called Sea Watch, a slowly growing city further south than Bay Town, near the Pamlico Sound. From there it was inland, westward to a small settlement called Ch'ie's climb. That town was actually closer to the point I'd arrived than Traders Meet had been.

I said us.

Besides S'sahr and the ten Royal Guards who went with us, my request for a dozen good Sathes soldiers had been granted.

Chirthi, R'R'Rhasct, two friends of previous acquaintance who had volunteered, along with ten others: Hosf, Eor'sf, Hraisc, Fasir, H'Ses, Finder, Haiscraf, Fen, Chir, and Ihhm.

I was told they were all capable warriors, all of them had seen combat of various kinds, and all of them were crack shots with crossbows. The majority were males, with three females including R'R'Rhasct. At first I thought that might be a problem. I knew they could handle themselves all right, I just wasn't sure if there might be some trouble with relationships or jealousies. I guess I was thinking like a human again. It was something I'd get over.

Chirthi and R'R'Rhasct proved invaluable, both as friends I could talk to and also as buffers between me and the others who weren't so familiar with me. There were times when I wasn't around and I knew there was talk behind my back: jokes, insults, complaining. I know they stuck up for me on more than one occasion. It was with their help that I was able to get the others to accept me as more than an oversized, furless animal.

Whilst on board the boat, there was precious little us landlubbers could do but try and stay out of the way of the crew. Once on the road however, I took every opportunity I could to work with them, to teach them tactics and concepts that would help them learn a way of fighting radically different from anything in any Sathes army.

We marched in shifts: ten clicks on foot, ten in wagons, another ten on foot. Sathes may be faster than a greyhound with a rocket up its ass when running, but they don't have a lot of stamina. I wanted to see just how far I could push them, then try for a bit further.

Late at night, they would limp back to their tents. In the wee small hours I could hear them bitching through the tent canvass. Since I marched with them, I suffered also, although I did my best to hide it.

It took a long time just to find a place I found familiar; several days. We followed the narrow trail north until it linked up with the road to Traders Meet. Disturbing. That branching in the trail was familiar territory, from way back when Tahr took me off down the other road, the other choice, the other life. If I'd gone the other way, what would have happened? Had it happened, somewhere Else?

The clearing was still there. I stood alone in the middle of it, hands in pockets, staring moodily at the place we'd camped. That place where we'd actually met, where she'd almost shot me, where we'd first spoken, however limited those first exchanges might have been.

"You've come a long way, huh, Kelly?"

Full circle.

"What was that?"

Startled, I jumped. S'sahr was right behind me. "Oh, I did not notice

you. It was nothing."

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking."

"Ah." He turned full circle on the spot, trying to see just what I found so fascinating. "You have been here before."

"Yes. A while ago now."

"Is there anything here?"

Memories. Regrets. Wonder. . .

I shook my head. "No. Not really. Come on, we should keep moving."

The river wasn't difficult to find at all. It was smaller than I remembered it. Just a stream and a road under the shady branches of huge old trees. There was no sign there'd ever been a fight.

"You are sure it was here?" S'sahr asked.

Then a Sathe found the skeletons. A jumbled mix of mouldy bones and skulls that stared out from the bushes that had grown around them. What clothing and weapons there'd been had either rotted away or been taken by other travellers. A Sathe skull. I'd never seen one before. The teeth were gone.

Finding the place where I'd first stumbled across the road was much harder. From there it was over a day's walk through the wilderness to find that clearing.

It was still there, but a year's worth of undergrowth had claimed the site as home and already the wreck was overgrown with ivy and other flora. Metal covered with rust and glass was being buried by dust and dirt. The camouflage over the crates had died away long ago, leaving the pile covered with dead leaves and the remains of a squirrel nest. Nature always reclaims its own.

While Sathe labourers hired from the last town packed olive-green crates with stencilled markings on them onto the backs of draft llamas, my small force watched silently from a distance as I kept a promise.

There wasn't much left to bury.

Workers swarmed over the docks, shouting and snarling at each other as they milled round in well-ordered chaos, grabbing for the ropes thrown from ship. Sailors leaned over the railing, yelling suggestions and cautions as the ship was brought in to bump against the wharf.

Home again. Huh, I smiled to find myself thinking of Mainport as home. Still, it would be good to be back on dry land, in a room that doesn't move, and be able to relieve myself without hanging over the side of a ship.

The twelve Sathe I'd been training were watching their home as well, laughing and whiling away the time with idle chatter. Watching them, I grinned. Twelve Sathe perched around and on the ship's central cabin, stripped to the waist and wearing old US army issue camouflage trousers, some with their decorated scabbards strung from equipment belts.

It was almost amusing.

Four and a half weeks and they had changed. Experienced soldiers, they knew how to follow orders. As archers they understood missile weapons and the principles involved, but the guns left them in awe, and not a little fearful. As it was something they'd had no experience with they were leery at first, flinching at a gunshot. Only to be expected; I'd known enough people in basic training with the same reaction, but for Sathe it was something a little more physical: I think the noise hurt their ears. The flinch they could overcome, the noise . . . There wasn't much I could do about that. Whenever they used the rifles, they did so with ears flattened back into their manes.

Uniforms. Uniforms were something else I hadn't considered. Sathe leather armour is bulky, not exactly inconspicuous, and also has a tendency to creak, but there wasn't much we could do about that. That was until a trooper asked a passing question about my fatigues. Could he get a shirt like that?

Why not?

Three of those cases held shirts - green t-shirts and tank-tops, another two of trousers and jackets as well as others with a scattering of belts, old Claymore carrybags and universal pouches, M-16 clip bandoliers and miscellaneous other junk. There'd been socks and boots in the inventory, articles that must have gone up with the truck. No great loss there. It was the pants and jackets I had plans for.

Back aboard the ship, the sailmaker-come-seamstress grumbled and swore when she heard what I needed, but still she managed to work wonders. The results . . . they wouldn't win any fashion awards back home, but they worked and the Sathé liked them. The trousers were taken in, turning them into something like the breeches so popular among Sathé. The jackets were cut into things almost resembling safari jackets, with ventilation slits along the sleeves and across the back. Useless in a sword fight they were, but the Sathé testified they were more comfortable than the armour, and the pockets were great novelties. They laughed outright at the pants' zippers.

They had changed.

I leaned on the railing and watched teams of dockhands transferring crates to the waiting wagons. They worked methodically and naked in the heat of the midday sun. It seemed that no two were the same, their fur marking had all the disparity of snowflakes. They weren't the only dock crews working; further up and down the docks other labourers were loading bigger vessels. One of the ships was taking on a contingent of Eastern soldiers.

A hand clapped me on the shoulder. "Are you coming, or waiting for the tide?" S'sahr asked.

"Yeah, coming." There were wagons waiting for us, along with more Royal guards. On cobbled streets the unsprung cart was more of a pain in the ass than a bike without a saddle, and on some of the steeper thoroughfares you held on or kissed the pavement. I held on, watching Mainport pass by. The narrow, winding streets with their rounded paving stones, the precarious buildings that'd never known an architect's touch. At the northeastern tip of the peninsula I'd once known as Staten Island, the tiers of the Citadel's walls stood over the town like a sculpted mountain.

It all looked normal, just everyday life going on as normal. Shops and stalls were open, Sathé dickering over the price of some trinket. Farmers came and went, selling their wares. A side street was blocked by a dozen or so carts and wagons, their drivers shouting and snarling over just who had the right of way. A Sathé on a llama threaded his way through the snarl of vehicles and animals, hardly slowing. From an alley in this city made of alleys erupted a pack of squealing cubs, gleefully engrossed in a ball game with no rules that were immediately apparent. They chased after us for a time before barrelling off down another street.

The carefree days of childhood.

Sigh.

They probably didn't know what was happening. Even if they did, how could they care? It was a world beyond their ken. Like the cubs in Traders Meet, in Bay Town . . . like the cubs in Hunter's Moon. They'd deserved more; they'd at least deserved a life. How many more towns had to go like that?

At least now I had some say in the matter.

I watched the other Sathé as they bantered and jawed among themselves. The world's first rifle platoon . . . this world's first. Okay, so they weren't Marines or SEALs: their training was haphazard and brief, their equipment was still new to them and they'd never fired a shot in battle. Neophytes. Unblooded. Nevertheless, they packed more firepower than a world war one infantry company - an overwhelming advantage against Sathé weapons.

It was a start.

Looking back on that day now: those guards probably got labelled with the moniker the instant they stepped ashore. Green was the color of their clothes and equipment and, hell, the name stuck. They became known as Greens; among friend and foe alike.

The walls of the passage were solid and rough, hewn from the granite outcropping upon which the Citadel stood. The air was damp and slightly stale, with only the tiniest breeze to move the atmosphere through the warren of passages and corridors under the Keep.

Tahr watched as guards locked and bolted the heavy door to the strongroom where the cargo from the wreck had been stacked. Some crates were filled with items useless to Sathé: boots, helmets, gloves. Others held more valuable things: ammunition, guns, grenades, mortar rounds and fuzes, things that could kill, could maim . . .

"M-16s." I muttered. Mostly to myself.

"What?" Tahr turned her shoulders to look at me as we climbed the steps back to more habitable areas of the Keep. Three guards followed us at a discrete distance.

"I wish I had something a bit more powerful than those." I jerked my thumb back down the stairs. A couple of gunships or tanks, even a few heavy machine guns.

"You have those bigger guns," she said, referring to the M-60s.

"There are larger ones available. I wish we had a few."

Her ears flattened and she gestured at the storeroom. "Then you think that those will not help?"

If my ears were as expressive as hers they'd have also laid back. "Sure, they will help, but they will not win the war. That is up to your soldiers. I will do the best that I can."

She reached up and put her hand on my shoulder. Squeezed, claws just denting my skin. "And I am grateful. You will be well paid when this is over."

If I survive, I thought to myself. Aloud, I said, "Thank you, but I am not sure what I would do with money."

She laughed. "It does not have to be money. Anything within my power. You could lord over a town if you wished."

I chuckled at that, then had second thoughts. "I'll have to think on that one. There are possibilities there . . ."

Surprise made her ears dance, maybe a bit of amusement. "Well, we can sort that out when the time is right. Why do you not go and get cleaned up." She snuffled. "You are rather . . . aromatic."

I guess I was. I couldn't remember when my last bath had been.

Tahr cuffed my arm. "Then you go and groom yourself. I will meet you afterwards, there is much to talk about. Go to the room of your mate, alright?"

My mate? Maxine?

"She is not my . . ." The sound of Tahr's claws spattering on the granite were fading as she disappeared off down a side passage. ". . . mate," I finished. I looked at the guard who had remained with me, dogging my heels; he stared back at me. "Oh well. Come on then, shadow of mine."

After scratching Sathé-style on the door, I leaned against the jamb, waiting. A pause, voices, the latch rattled and the door opened and Maxine stared.

"Good afternoon," I smiled. "Have you ever considered the advantages of owning a really good set of encyclopedias?"

"Kelly!" Her surprise transformed into a grin then it was my turn to be surprised when she jumped forward to hug me, then just as quickly let go and stepped back, looking suddenly embarrassed. "Hey, it's good to see you."

"Same here. You're looking good, Ms Wayne."

"Max," she corrected immediately and her smile flickered for a second as she stared at me, then it flashed back again. "Come in. We've been waiting for

you."

The room was still cluttered with poignant reminders of a place I'd left behind. The lantern was on the desk alongside with pens, several textbooks and papers, as if she'd been working at night and needed more light than candles could provide. Her leather bomber jacket hung from the back of a chair. A Sony DCC walkman, earplugs and tapes perched on a shelf beside a small stack of dogeared paperbacks.

Unlike mine, her quarters were on the inner walls of the Keep, with a small balcony built onto one of the tiers overlooking the central Circle. Sunlight streamed in through the open doors, and Tahr was leaning against the carved stone balustrade, watching our greeting with her ears perked up in interest. I don't know if she could understand: we were speaking in English.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting." I said to Maxine.

"Don't worry about it." Max waved my apology aside then changed to the modulated coughing, hisses and growling of Sathe, "Tahr . . . explained to me. You have been on the road a long time."

"Could've knocked a skunk cold at fifty paces . . . Hey, your Sathe's improving."

She smiled proudly. "I have something for you, a home-come gift."

"Accent needs work though," I mused and grinned as she shot me a sharp look. "Hey! Just kidding! Peace!"

"Bastard!" She produced a chilly bin and rooted around inside then tossed me an object I plucked out of the air. "My God! Heiniken! I never thought I'd see that again."

"Been saving it," she smiled and ushered me outside onto the balcony where Tahr was waiting.

"Feeling better?" the Sathe asked.

I ran my hand through my still-damp hair. "Yes, much."

"Smelling better as well," she smiled, then motioned toward the can I was still holding. "What is that stuff?"

"Ale," I said and popped the tab. Tahr blinked, flared her nostrils at the can as it spat and hissed. I proffered the can to her. "Try some."

She took the can, sniffed it, then spent a while trying to find the best way to wrap her almost-nonexistent lips around the opening. She finally managed a swig and almost choked on it. Her ears twisted until they stuck out sideways, she took several rasping breaths. "My Ancestors . . . you actually DRINK this?!"

I took the can from her and took a swing myself. Maxine stared: I hadn't bothered to even wipe the rim. "Bit warm," I judged, "otherwise nothing wrong with it."

Tahr hissed and shook her head. "You must have gullets of iron. I will stay with something a bit milder. Come, K'hy, tell us what happened. How are the midland towns taking the news of the war?"

"You would be better off asking that of S'Sahr. Sathe in the towns never got very . . . friendly with me for some reason." I grinned. "What I saw seemed obvious enough. Storing food, preparing defences. There were already garrison troopers recruiting."

So Tahr sipped Sathe wine while Maxine and I drank beer and filled each other in on what had been happening over the past few weeks.

Another village had been hit, farther along the border than the others. It seemed that the Invaders weren't going for a direct lunge at the heart of the Eastern Realm. They were advancing slowly in three points across the Realm, wiping out anything that stood against them.

"At that rate they will not have anything left to conquer," I said.

"This tactic is only temporary." Tahr flexed her claws. "They terrorise the settlements. Soon they will not even try to resist; they will surrender straight away."

"You cannot really blame them, can you," Maxine said softly.

The death of your family and yourself as well as the destruction of your

town . . . or surrender. No, you couldn't blame them. And there was no way the Eastern Realm could quickly field an army to help. Even if they had one ready, it would have to reach the enemy. Shit, it took two weeks for just a couple of dozen of us to travel less than half the length of the Eastern Realm.

And the Realm was in Tahr's hands.

Nursing my drink, I leaned against the granite balustrade beside Tahr. "There are going to be hard times."

Tahr took a pull of her drink, then stared at it as if wishing it were something stronger. "A," she muttered. "Hard times indeed."

I reached across and took her furry hand and gently squeezed it, drawing forth a flicker of her ears before she returned the pressure.

"Kelly?"

"What?"

"You . . ." Maxine was staring at us, looking from our hands to me to Tahr to me. "You two . . . What is between you two?"

For a second I all I could think about was that that was how I must have sounded; heavily accented Sathe from a throat that was never meant to make those sounds. Then the actual question registered.

"What?" Tahr beat me to it.

Maxine looked at the can she was holding. "You two. I talk to a guard, he say . . . he . . ." She swallowed and made vague motions with her hands, a bit of beer spilled. "Have you . . . ah . . ." She couldn't find the words in Sathe and switched to English. "Kelly, have you two . . . slept together?"

For a second the beating of my heart seemed to be the only sound in the world.

Even though she couldn't understand exactly what was being said, Tahr must have guessed the question. Her ears slowly flattened back and she looked to me.

It had to happen . . . "You would find out about it sooner or later," I sighed. "Look, Tahr, please, this would be easier in our own language."

Tahr ducked her head, "All right. I understand."

I could feel her eyes on us as Maxine and I retreated back into her room. Sex. Most Sathe wouldn't . . . they couldn't understand. Already I'd bedded - or perhaps been bedded by - two and propositioned by a third. They had no problems with it, to them it was just sex, just enjoyment and pleasure. For me . . . Only Tahr really had an inkling how different it was for me and she watched, partially understanding just what was happening.

How much did she really comprehend?

Maxine was staring at me.

"So," I began, moving behind the high-backed wooden chair, using it as a podium to hide behind, "now you know."

Maxine Wayne sat down on the edge of the desk, looking stunned. This was not going well. "Shit. I never believed it. I thought he was joking. You really . . . did it."

I nodded, glancing at Tahr. Out on the balcony she ducked her head, turning away to stare out across the Circle.

"Jesus Christ," the human woman was shaking her head. "I didn't believe it. You really did it, you actually screwed her?! That's sick! God's sake, how the hell could you DO it?!"

She was almost shouting, gesturing with clenched hands. My own were gripping the back of the chair. Shit, the way she was putting it . . .

"Look, I was cold, confused, scared and lonely. I didn't really know what was happening, it just . . ."

"You saying she raped you?" Maxine snorted.

Stung, I softly answered, "That's not funny."

"Oh? Why?"

"She'd been raped."

Maxine's mouth opened, then closed again. "Oh. Sorry." Then: "They catch him?"

"She killed him."

There was a short silence, then Maxine almost pleaded: "Jesus, Kelly, she's not even Human!" She looked out the balcony doors at where Tahr was leaning on the balustrade, her back toward us.

That coarse mane flowed down her back, sharply defined muscles rolling under fur turned golden by the sun. Red breeches were tied with white cord at her waist and calves. That silver ring glistened as her ears twitched toward us.

"She's not ugly, is she?" I asked. "Just different. Inside, she's the most beautiful person I've ever met. I mean, you don't just fall in love with someone's looks."

"You love her!?" Maxine's eyes went wide.

I turned away, raked my hair back in frustration, then spun back to face the human girl. "Dammit! I don't know how else to say it! It's not that kind of love! We've been through shit together; she's been there when I've needed her, and I've helped her now and again."

"I can imagine," she said drily, then her hands waved as she exploded again, "Shit, man! What about diseases. I mean she could be carrying something that makes AIDS look like a cold!"

"I don't think so."

"How'd you know?!"

"How'd you know I didn't give HER something?!"

That stopped her for a second, giving me time to continue: "We just did what seemed right at the time . . . can't you stop acting so catty."

"Me!? Acting catty!? What about her! THAT'S catty," she jab a thumb at Tahr who'd turned and was watching us with a troubled expression. She couldn't understand what we were saying, but she could follow the tone well enough.

"That was not what I meant," I was feeling weary. "You don't understand."

"What's to understand."

"Everything! I've been here to nursemaid you. You haven't got a clue what it's like to be absolutely alone and never sure if you'd ever see another human again! Not able to understand anything of what's going on around you! If Tahr hadn't been there I'd be dead several times over; either from Sathe, wild animals, or my own stupidity! I owe her a lot!"

"And that's how you repay it?"

"It's not a question of payment! It just happened! Spontaneous. I think it took her as much by surprise as it did me." I shook my head and watched her, looking for some sign of softening, my heart sinking as she stared back. Chagrined, I continued in gentler tones, "I do love her . . . but you just can't understand, can you."

"No. I can't," She shrugged. "I guess I shouldn't be prying. It's really your own affair . . . No pun intended." Again she looked at Tahr, then said, "It was her Time was it?"

"You know about that?"

"That guard came on to me . . . "

"What?!"

"I don't see what you're looking so shocked about, with what you've been doing. This guard came on to me. He asked me when my Time was and I asked him what the hell a Time was. They have seasons, don't they. Like cats."

"They're not cats, dammit!"

"That was the only reason you got together? She was too randy to keep her paws off you?"

Oh, God. That hit hard. "Ms Wayne," My voice choked on me. I started again. "It wasn't like that. We didn't. . . I don't know; perhaps it started like that, but it changed. That first time, I was as shocked as you. I didn't know what the hell I'd done. I didn't know why I'd done it and the later times. . . I did it because I wanted to. I did it because it was the way to show how I really felt about her, everything she'd done for me."

I didn't know how else to say it.

She stared back at me, then looked at Tahr. "You were right: I don't

understand."

Of course things changed. I knew they would.

Over the next few days Maxine did her best to avoid me. When I did see her she had few words for me and always pressing business elsewhere. I could understand her reactions and didn't try to push it. Give her time.

Meanwhile there were other things to keep me busy.

The war was spreading. Fighting continued in the southern provinces of the Eastern Realm and all the time shiploads and wagon trains of troops left the city. Recruits drilled and trained continuously in the Citadel's courts. Much of the time Sathé I knew were occupied: S'sahr southbound for the central Eastern Realm, Remae and Tahr engaged for hours at a time in conference with Eastern commanders, sifting over the news filtering in from around the Realm.

I couldn't sit in on any of these meetings: I would be too . . . distracting. The disjointed snippets of news I did pick up around the place through rumours and gossipmongering were more confusing than anything else. I spent most of my time working with the Greens, drilling with them. Even with the limited ammunition available some of them were becoming quite adequate marksmen, even though I found their eyes couldn't discern fine stationary detail nearly as well as I could.

It was almost two weeks before Tahr sent for me to fill me in about just what the hell was going on.

"Here, here, here, and here," Remae's claws stabbed at points on the map. "We do not have enough troops down south to cover all this area. These villages will be defenceless."

"We may have to evacuate some of them, move the inhabitants to towns that we can defend," Tahr said.

The room was one I was familiar with, the conference room with the huge obsidian table and pile carpet. A wood and brass chandelier hung over the table, oil lamps hanging from it. Three Sathé and a human sat around the table on which maps and pieces of vellum and parchment were spread.

Remae was looking terrible. Her ribs were showing through fur which itself lacked lustre, was actually coming out in places. The corners of her eyes were crusty with goop. I knew she'd been under stress, but she was going to kill herself.

"The villagers would be vulnerable while they are being moved," Rehr observed. "Again they would need armed escorts. Could we spare that many?"

"I do not think so," Remae said and ran her claws through her mane, staring dully at the handful of fur that came away. "We have lost several scouting parties without trace, and they were not small."

"We have lost too many troops," Tahr sighed.

Indeed, the map was dotted with small red triangles; places where battles and Sathé had been lost.

"We just do not know exactly what they are doing," Remae said. "Their main host is reported to be about here . . . and they have others scattered along here." She drew a line from east to west at the top of the Florida peninsula. "We are trying to muster forces to meet them."

"And how many victories have been ours to date?" Rehr asked softly.

"Precious few I am afraid. Commander Rsef managed to defeat a flanking force much larger than his own by luring them into swampland where their own numbers were a liability. They lost over a thousand troops, but they will not make the mistake of baring their necks like that again." Remae rubbed her eyes. "K'hy, are your troops ready?"

I frowned. "I would have liked to have given them a bit more time, but

they are soldiers, they are ready."

"Commander S'Sahr wishes to move a Company to this town." She pointed at a circle set on a squiggly line that led to the sea south of us. "Weather Rock. It lies on the river Broken Tooth, ten days south by sea.

"It is not a large town, but wealthy, able to afford its own small garrison. And it controls the only bridge over that part of the river. The last news placed the Gulf forces about . . . here," she pointed at the line on the map, "but we simply cannot afford to spend a company holding a place the Gulf forces may never approach. The Greens are few, but you said they can stand against much greater numbers. Could they secure the bridge against a Gulf strike?"

"What is the opposition likely to be?"

"Ah . . . that we cannot be sure about, but if they do assault the town, it will most likely be with their easternmost force . . . this one. Reports are too sketchy to give an accurate size, but it will not be as large as their central one. I would go out on a ledge and guess perhaps two, three thousand."

I nodded. "And the town? What kind of a position is it in? Defensible?"

There were some troubled looks. "That . . . we are also not sure about." "Oh, great!"

"We spoke with some traders who'd been through about seven months ago. According to them there were siege engines being built and the walls were in terrible condition. They cannot say if repairs have been made since then."

"Wonderful," I scowled. "This is sounding better all the time."

"The town . . . here," she pulled out another map. "It straddles the river, with quarters on the north and south banks. The river at this point is wide, but shallower and slower than elsewhere; suitable for a bridge and ferries."

"Could it be forded?"

"Ah . . . that is doubtful. In mid-summer during a heatwave, perhaps. Otherwise, I think not. The surrounding land is flat and open farmland surrounded by forest. There are three roads leading in through the forest: two from the north, one from the south."

"How much open ground between the walls and the forest?"

"I have no idea. Can it be defended?"

I considered, then nodded. "I think so. We will have some good fields of fire."

"And, K'hy," Tahr leaned forward. "You will not be going."

"What?"

"You heard well enough. We do not want to lose you, K'hy. You will remain behind, and that is an order."

"High One, they are my unit, I have to go with them. I will not sit around on my fundament while they go out there, maybe get hurt or killed!"

"K'hy, you are staying even if I have to have you chained in the dungeons," growled Tahr.

"No! We are a unit!" I protested. "I trained them to work as a team, like a machine! Listen, if you take a working part out of a machine you end up with junk! Also, I am the only one who understand how the weapons work, I know what their strengths and weaknesses are. If you send those Greens out without an experienced commander, it would be like having a huge army with a cub in charge; a shrewd enemy could beat them." She didn't look convinced. I turned to appeal to a professional soldier: "Remae, you must know what I am talking about."

Remae rubbed the side of her muzzle. Tufts of fur drifted down and she quickly stopped. "Well, yes. I think he is right, High One."

"Rehr?"

"It does sound reasonable to me," the elderly advisor confessed. "Can you name any commander who would know how to use a gun?" He hiccuped a bit on the foreign name.

"You too?" Tahr was outnumbered. "I shall have to think on this," Tahr tapped her claws together and looked at the black-furred Remae; her worn expression, the shedding fur. "Remae, when did you last rest?"

Remae blinked at Tahr through crusty eyes. "Why just . . . It was . . .

"

"Go and get some sleep," Tahr snapped. "Before you fall on your face."

"But . . . "

"Go!"

Remae hauled herself to her feet and went to the door, a very different kind of movement to her normal graceful stalking walk; heavy and tired. She hesitated at the door like she was going to say something, then she left.

Tahr stared at the closing door. "She will kill herself if she keeps on like this. I should have said something before."

"There is much to be done," Rehr said. "These are hard times for us all . . . You yourself look as if you could do with some rest."

"I am fine," Tahr muttered.

"If you say so High One," Rehr stood up with a rustle of red robes.

"You will find decisions easier if you are rested . . . By your leave?"

Tahr watched the door close behind the advisor then got up and went to the window, throwing it open. The breeze that blew into the room put the lamps out but was also welcome breath of fresh air. She stood in front of the window cutting a black swathe out of the stars, her mane moving in the breeze. "You actually want to go and fight."

I shook my head. "No, I want to finish what I started. You cannot send them off by themselves. I KNOW they are not ready for that."

She sighed, her shoulders rising and falling. "You make tried and proven soldiers sound like cubs."

"They are like cubs," I said. "If they were soldiers in my world, one enemy could kill them while they all sat around their fire telling tales," I remembered what I had shown them, how chagrined they had been when I jumped them. They had had a guard posted, but in full camouflage and enough bush, a man can become almost invisible.

That was how they learned that heavy armour is not the only kind of protection: What you can't see, you can't hurt.

"By my Ancestors, Tahr. They were sitting guard duty around a goddamned CAMPFIRE!"

"But this is not your world, K'hy, and they know it better than you do. What can you still teach them?"

"They are too smart for their own goods."

Her ears flicked: "Explain."

"Those weapons do not make them . . . all powerful. They are simply tools, just like an axe or adze, and only as good as the person using them. It is good that they feel confident in themselves, but not foolishly so. A crossbow bolt or sword would have just the same effect on them as on any other. They are just raw recruits . . . Green is a good name for them: they are as green as a new sapling."

"Then do you really think they are ready to go?"

"As you said, they are soldiers. They have to learn somewhere . . . why not there? Also, how many conventional troops would you have to send in their stead, ah? Troops you are going to need."

The shadow moved away from the window and there was a muted footfall on the carpet behind my chair. Then smooth, hard crescents were running gently over the bare skin on my cheek and neck. "My furless strange one . . . Down inside you are not so different from the rest of us. Why do you decide that you want to fight now?"

"I have been trying to adapt, to fit in," I said. "There is so much to un-learn."

She sat down on the empty chair to my right and hunched forward, toward me, her hands hanging between her knees. "You want to fit in by fighting? My Ancestors . . . K'hy, we fight, that I cannot and do not deny, but it is not a

way of life for us. You do not have to try and prove yourself by doing that."

I blinked in surprise. "I never said anything about proving myself."

"I think that you do not always say what you want to say K'hy," she looked dour. "Is there nobody else who could go in your stead?"

I shook my head.

"Do not do that," the pads on the tips of her fingers touched my chin, rubbing against the stubble. "Very well, you impossible fool, go if you must." Then her breath was a warm breeze against my neck as she leaned close.

"But I shall be very angry if you get yourself killed."

"Rehr? Sir?"

The Born Ruler's Advisor looked up from his desk, starting to put paper away in a drawer before he saw who had spoken. "I am busy, K'hy. Can this not wait?"

"Please sir, it will not take very long."

"Very well." He stood his quill pen in a rack on the desk, beside an inkwell. "I think I can make time. What do you want?"

I pulled the sealed envelope out of my breast pocket and stroked the creamy paper with a finger before dropping in front of Rehr. He picked it up and glanced at the handwritten English message on the outside: To Maxine Wayne.

"What is this?" Rehr asked.

"A letter," I replied, then took a deep breath. "If something should happen to me, could you see that Maxine gets this?"

Rehr stared at me, then at the parchment in his hand, then back at me. "Why did you not ask Tahr to do this? You are close."

"I am not sure," I admitted. "We are maybe too close. Please. I am asking you because I think I can trust you."

He slowly ducked his head, his greying mane bobbing. "You honour me. Very well. It shall be as you ask, but I hope I will not have to pass it on."

I worried about that letter. There were things written on that indifferent paper I'd lost sleep over.

Amongst other things, I had left Maxine with a decision which I had had to make once. She knew a bit about firearms; she could certainly fire a gun well enough . . .

I had left the complete formula for black gunpowder and detailed instructions for forging cannon and muskets.

When we finally rode into Weather Rock I was hot, tired and covered with yellowish dust blown up from the road. We all were. The Broken Claw river flowing through the town beckoned invitingly, but there were formalities to go through first; time for bathing later.

First impressions of the township of Weather Rock were of a set from a movie, a western. A single unpaved avenue split the town down the middle, from north to south, the river quartering it east to west. The buildings were slightly more auspicious. Large - some of them actually had two floors - and made of wood, brick and something like adobe.

The Sathe inhabitants quickly dispelled any illusion of similarity that Weather Rock had to Dodge City.

By then I was used to the kind of welcome we received; locals stopping and staring at us from the street and their dwellings, bolder cubs falling in behind the soldiers in an impromptu procession. I just smiled wearily at them and blinked dust out of my eyes.

The curtain wall around the town was not very imposing, in fact it was rather pathetic. Parts lay in disrepair with ivy and lichen growing over fallen stones. In a couple of places - mainly around the gates - the walls had been repaired, I suppose for appearances's sake, but still there were a few merlons missing and one tower bore the blackening of a fire. Weather Rock was not a prime example of a fortified stronghold.

We definitely didn't look any better; worse if anything. The Greens were only wearing their trousers, rolled up to their knees, and these were all a uniform shade of mud brown from airborne dust. Sathé fur was caked with grime and the llamas were exhausted.

An awe-inspiring sight we were not.

The ruling clan in Weather Rock was the Fres's Clan. R'R'Rhasct had told me that it was a powerful Clan, and one friendly to the Shirai Clan so their loyalty was assured. They had control over two towns in the Eastern Realm and were purely traders; their Clan Elders had never had any desire for any power other than that brought from trading.

So the Fres's clan had always remained totally loyal to the Eastern Realm, and despite the attempts of rival clans to use them as political leverage, they had prospered.

The dilapidated state of the city walls belied the wealth of the town behind them. The buildings were well-maintained, painted, glass in the windows. The streets were clean with the populace looking well-fed. The air of affluence exuded by the Keep more than made up for any unfavourable impressions the walls may have given.

Pennants and flags waved at us in the breeze while sunlight glittered off a multitude of windows; far more than a building designed to keep people out would have. Servants stopped in their tracks and gaped at us, at me. We clattered into a courtyard while guards still stumbled out of their barracks to intercept us. Their armour was spotless and highly embossed while their weapons had that air of something straight off the rack. Probably still had the price tags on them.

If they were the police around here, who upheld the law?

Amongst us, we had already agreed that the Green called Fen would meet with the Clan Lord as our representative. He was educated, intelligent and being raised in a wealthy family, knew something about court protocol. It would make things easier if the Clan Lord only had talk to him, and not try and get used to someone like me.

Fen dropped stiffly from his saddle and waited while the guards approached him, surrounding us. Up on towers around the courtyard, archers were taking up positions, their crossbows cocked but not levelled. An officer stepped forward and there followed a spirited conversation that I couldn't hear. Fen eventually produced the sealed document from Tahr and brandished it in front of the other's nose.

The officer's muzzle wrinkled when he saw the red seal on the document and he looked us over again, then he gestured and led Fen off through the surrounding ring of guards. A small entourage of soldiers followed the pair.

They disappeared through a wrought iron gateway and I looked around at the remaining Fres's guards. They were watching us, but all of the crystal-green eyes surrounding us seemed to be fixed on one object; Me.

I raised my face to the sky, squinting into the glare of the sun. Anything but look at them.

The Sathé up on the walls stared back at me.

Chirthi and R'R'Rhasct walked with me along the southern fortifications of Weather Rock.

"This is pitiful," R'R'Rhasct gestured angrily at the wall. "If any modest number of cubs ever attacked these walls, they could take it within the day!"

She was absolutely right. The gatehouses on the roads leading into the town was solid and sound, as were the gates over the river, but the walls on either side of the town, each curving around to meet the river, were low and falling apart..

Barely three metres tall, the walls' catwalks were crumbling and eroded. Lichen and ivy were growing over the ramparts and we disturbed birds in their nests as we passed. The only things that were in decent repair were the few arbalest and catapults, mainly maintained, I suspected, for show.

"The only chance this town would have would be to stop an attacker from getting near the walls," said Chirthi.

The ground out there was flat, just fields and grazing land away to the forest. Even with crossbows a determined charge could swarm the walls.

As we walked back to the keep where the Greens were barracked, the two Sathe carried on a spirited conversation, recalling old battles where defenders were in similar conditions, and what they had done. I found the references they were using totally meaningless, instead I watched the stalls and shops, the Sathe who went to and fro, until a stall caught my eye.

"Chirthi, Rhasct. Hold on," I tapped their shoulders to stall then ducked across the dusty throughfare to take a closer look.

It was one of those shops with front shutters that rotated on a central pivot. At night they'd be swung up to close up the shop while during business hours they hinged down to produce instant display tables. The tables were covered with small metal trinkets and jewellery of all kinds, from tiny locks to spring-loaded flint and steel fire strikers to gold and jade earrings. I bent low to admire the craftsmanship. Without machinery or advanced tools someone had made these from scratch and they were as much pieces of art as pieces of metal. Delicate shapes hand-crafted from gold and silver wire, a small quarter-sized medallion that was unmistakably a bald eagle. That one caught my eye: I'd been wondering what I could use for a sort of cease-fire offering to a certain non-Sathe I knew and that might do the job. If I ever had the chance.

The proprietor of the shop, an oldster with long fingers and much grey in his fur, watched me with his ears flattened back as I picked up the medallion. He looked like he wasn't sure whether he wanted to watch and laugh or run for help.

Strands of gold filigree made up the body and outstretched wings while silver wire outlined the head, feathers. The chain was also solid silver. I'd have never believed Sathe fingers were nimble enough to make something like that. Whoever'd made it must have used a microscope. I whistled softly and turned to the proprietor, "Sir, how much does this cost?"

"You . . . speak?" He gaped.

I sighed, "Yes, I speak. Now, is this for sale or not?"

A businessman through and through. Almost instantly he had pulled himself together and quoted a ridiculous price. I got the idea and countered with an offer of my own. We bantered back and forth and when a price was finally settled on and I dropped three pieces of gold into his palm, he seemed inordinately cheerful. No guesses who'd ended up with the better end of the deal. Chirthi and R'R'Rhasct were waiting, sitting on the stoop, leaning against each other and chuckling at something. They squinted up at me as I came out. "We are at war and you go shopping?" R'R'Rhasct smiled.

I shrugged and scratched at my jaw. My beard needed a trim. "What can I say? It is a dirty job, but someone has to do it."

"Ahh . . . true," Chirthi chuckled. "What have you got there?"

I showed them. They both laughed when I told them how much I had paid for it, saying I had been done out of a gold piece. R'R'Rhasct was ready to go and get it back, but I stopped her, "He probably needs it more than I do."

"You would throw away a gold piece?!" They were astonished.

I shrugged and grinned, "I have to learn the right way to do it. If I make a mistake, I should pay."

"The place you come from, do you buy things there?" Chirthi asked.

"Yes, pretty much the same." I was thinking about check books and credit cards. "But there is usually no haggling over prices."

"But that takes all the fun out of it!" exclaimed R'R'Rhasct, sounding genuinely horrified.

The tiny bird of prey gleamed dully in my fingers as I lay under the rough grey blanket, holding the medallion in a pale moonbeam. The chain rattled almost inaudibly as I slipped it back into the pocket of my jacket lying beside the bed.

Down the other end of the long, second floor room, I heard the surf-like sound of Sathes whispering; Chirithi had joined R'R'Rhasct in her bed where they murmured softly to each other. I couldn't hear what they were saying, and I didn't try to. The deep, steady breathing of the other sleeping Sathes filled the room.

I stretched my legs off the end of the Sathes-sized pallet, then curled up and slept.

The shouting woke me.

"ATTACK! Rot it! THEY'RE ATTACKING!"

Someone was shaking me and I scrambled out of bed, still wondering what time it was. It was still dark out, but a flickering red glow shone through the dusty windows. Coming from across the river.

"What's going on?!" I snapped as I pulled my shirt on, grabbing my rifle and stuffing extra clips into my pockets.

"Attack, sir," Eor'sf shouted. "The town is under attack!"

Fasir clattered up the stairs with wild eyes. "From the south!" he yelled as he grabbed for his weapons. "They're burning the town! Trying for the bridge!"

Outside was chaos.

Sathes were starting to appear in other buildings while from across the river came the source of the glow. Buildings over there were burning, the bridge swarmed with the dark shapes of fleeing Sathes. Behind them I could hear screams and cries and see steel glinting in the firelight as weapons were swung. Figures escaping burning and collapsing buildings milled in confusion before being cut down. Wolves in a flock.

Armoured figures started to head for the bridge, swords and firebrands ready.

"Two teams!" I yelled at the Greens. "Six on each side of the road. Crossfire on that bridge, then fire and manoeuvre. Let them come to us, try to get as many as possible on the bridge. . . Watch out for the civilians! Go!"

Toe claws scrabbled on wooden stairs as they got, with me right behind them.

By night and firelight Weather Rock had become downtown Pandemonium. Flickering orange-red light and the alien shapes of terrified Sathes. Someone bumped into me, and I got a glimpse of a terrified face and managed to duck a frenzied swipe at my face before I was past. Up ahead Greens, naked but for their belts and ammunition, were spreading out on each side of the bridge. Kneeling behind walls, barrels, and any other available cover to steady the M-16s.

The Enemy were already on the bridge, dozens of them, red and black armour turned into something more sinister in the mad light. As they ran toward us they howled, and I saw bared fangs, eyes wide with battle-lust.

Then the guns started chattering, the racket of concentrated gunfire mingling into a metallic-sounding snarl.

I took cover beside a Green and added my own fire, her spent brass flying across in front of me in erratic bursts. On the bridge invading armoured Sathes caught in the gunfire went down like skittles, spun and fell, doubled over and fell, fell and died.

Their assault melted away into piles of bodies on the bridge. A few

survivors turned to dash back the way they'd come, howling ambush. Some of them made it back to the end of the bridge. None of the ones who'd chosen to run the other way made it. The Greens howled in triumph, but didn't rush to follow. Every second soldier ran forward under covering fire from the rest of us, then it was our turn to leapfrog them. Fire and manoeuvre until we had the bridge.

That was a blessing. Their first fight and they didn't get carried away, go wild and charge off on their own.

Wounded and dying Gulf Sathe shied away from me as I crossed the bridge, some rolling under the parapets and into the dark water below; the light, spinning rounds from the M-16 are not always mercifully quick. The Greens remedied much of that suffering; their claws and knives were messy, but fast.

Across the bridge, the street was littered with bodies. A few Gulf corpses lay scattered around, but most of them were Eastern Sathe; Men, women, and children.

Any sympathy I felt for the Gulf soldiers on the bridge vanished.

The next half hour was a time of killing. All I can really remember is the light; that bloody, red light from burning buildings. Armed Sathe came at me and were cut down by my weapon, or the fire of other Greens. With only swords out they came from the buildings, being cut down before they came near. Blasts of gunfire cut through the night. Muzzle flashes strobed along the street as teams of Sathe moved and hunted down the Gulf forces.

I remember a Gulf soldier standing over the bodies of a unarmed male and his cub, claws still dripping. I remember the look of surprised horror on his face as my gun butt stove in his skull.

A group of Sathe with crossbows firing at us from the cover of a window. Greens firing a burst that stitched across the wall, letting me get close enough to throw a grenade in. The concussion kicked the door off its hinges and knocked wooden slats from the walls, then the top floor caved in.

A Gulf warrior with a firebrand coming out of a building while flames licked up in the windows, he saw me, his eyes widening then the muzzle flash of my rifle strobed across him. I remember firing until my gun jammed, or ran dry, then using it as a club. I remember pain from minor wounds. I joined the chase as the remaining troops fled for the walls and the gun just clicked as I tried to fire on fleeing troops . . .

"K'hy?"

I stood on the crumbling town wall. The body of a guard lay at my feet, his throat slit by a Gulf blade. I stared down at the corpse, feeling utterly drained, like I'd run a marathon. There were still bursts of gunfire - on the wall and in the fields beyond - as Greens and local guards rooted out enemy troops, firing on the few who were retreating across the fields to the woods beyond.

"K'hy?"

Chirthi repeated my name. I looked at him, winded, unable to reply. His ears were back, blood matted his fur. I looked down at myself. Gore covered me; blood, my own and others', glistening black in the light of burning buildings. Gently he reached out and took the gun from my unresisting hands, then led me back down to mainstreet.

That central street was still in chaos. Buildings burned, filling the air with sparks and smoke. Sathe were forming bucket chains to the river: soldiers and civilians. What good could that do? The buildings still burned, and would continue to do so: right to the ground.

I stared, strangely detached as flames begin licking at another building. There was a movement at a window above the covered porch; a small head that barely reached above the sill and hands fighting at thick glass.

Cries rose from behind me: "K'hy! NO! Stop! Stop him!"

I was inside the building before I realised what I was doing, still going on automatic. The stairwell was filling with smoke. Red light and flames danced through cracks in the wooden stairs. I could feel the heat through the wood against my bare feet, but the stairs held.

Smoke filled the corridor in the top floor . . . What the hell am I doing here!? The door was locked, barred from the inside, but gave way under a kick. Flames climbed one wall of the room and I choked and hacked as heat and smoke seared my lungs; blistering my skin.

A small form hunched under a window, a stink of burning fur. I grabbed the cub and turned just as the lintel above the door collapsed in a shower of sparks, blocking the portal with flaming debris. I crouched over the cub, sheltering it as the heat tightened the skin on my face and hands.

Below, on the street outside, Sathé milled about, pointing towards me, the heat rising from the flames making their images blur, twist, writhe . . . The window exploded into a thousand glittering shards of glass and wood as I heaved a chair through it, then as the flames exploded around me, fuelled by the influx of fresh oxygen. I hit the eaves outside the window, stumbled, and fell.

The burning world spun and came up and missed me as I hit something soft that collapsed beneath me. Hands were pulling me away from the small body I had wrapped mine around in an unthinking effort to protect it: an instinct I never knew I had.

Voices were rising around me, calling and shouting. A Green - Finder - was propping me up, trying to get my attention, shouting something about the fingers he was holding up. I pushed his hand away and looked to where more Sathé were clustered around a small shape.

"He is not breathing." A Sathé looked down at me. "I am sorry."

"Bullshit!" I gasped and tore from their grasps, claws inadvertently tearing my skin as I half scrambled through the crowd. The cub lay sprawled on his side, his baby-fur scorched, shrivelled, and curled from heat.

I didn't bother checking for a pulse. The ring of Sathé around us stirred and shifted in indecision as I tilted the limp head back and clamped my lips over the small mouth. His chest rose and fell as I breathed in and out; I could taste soot on his breath.

Desperately I blew, watching the chest move feebly. I couldn't make a proper seal around the alien mouth!

Damn you! BREATH, damn it !

A shudder in the body. I pulled back as the chest started to move on its own. Then the kid started convulsing, and I pawed him over onto his side. A thin trickle of vomit ran from the corner his mouth, pooling on the sand. His breathing settled down to a steady rhythm. I sat there with his head cradled in my lap, gently stroking the singed fur over and over and it was another cub I was holding, one I'd never had the chance to thank.

"I'm sorry. Oh, god, I'm sorry I wasn't there. . ."

Sathé hands gently took him away, then took me away.

The guard who'd been bending over me jumped back in alarm as I opened my eyes, then he dashed out. I listened to claws clattering in stone, a door slam, and looked around in bewilderment. Where the hell was I?

The room was large, spacious, and spartan. Big shuttered windows along one wall were hanging open, a warm summer breeze blowing through. The off-white walls were covered with what looked like polished granite slabs, as was the floor. The round bed I was lying on was in the middle of the wall directly opposite the door, and I was lying stark naked on white satin-soft sheets.

I had enough small cuts and bruises to add to my collection of scars. I ached, pain outside and in. Both my feet were bandaged, and there was another bandage around my right forearm, another around my stomach.

My clothes were nowhere in sight.

I sat up and gingerly put my feet on the floor, wincing at the pain. Running around on stones and broken glass with no boots. Not a good idea. Slowly I put more weight on them. Ouch.

"K'hy!"

Sathe burst through the door, R'R'Rhasct and Chirthi, with Weather Rock guards close behind.

"Hi," I greeted the pair.

"Out," R'R'Rhasct ordered the other guards, then strode over to stand over me, arms folded and wrinkles on her nose: "What do you think you are doing?!"

"What does it look like? Where are my clothes?"

"Oh, no. You are staying right there," Chirthi told me.

R'R'Rhasct pushed me back onto the mattress and perched herself beside me. Belatedly, I realised what I wasn't wearing and made a grab for the sheets. Pointless really: she'd seen me in the buff before, and in a far more compromising situation: straight after my little soiree with the bartender at the Red Sail.

"The physician said that you must stay off your feet until they heal," she scolded me. "You are not to walk for at least a few days."

"There is nothing wrong with them," I protested. "They are a little sore, but that . . ."

"Sir," Chirthi said from where he was standing by the windows, "You looked half-dead when we carried you in here." He rubbed his mane. "The physician did good work on your feet. You'd been dancing on glass; they looked like burnt mincemeat."

"Same as the rest of you. You are not fireproof," R'R'Rhasct added. "And you were not acting quite . . . normally."

"Well, I feel fine now," I lied. Then blinked around at the opulent room. "Where am I anyway?"

"A guest of the Clan Lord," Chirthi said. "In the Keep. We could not leave you with the other wounded. It was too crowded, and there would be some who would not accept you."

The other wounded . . .

"How many did we lose?" I asked fearfully.

Chirthi looked at R'R'Rhasct. "Twenty-four wounded and thirty-seven dead. Thirteen of them soldiers."

"Oh, shit!" I moaned to the ceiling.

"Are you alright?" A hand touched my shoulder.

I looked up at her. I wanted to cry. "Thirty-seven?"

"There would have been many more if we had not been here." Chirthi stared at me, "Do all h'mans fight like that?"

"Huh? Like what?" I asked, confused.

"Never mind." They looked at each other.

I ignored that, didn't really attach too much importance to it. Thirty-seven . . .

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed. "Fuck doctor's orders. There are things to be done. I have work to do . . . where are my damn clothes?"

"Please sir," Chirthi pleaded, "We are already doing everything. Do not do this!"

"I am fine," I insisted as R'R'Rhasct passed me a mug half filled with water. Water . . . I was parched. Unthinkingly I drained it and tossed it aside. She retrieved it from the bedspread to set it back on a tray on the floor by the bed, smiling a bit. "I do not want to lie here like a fucking invalid!" I snapped. "Bring me my clothes, and that is an Goddamned ORDER!"

"We cannot."

'Rhasct!" I snarled, furious. "Now!"

The Sathe looked at each other, then Chirthi said, "Sir, before we left, the Shirai gave us other orders, to make sure . . . Sir, she outranks you. We cannot let you.

"Tahr!" Goddamit, she had no business . . . giving me fucking BABYSITTERS! "I don't care what she told you! Bring me my clothes!" I managed to get to my feet, then my muscles turned to jello. The Sathe caught

me as I collapsed and lowered me back to the bed. I tried to grab them, then lost the use of even my arm. I twitched helplessly.

"The water," I croaked. "Rhasct, you bitch!"

R'R'Rhasct straightened the sheets, brushed hair from my eyes, then stood up beside Chirthi who gently nuzzled her neck, his eyes still on me. "I am sorry, K'hy," R'R'Rhasct told me, even sounding sincere. "The Marshal told us it is quite safe for you. It will just help you relax and sleep. You will heal better."

I tried to swear at them as they left, but my tongue had turned to a slab of dead meat. All that came out was an incoherent mumble and then the drug rolled over me like a velvet bulldozer.

Hands gently shook me awake. Faces, hovering over me. Blood pounded dully in my ears. There were noises, voices talking and words washing over me without registering. I mumbled some meaningless protest and let my eyes close. Again hands were slapping at my face. I tried to push them away and don't know if I even lifted my hands.

Another face, a small face, pelted with long cinnamon fur shrivelled and curled, green eyes blinked down at me. A hand, fingers, white bandages, feather-touch my face. I moved my arm to catch fur, hold a small hand. Teeth bared, fear blossoming in the eyes before voices rang. Green blinked, curiosity and wonder . . .

To the south of the Broken Claw river the town of Weather Rock was in ruins.

Great black swathes were burned in jumble of buildings, patches where the fires had burned unchecked, levelling the wooden structures as effectively as if they had been dynamited. Sathe were swarming through the streets. If there had been a time for mourning, I'd missed it. I'd been flat on my back for the better half of a week, dead to the world while the town pulled itself together again. Admittedly the Greens had done good work: the walls were being repaired and reinforced. Food and equipment being stored.

Still, not all the Sathe were choosing to stay and fight. Over on the river, flat-bottomed barges being loaded with cargo and refugees headed off down the river. Occasional clusters of refugees were leaving by the main gates; going north in their search for protection.

Those were the outsiders; the ones from outside the Fres's clan. The majority of the towns population had found shelter on the untouched northern bank. It was crowded, but they were coping.

I leaned against the parapet to take some of the weight off my feet. They were almost healed, but I still treated them with respect. I turned around in time to see a Sathe messenger pop out of the stairwell . . . The clan lord wished to see me.

The messenger was a talkative Sathe, as well as curious. He asked me all the usual questions: What am I? Where do I come from? Am I male or female?

He shut up as we got near the centre of the keep. Four guards outside a set of reinforced oak doors sprang to attention as we approached. The messenger disappeared off down a side-passage, and the guards opened the doors as I approached.

And closed them behind me again.

"Sir," R'R'Rhasct greeted me in a small voice, her ears plastered back.

"You . . . !" I pulled up short when she stepped back, baring her neck to me.

"No! It was not her fault, sir."

I turned around to face Chirthi and a bemused Fen. Chirthi continued:

"We were only obeying orders," he saw me glance at Fen. "The others knew

nothing about it . . . We did it for your own good."

I looked down at my fists and forced my hands to relax. "NEVER do that again! Ever!" I snapped through my teeth.

They said they wouldn't . . . I wish I could have believed them.

"IF you have quite finished," a cold voice interrupted. Another pair of double doors were open, a female standing between them.

She was wearing only dark green breeches, belted around her waist and fastened just above the knees by gold clasps. On her right arm there was another gold ornament, an armlet of fine gold wire that showed up well against her chocolate-brown fur. Her eyes glowed green from under a rust-red mane, and a silver earring glinted in the fold of her ear. Hanging at her waist, the hilt of a dagger protruded from its lacquered wooden scabbard.

Fres's. The Clan Lord.

The Sathe around me instantly adopted postures of submission; lowering their heads as her gaze swept over us. Her eyes locked with mine as I stared back at her, still silently fuming at R'R'Rhasct. The Clan Lord's ears flickered in amusement. "You are not a very docile one, are you. Now get in here!"

The room that Fres's led us into was a private study. A large desk sat before a fireplace and the wooden floor was covered with fur rugs. There were seats arranged around the desk.

"Sit down," Fres's told us as she settled down behind the desk, picking up a quill and absently stroking the feather. "You should have told me that. . . he," she indicated me with the tip of her quill, "is your commander."

"We felt that it would be easier for you to talk to someone normal," Fen said, then his ears flattened and he hastily apologised to me, "No offence intended, sir."

"None taken," I said. "I am really only an. . . uh. . . advisor. I command them in battle. . . but that seems to be the only time I hold any authority," I glared at R'R'Rhasct. She wrinkled her muzzle in hurt.

"Your wounds are healed?"

"Well enough."

She ran her gaze over me again, staring at my clawless fingers and flat face. "That was a brave thing that you did, saving the child. You have the clan's thanks."

"Heroes do not usually live very long," R'R'Rhasct muttered.

The Clan Lord glared at her, "Do you have a reason for disliking what he did?"

The Green clicked her claws together nervously. "He has a knack for getting himself into trouble."

"So?"

"So," I said, "They were ordered - by the Shirai - not to let anything happen to me. I suspect there was a punishment involved?" Neither Chirthi nor R'R'Rhasct could meet my eyes.

"Well," Fres's said grimly, "if she does not want you damaged, I would suggest you leave as soon as possible. If you will look at this:"

I leaned forward as she pulled a map out of a drawer in the desk and smoothed it out. "You see Weather Rock is here, on the Broken Claw river. Up here it turns into lakes while downstream it becomes even wider and the land becomes like mud. If you want to cross it is either here or three hundred kilometres upstream. I can tell you that first attack was their outriders. They must have nearly killed their llamas to make such good time because they are almost two weeks ahead of their main body . . . and as best we can tell that is about here," she stabbed a claw into the map. "About five thousand Sathe, I would say they are now about four days out and coming this way."

"Shit!"

She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness, "I know very little of warfare. The Fres's Clan have always been traders, not fighters. We are simply not prepared for an attack, as you have doubtless noticed.

"The other night your warriors had stopped those motherless bastards

almost before our guards were out of their beds. Your troops have done a lot of work helping us ready our fortifications. You seem to know what you are doing." The next thing she said obviously hurt her pride, "I think it best for all of us that I leave the defence of Weather Rock to you."

"Thank you, High One," I nodded.

"Can your weapons stop them?" Fres's asked, and the Greens looked at me.

I walked across to the south-facing window. Even with what had been done to them, the pitiful excuses for town walls wouldn't hold that number for long. Beyond the walls, fields surrounded the town. Open fields stretching off for about one and a half kilometres until they ended in a solid line of trees. A single road led out of the forest.

"The guns will help," I said. "But they are not going to be enough just by themselves. Your town will be difficult to defend. Being on flat, open ground and with the walls . . ." I shrugged.

Fres's slumped behind her desk, "You do not have to stay."

"Hey, that is what we are here for, to help you" I said. R'R'Rhasct started to say something but changed her mind at a sharp look from me.

The Clan Lord flicked her ears wanly, "I thank you, but against five thousand, there is not much that you can do."

"Do not be too sure of that," I replied. "There is more we can do to make life difficult for them. Smaller numbers than ours have held off vastly larger armies for some time."

Fres's snorted. "But doubtless it was not in such an indefensible spot, and that is just part of the largest armies the world has ever seen."

"Not that big," I shrugged.

She stared at me then flashed an unsure smile; was that supposed to be a joke? The Clan Lord obviously wasn't sure. As if annoyed by that indecision, she dismissed Fen, R'R'Rhasct, and Chirthi.

"We will be outside," Fen told me. The last to leave, he closed the ornate double doors behind them.

Fres's bade me sit down again. "I am very curious about you," she said, coming around the desk and moving around behind me; a blur in my peripheral vision. "I had heard that the new Shirai had an . . . unusual favourite, but you . . ." The sentence trailed off.

I just stared at an ornament on her desk, a glass paperweight riddled with air bubbles. She was reflected in it, standing behind me, one hand resting on her belt near the dagger.

"The things that I have heard about you are difficult to believe," she said. "Are you truly from another world?"

"Have you ever seen anything like me on this one?" I replied.

A soft hiss of laughter. "No. Never in all my days."

I also grinned, then said, "You seem to know quite a bit about me."

"I have my sources," Fres's said. "There has been a lot said about you and your exploits. As your minder said, you have a gift for finding trouble."

The reflection in the paperweight shifted.

"As Clan Lord, I have a responsibility to my town," she said. "I have to know if there is any chance of holding the Gulf forces. I will not order my people to stand and be butchered for a hopeless task."

I rubbed my temples with my fingers. "So you put the burden upon my shoulders . . . I cannot make promises that they can be stopped, but there is a good chance we can delay them. At least until reinforcements arrive, but we are going to have to work on the walls. We have brought some materials with us, but we are going to need help from you: mainly labour, also some materials . . . Chirthi has a list."

There was absolute silence for a while, then a feather-light touch on my hair. "You will have whatever you need. We are not fighters, but we can learn."

Fight: How I was coming to loath that word.

THE HUMAN MEMOIRS
PART IV

Alone we are born
And die alone;
Yet see the red-gold cirrus
Over snow-mountain shine.

Upon the upland road
Ride easy, stranger;
Surrender to the sky
Your heart of anger.

High Country Weather
1945
James K. Baxter

It was going to be close. The deadline was finally catching up with us. Huh, deadline: perhaps not the greatest choice of words. Death was something I for one was trying not to think about. Now refugees trudged along mainstreet, whole villages and bedraggled individuals carrying what they could. They would beg food, but how could we feed them all? We could only stand and watch the exhausted stream passing through the town. Some stayed; those incapable of going any further and those sick of running. The others just kept their eyes on the road and continued onwards. Some had fled from as far as the Savannah district; That's over four hundred clicks. It was like watching a procession of the damned.

That strike by the Gulf outriders was a mixed blessing. It gave us warning that they were close, and that Weather Rock was a target, but we'd lost buildings, resources, and all too many people.

Yet the Gulf Forces had come off even worse. The town had been littered with their corpses. Seventy three bodies, the majority of them scattered along the length of the bridge. We had a few prisoners, but they weren't very helpful and the Fres's interrogators hadn't had a lot of practice. All we could get out of them was their equivalent of name, rank and serial number.

Oh yeah. And most of them boasted about the Gulf army marching on Weather Rock. Tens of thousands of troops. Break us like a bone. Stand over our corpse. Etc. Fres's had lost her temper after the fifth. The next one who tried that died with his throat ripped out by her claws.

The midday sun was raising shimmering heat waves from the packed dust. The ramparts still swarmed with activity as carpenters and stonemasons laboured at reinforcing Weather Rock's flimsy fortifications. I stepped aside to let a couple of guards struggling with barrels of quarrels to pass, followed in turn by more Sathes carrying awkward bundles of crossbows.

I ducked into the south gate's barbican. Inside the tower the sounds of pounding hammers and Sathes shouting echoed up and down the circular stairwell. A female dashed down the narrow steps at a suicidal pace, sidestepping me in a grey swirl of fur, patches of green fabric, a spattering of claws upon raw stone.

The rooms in the gatehouse towers and the single gallery that ran above

the gates - housing the winch for the portcullis - were filled almost to overflowing with casks and crates of water, food, quarrels, pitch, rocks, arbalest bolts, and oil. Several Sathes were arguing over a barrel, one of them brandishing a scrap of foolscap beneath the others' noses. Leaving them to sort it out for themselves I clambered up the wooden ladder to the fortified roof.

Already three arbalests had been put together and were squatting on the ramparts, looking like crossbows titans might use, their sweeping horns embracing the arc of landscape visible through the crenelle. Another was being built; a trio of carpenters cursing as they battled to string the massive fibre and gut bow. Overhead, heavy frameworks roofed with sandbags and half-rounds of timber shielded the ramparts from the heat of the sun and any heavy objects that might decide to drop in.

Beyond the town walls the road ran in a near-straight line to the point where it entered the forest, a couple of kilometres off. On either side of the road the fields were deceptively peaceful. Stalks of grain were sprouting in the fields and a few small farm buildings stood a good distance from the town's curtain wall. Those were the fields over which the Gulf forces would have to march to reach the town, and we had made sure that it would not be easy for them.

A few Claymores would've been useful. So would a few M1 tanks or Appaches. We had to make do with what was available.

The fields to the south of the town were sown with booby traps and obstacles of all types. Caltrops, sharpened spikes, punji stakes and pits, 'venus flytraps', abatis ditches, everything we could think of that would slow an attack. Close to the town the obstacles were even denser and anyone trying to clear them would come under rifle and MG fire. The road itself wasn't booby trapped, but the punji-filled trenches running along either side gradually closed in. It was a neat trick of perspective that concealed the constriction: where a row of ten Sathes abreast may enter the gauntlet, there would only be room for seven at the end. Guaranteed to screw up a concerted charge any day.

I pulled my dogeared notebook from a cargo pocket, flipped it open and ran a finger down the list. There were still a few items to be checked off.

"Sir?" A lieutenant of the Weather Rock guard stepped up and raised his muzzle in a salute. "The western wall reports that all is ready, but the eastern side is having trouble with the catapults. One of them tipped over: they are still trying to right it."

"Shift some of the engineers from the western side to give them a hand. And what about the river gates and clearing that wreckage away from the walls?"

"The chains and nets are in place," he reported. "Nothing is going to be coming down the river. The rubble around the south bank, that is going to take a while to clear away."

"Okay. How long until the rest of the supplies are stored?"

"I would guess at the end of this day, sir. But the crops were not ready. There will not be enough to withstand a long siege. Perhaps two months at the most."

Should be ample. "What about the positions on the corner towers?"

"Ah, those bags of sand are in place, as are the overhead shields. Extra strong as you ordered."

I nodded then dismissed him.

Things were moving smoothly. I guess I'm a pessimist, but I always felt it was going too well; any moment Murphy'd rear his head and it'd hit the fan. Of course we had our share of drawbacks, but thankfully nothing terminally major.

The Gulf army had to be close by now. The refugees and the few scouts we had risked sending out had come back with news of razed homesteads and villages in the wake of the army that advanced on us. Reports on their muster fluctuated between four thousand and eight thousand warriors. However all

agreed that they were headed in this direction.

Already there had been encounters between Gulf outriders and the skirmishers we'd posted in the wilderness to the south of Weather Rock to ensure that Gulf spies didn't get close enough to take notes on the town's defences. There were only two small groups of town guards - no more than ten - but the two Greens per platoon made sure they could hold their own in a fight against a force four times their size.

Bipedal cats in fur, leather, and metal and armed with scimitars, accompanied by other felids in camouflaged battle dress slung with webbing, ammo pouches and carrying assault rifles is a sight that has to be seen to be believed.

But I've seen it, and even then it's difficult to swallow.

"How are things going here?" Lady Fres's stepped up beside me and looked out over her lands; standing straight, her hands linked behind her back.

"So far everything is on time, High One," I replied, pushing my hands into my pockets and following her gaze. There were still labourers out there, struggling to manoeuvre an abatis into position. "Your people are hard workers."

"It is their home they are working to save," Fres's pointed out, wandering over to an arbalest and laying a hand on a curved tines. "You are placing great stock on missile weapons. Why did you have so many more crossbows built? Nearly a hundred more."

I nodded. "I want to keep the Gulf Realm at arm's length. They will outnumber us in trained troops. You know a lot of farmers and peasants cannot use a sword, but most of them are familiar with crossbows. A few hundred more archers in the right place at the right time will make a vast difference."

"I see you have made some changes."

"Uh-huh." I called a sentry over and took his weapon to show Fres's. "It is twice as powerful as the old design."

The Clan Lord hefted the weapon. "Heavier also." She tried to cock it and was barely able to pull the string halfway back.

"Here, it is easier with this," I grinned, tapping the lever built into the forestock of the bow. She fiddled with it briefly, then easily cocked the weapon, slotted a dart into place and took aim at a stanchion. There was a sound like a sharp handclap and red fletchings were sprouting from the post. That was all you could see of the bolt, it was buried over halfway into the wood.

"Saaa!" The Clan Lord hissed and bared her teeth in a toothy grin as she tossed the weapon back to the guard. "Alright. So we have better claws. How long do you think these will hold them back?"

I shrugged. "Until the sun went out if we had enough ammunition. But we do not, so I cannot really say. We do know they have about five or six thousand well armed and trained warriors, along with archers and engineers with siege engines and equipment. We do NOT know how well supplied they are, what reinforcements and equipment they may have."

"Agreed. What would be your best guess?"

"Perhaps two weeks. . . perhaps. Do not quote me on that."

She snickered; a throaty hiss. "Well, we shall make them pay for every handspan."

I nodded.

There was a shout of triumph as the carpenters struggling with the recalcitrant arbalest finally managed to string the bow.

Suddenly it all seemed remote, as though I were seeing the whole thing through someone else's eyes. The mottled gridwork of shadows cast by the frame above my head, the gape-toothed grin of the battlements, the faint heat shimmer of earth baking beneath the sun, the thunderheads on the horizon.

I could die here.

Away in the distance birds burst into the air from the sanctuary of the shady treetops. It was almost a full second before I heard what had startled

them.

A gunshot.

Then a long volley of gunfire. A brief lull, then the distant pops of automatic weapons on full auto. It slowly died out to the sporadic shot interspaced with rolling rattles of snapping.

Then Sathe were on the edge of the woods; tiny dots bolting towards the safety of the town walls. I watched as they covered the distance at top speed, long legs blurring, mouths gaping; over a kilometre in about a minute and a half.

Chirthi popped out of the trapdoor to the parapet of the gatehouse like a piece of toast from a toaster. Tongue lolling, he hitched the webbing of the rifle's carry-strap with a clawed thumb and pattered over.

The M-16 reeked of hot propellant.

"They are here," he announced; unnecessarily.

"Lose anyone?"

"WE didn't." He grinned and slapped the receiver of his weapon; claws clattered against metal.

Sathe citizens and warriors of Weather Rock were converging on the town walls as the news spread. The white noise of their massed voices rose in volume then abruptly there was silence, like the flipping of a switch on a radio.

The scouts came first. Cautious, nervous, they darted like wasps on the fringes of the treeline as they scoured the area for further ambushes.

Then came the rest.

Streams of Sathe soldiery - on foot, riding llamas, wagons, and carts - were leaving the confines of the road through the forest, spreading out across the fields, their numbers growing steadily until they stretched along the front of the forest. And still they came.

The afternoon stretched on and the sun traipsed lazily along on its arc across the slate-blue sky. As the shadows grew, long red and violet streaks dashed the clouds. The tiny sparks of campfires started to spring up in the Gulf encampment.

I hugged my jacket around me and shuddered in a breeze that came entirely from my mind. Shadows stretched and merged, gradually climbing up the trunks of the trees until only the crowns were illuminated in the twilight, then even that was gone as the sun finally sank below the horizon and there were only the fires of the Gulf Realm.

It was the kind of morning when even the sun seemed to have trouble rising.

A light mist covered the ground in grey tendrils of damp moisture. The air was perfectly still and chill. Droplets of crystal condensed on grey stone, making the walls greasy to the touch. I pulled my cowl a bit closer and watched through the approaching rider through the small cloud my breath made.

Leaving his llama huffing to itself he approached the town on foot. His red and black armour was clean and polished, without a buckle out of place. Three small chevrons embossed on a pauldron gleamed silver in the crisp morning light, denoting his rank. No scabbard hung from his belt; he appeared to be unarmed.

He did not look worried as he stopped, easily within earshot of the gatehouse.

"I want to speak to your commander!" he yelled.

Fres's had already been summoned. She looked at the small group of Greens standing around with weapons at the ready and stepped forward to the

crenellation, drawing herself up to address the Gulf Messenger: "I am the Clan Lord of Weather Rock. You and your forces are in breach of all treaties between our Realms and I warn you, the consequences will be dire."

"For whom?" The other's ears dipped in amusement. "Hystf Fres's. . . Yes, we know you. My lords also know that your town has no chance against us. You are not fighters," he spread his arms in a gesture of supplication. "In their magnanimous generosity they offer you sanctuary if you surrender to us. This is sworn upon the honour of the S'erst Clan."

"I would speak with your commander," Fres's called. "If he is so sincere in his offer, why does he not come himself?"

"The Mharah has no wish for words with you, Fres's," the messenger bared his teeth in a savage grin. "You may have until noon to decide what your choice will be. Please choose carefully, there are five thousand warriors who eagerly await your decision." He snorted, turned his back, then raked his feet to scuff dirt in our direction before going back to his mount and riding off toward the dark ranks of enemy troops massed along the treeline.

Fres's sagged against the rampart, looking haggard and worried. Unfortunately the Furball on the llama was right; She was no fighter. The daughter of a merchant mariner - now deceased - she had made a successful career of trading and returned to her home to succeed the previous Clan Lord.

But this was never in the job description.

With the fate of the whole town resting upon her decision, she was scared and confused. Fres's turned to us with the muscles on the side of her muzzle twitching in a nervous tic. "He swears upon his Clan name," she said. "If we surrender they must keep their word."

"It stinks," I said. Surrendering to The Gulf Realm was not an attractive option, especially for me. Besides, I wouldn't trust him any further than a Bosnian Cease fire. "It is not Hraasa's style to offer terms."

"Huh! You are right," Fres's agreed. "But I think that he does not know about those weapons that you have. After that skirmish in the woods their commander knows we have some new weapon, but he is probably still certain that he can take Weather Rock. Probably expects us to be cowering in fear of sharing the same fate that the border towns faced, willing to surrender to him. Also he wishes to save himself the slight inconvenience that attacking us will bring. Also, there is little point in gaining a Realm if it is peopled with corpses and its buildings are gutted ruins."

I nodded. "I think he would be more worried that if we did stand against him, we would have time enough to fire the bridge and make sure it burns completely."

"But our forces need that bridge as much as they," Chirthi mused.

We had no idea of how far behind us reinforcements were, but any Eastern army that was following us would need that bridge to cross the river and mount their own offensive. If this arm of the Gulf forces took the town, they could delay the Eastern forces long enough for the other prongs of their army, moving northwards further inland, to swing in from behind.

All they had to do was take the town.

"I think that they will find Weather Rock a tough nut to crack," I grinned. "High One, we have decent defences and we have these," I slapped my palm against the receiver of my assault rifle. "Twelve of these firing can fire three hundred and sixty bullets at eight hundred a minute, every one of those is deadly. The larger weapons. . . they can turn any attack into vulture-food. That should make them think twice."

Chirthi backed me up: "It is true. At a distance one Sathé armed with one of these is more than a match for a hundred with swords. We wiped out an entire advance force of their elite scouts before they knew what was happening."

Fres's looked across at the bustle of the enemy encampment and grinned a Sathé grin, nervously running her tongue over her teeth. "You believe that we have a chance?"

"Twenty to one?" I returned her grin. "Yeah!"

True to his word, the Gulf officer returned - punctually - at noon. The sun was beating down on the battlements, the contingent of Eastern Sathe waiting shaded by the shields placed to protect archers from ballistic weapons.

The intermediary was squinting into the dazzling sunlight as he reined his mount up on the road below the gatehouse, not even bothering to dismount.

"You have had time enough to make your decision," the officer called up to us. "What will it be?"

Fres's scratched her jaw, then set her ears back and snarled, "You can tell your superior we reject your offer!"

The Gulf warrior leaned forward in his saddle and squinted up at us, twitching his ears. "Prize fools, ah? Your last chance. No? Ah, well, not to worry. It should not take us more than a day to walk over this hovel and urinate on your clan ground."

"You talk too much!" Fres's growled.

"You think that you. . . ." the Sathe started to say and Fres's gave me a pointed glance and tipped her head toward the messenger.

I grinned, raised the M-16 and squeezed off three shots. Three spurts of dust kicked up in front of the llama and the animal reared as the rounds impacted, one ricocheting away with a ululating whine. The officer was thrown, landing heavily on his back. The llama bolted back down the road, away from the town.

Fres's spat at the groaning figure sprawled below. "You little piece of offal! Nothing here would abase itself enough to bow to festering cesspits like you. You can crawl back your superior and tell him that we will meet you in combat. . . if you are capable of it!"

With that done she opened her mouth in a hostile hiss, then spun and stalked off.

Soldiers lined the walls, laughing as they watched the Gulf warrior stagger to his feet. His armour was covered with ochre dust. Blood stained his muzzle: he'd probably bitten his tongue. He stared up at me.

I tipped my helmet back and grinned.

It certainly had an affect on the Sathe. He stood, staring, his ears down and mouth moving vaguely with words I couldn't hear, then he started retreating, stumbling backwards before turning and limping wildly back toward the Gulf camp, casting panicked looks over his shoulder as though he thought I was going to go after him.

The laughter of the Eastern troops on the walls of Weather Rock hissed after him like a mocking ocean.

Your move.

The warning gongs sounded from the gatehouse, booming across the town. The Sathe cubs and elderly looked up at the sound, but stayed put, diligently spreading layers of linseed oil on the seams of the mass of cloth spread before them while I grabbed my equipment and double timed it to the southern gate.

Sathe at the base of the walls were already in action: loading catapults with the medieval equivalent of a beehive round, carting bushels of crossbow quarrels to the troops upon the battlements, boiling water.

Other Sathe, Sathe who only a couple of weeks ago had been merchants, shopkeepers, farmers, craftsmen, they also hurried to their positions on the walls, all of them grasping their bows.

They had the numbers, but not the training. How would they hold up? God help us !

The Gulf host was readying itself. Lines of their troops shifted and writhed as they formed into groups of fifty Sathe, six of them altogether. I frowned: three hundred, that was about a hundred more attackers than there were experienced defenders. That certainly wasn't large enough a number to

ensure they took the walls. Why didn't they swarm in en masse?

What was Hraasa playing at?

"Testing us." R'R'Rhasct came up beside me to answer that question. "You have been a thorn in their feet for some time, and now they find you, they are not sure what you can do."

"If they keep coming as they are, I will put more than thorns in them," I muttered. I was still sore at the Sathe bitch, tense every time she was around. She must've known that, but she still talked to me, trying to be friendly. For some reason that in itself annoyed me.

I sighed and slapped a magazine into the well of the M16. "Everyone ready? Alright! We let the crossbows handle this lot. Have the archers fire in volleys. The Greens hold their fire unless they get within a hundred spans."

R'R'Rhasct grabbed her rifle and sprinted over to the group of Sathe who functioned as our communications centre, taking courier reports from the east and west ends of the walls. She had words with one of them and came back. "Everything and everyone is ready."

"All right. Now the next move is up to them."

I propped the M16 on a sandbag in the embrasure in front of me and squinted through the scope.

Officers were strutting around before their troops, waving swords and yawling, psyching them up.

R'R'Rhasct snorted something.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Conscripts," she repeated. "In the front ranks. There are a few elite there in the back, but the rest are rabble."

Cannon fodder. Almost made me feel sorry for them. Almost.

Now the Gulf scouting forces were advancing, slowly, then the lines began to break up as they began to rush the western end of the wall.

That charge faltered badly as they crossed the fields. That'll teach them not to scout the terrain properly: What looked like sprouting crops at a distance were in fact slivers of wood stuck in the ground. Those and the six-spined metal caltrops buried in the soft sod played hell upon unshod Sathe feet. Those pads might have been as tough as leather, but they couldn't stand up to sharpened iron spikes.

The charge faltered amongst curses and cries of pain. Their screaming officers got them going again, much more slowly.

I ducked as a crossbow quarrel clattered against stone near my head. Okay, that's far enough !

A shout sounded out along the parapet. Peaked ears appeared along the wall, weapons raised to crenelles. The snap of close on two hundred crossbows firing in a ragged volley was a sound like sharp applause. A cloud of quarrels rose, then fell again, following shallow arcs into the thick of the Gulf forces.

The Gulf archers had been firing at extreme range, their shots striking our positions with little accuracy. Our archers were a rag-tag bunch of farmers and traders fighting for their homes. They might not have had training, but most of them were quite at home with a crossbow. When hunting was a way of providing food, straight shooting often decided whether they ate or not. Along with that they had superior weapons, a height advantage, and a fortified position to ready their aim.

Screams sounded as near fifty Gulf soldiers were hit. The next volley - scant seconds later - claimed even more victims as the archers got their range.

This one got the Sathe officer. He jerked rigid, then doubled over clutching frantically at a spot just above his hip. Another bolt hit his leg, knocking it from under him, leaving him writhing in an incredibly energetic manner for a dying man. . . Sathe. . . whatever.

The Gulf assault wavered visibly. Despite the elite troops at their backs the forward ranks began to falter. Their archers had been cut down in

those volleys.

Another swarm of arrows hissed out from the walls. And another.

Now, with little more than a quarter their original numbers left the attack crumbled, the ranks shattering and falling apart like a house of cards collapsing. Forward ranks pushed back, darting past the elite guards at their backs as they fled for their own lines.

The elite guards broke also, snarling. Toward us. All twenty seven of them, trying to push their way through a hedge of sharpened stakes.

To be cut down by a fusillade of quarrels that left them scattered where they fell, looking like so many multicolored pincushions. A few of them lived for over half an hour.

It was hardly a decisive victory, but it did wonders for morale. Any rumours that may have been circulating about the Gulf Realm being an unstoppable juggernaut had just been stabbed in the back. There were well over a hundred-fifty dead and wounded scattered out there like so many cast-off dolls.

"What the hell was that?!" I muttered in English, shaking my head.

"What?" R'R'Rhasct was standing right behind me.

"That fiasco," I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "Whoever their commander is, he just threw away over a hundred of his troops, for no real purpose. He knew that there were not enough to successfully charge the walls. A fucking rout!"

"As I said, just testing our defences. Besides, now they are a hundred less."

"Yeah. . . Fantastic," I scowled.

It was late that day, the sun burning into a hazy, red, orb on the horizon. That first Gulf attack - little more than a cautionary probe - had been beaten off. Our casualties? A minor scratch.

Now they were preparing again. Would they fight all night? With their night-vision it was a possibility. Shit! Our twelve Sathes qualified to use firearms couldn't stay on duty twenty-four hours a day.

Their troops were forming up again. Along a much larger front this time. Those units of fifty they'd used last time were being formed again, only many more this time. I counted twenty units. Several of them composed of archers. More of Gulf Regulars.

A thousand warriors. Perhaps one-fifth their number. They weren't screwing around.

Our crossbows had superior range but they obviously believed they'd be able to storm our positions. If crossbows were all we had there was no doubt they'd break through. As it was things would be tough.

I was nervous, sick to my stomach as I checked the M60 for the third time in an hour. I removed the barrel and switched it for one I'd taken off the last time I cleaned it.

"Sir?"

A Green. Fasir. A lanky, barely post-pubescent cub. But he was a soldier, had been since he was twelve, and he was also turning out to be a damn fine shot. He ducked in under the heavy overhead of sandbags. "The other positions are ready. No problems." He was referring to the other M60 in its sandbagged embrasure on the western tower.

"Good," I nodded as I snapped the breech down on a round. "Make yourself comfortable. Now we wait."

Fasir settled himself down to my left, in a position to link and feed the fifty round belts into the GPMG. As my second, it was his job to make sure the links went in without a hitch. He crouched beside the gun, staring out along the barrel at the Gulf forces.

Drums boomed in the distance, the distorted echoes rolling across the fields towards us. Already carrion birds had found the dead: the dusk swarmed

with black feathered bodies squabbling and fighting as they pecked and tore at fur and flesh.

"Sir?" Fasir asked without taking his eyes off the Gulf forces. "You ever afraid?"

I flashed a tight grin. "Hell yes. Be a damn fool not to be."

The tide of the Gulf swept forward, the troops breaking into a long-legged lopping stride that rapidly devoured the distance separating us. Swords were out of their sheaths, hundreds of them glittering in the setting sun as soldiers sprinted toward us. The traps took their toll, leaving screaming soldiers impaled on punji stakes in pits and ditches, but nobody had ever expected them to stop everything.

I drew a bead on a company of archers, took a breath, and fired and the muzzle retort was like a palpable force in the shelter. Sathe tumbled like ninepins as their legs were shattered, ripped apart. So sudden they just lay there, unable to understand what'd happened.

I raised my sights a couple of notches.

The stopping power of a 7.62mm round is awesomely lethal. The Sathe archers might just as well have not bothered with their armour. Machine gun fire from the other M-60 in the west tower ripped into their flank, decimating them. A higher-pitched clattering started as the Greens opened up with the M-16s and entire ranks of Sathe went down.

Beside me Fasir was coughing on the propellant fumes as he worked at linking the belts together and feeding them hand over hand into the pig. I slapped the stock of the weapon to bring it to bear on another target: elite guards. This lot were closer. I could see the effect the impacting rounds had.

An officer turned from seeing his troops being cut down by something they couldn't fight, turned and looked straight at my position as I fired. Through the haze and shock waves around the muzzle I saw flowers bloom on his chest and red spatter the dust behind him. Small, harmless looking red patches. He was kicked back several feet and bounced in the dust before lying still.

The gun ran dry. Fasir set up another case while I changed the barrel, already shimmering from the heat. Spent brass casings rolled around underfoot as I swung the weapon to find another target.

The Gulf forces were in complete disarray. Some were trying to push their way back through their lines while others were still trying to advance. I aimed at the largest congregation of troops. Finder on the other gun had the same idea.

Two M60s caught the same area in a crossfire. The effect was devastating. Rows of Sathe toppled like grass in a strong wind, but these ranks of flesh and blood stayed down. Sathe screamed and howled, trying to tun, some hugging the ground which was turning into a reddish, viscous mud. Had this been what the legendary charge of the light brigade had been like?

Pity the poor sods.

Through half a case of ammo I kept firing.

When - finally - the firing sputtered to a halt the silence was deafening. An acrid cloud of propellant hung about the gun, the stench of hot steel and brass stinging at my eyes. The Gulf attack was in full retreat, the field littered with their dead.

We'd hammered them badly, but how much ammunition had it cost us? A more than considerable amount of the limited 7.62mm stuff and a fair bit of the 5.56mm ammo for the M-16s.

At least it'd gone down the way I'd wanted it: to draw them into a serious assault, then hit them back hard. That'd slow them down a lot, buy us some time until our reinforcements arrived.

Fasir was also watching the fleeing gulf soldiery. His eyes were

red-rimmed and watery, his nose running. The gun fumes in the confined space really didn't agree with him. He sneezed.

Along the battlements a mass howl rose after the retreating red and black uniforms. Weather Rock Sathe were dancing on the ramparts, yowling obscenities at the Gulfs' backs. They were alive while the ones who'd tried to kill them were dead. Can you blame their exuberance?

"You alright, kid?" I asked Fasir.

He rubbed his eyes, spat in distaste and flicked his ears. "I will live. Will it all be this easy?"

"We can only hope."

"They cannot take losses like that for long."

"Yeah. Unfortunately we cannot hold off attacks like that for too long. How much ammo did we use?"

He did a quick check. "Almost two cases."

I whistled. "A lot of lead."

"They will have trouble swimming."

I laughed at that. It broke the tension.

"Good work," I grinned, then slapped him on the shoulder and clambered out of that goddamned little nest of sandbags and half-rounds. The other Sathe on the tower were distinctly more disposed to approach Fasir with their congratulations rather than me.

Didn't bother me too much. You get used to it. I was content to lean against the wall and stare at the Gulf positions, wondering what they'd get up to.

"K'hy. . . Sir?"

"Hey, Chirthi. How did it go along there?"

"Incredible. Oh. . . we had one casualty. She took an arrow through the eye. Had her head in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"One. . ." I shook my head. "Could have been a lot worse. What about ammunition?"

"The small guns used maybe seven percent. The big one. . . about thirty at a rough guess."

"Ahhh. . . shit! Maybe they will not be stupid enough to try another couple of attacks like that one."

"If they do they will be climbing over their own bodies."

"But how many can they afford to loose?" I asked myself and went back to the wall, leaning against a merlon and staring at the enemy encampment. There was a small bunch of Sathe on llama-back out in front of their lines, I caught flash of light off glass; a telescope? Sathe had them - in fact Rehr had one in his study - but the clarity of the lenses left a lot to be desired. Whoever it was, they were watching us.

I lifted my M-16 to the parapet and squinted through the scope. So you're the opposition.

The central Sathe was holding something with a golden, metallic sheen to it. An expansive red cloak surrounded the body, but I got a glimpse of white fur on the head. The others in the group were military types; red and black armour with matching cloaks.

Lowering the rifle I squinted across at the enemy lines. At that distance they were indistinct, like dolls, but their uniforms stood out like sore thumbs. A real snappily dressed bunch. Officers.

How far? Two hundred yards? A little over probably. I raised the rifle again, propping it on a sandbag and fiddling with the sights. About right. I snugged the rifle into my shoulder, relaxing. . .

Squeeze.

I hardly noticed the retort. Through the scope a second passed, then one of the llamas went down, taking its rider with it. Hastily the others reined around and put some more distance between us.

"Shit!"

The fallen officer struggled out from under his beast and raced after the others, leaving his mount on the road. I fired two more rounds without

much effect. They were still over there, carrying on a very animated conversation. The central figure raised the spyglass, staring straight at me.

I gave a tight, humourless grin and waved back.

There was no moon that night. Heavy banks of clouds covered the sky, only a pale glow seeping through. In the gloom I could barely see two yards.

Lights glowed in the town behind us, friendly warm-orange windows and doors. Promises of warmth. On the walls there was nothing, not even a torch. Screwed up a Sath's night vision and made them sitting duck to any enemy snipers who might try to sneak in. Still, on a night like that, even they couldn't see much.

"There you are." A shadowy figure approached me.

"Chirthi?" I squinted into the gloom.

"Yes. So, what do you see out there tonight?" He laughed.

"Very funny, I do not think."

He hissed. "I thought you had good eyes. Hitting a llama from this distance, that was impressive shooting. Tell me: was there a reason for that particular one? Ah, advisor to their commander, a?"

I smiled. "Well, it will make them keep their heads down." But it wouldn't stop them. Even now they were probably trying to sneak troops across the river upstream, downstream, anywhere they could. Cut us off eventually.

"Sir?" Chirthi broke into my thoughts, sounding uncomfortable. "Do you mind if I ask. . . Is it true that you were a. . . a quartermaster?"

I nodded: "Yes, among other things."

He used a single finger to scratch beneath his cuirass and grinned in the moonlight. "Somehow you do not seem like just a box pusher. I mean, that thing you are putting together in town, how did you learn to build something like that? You did other work?"

"I repaired machinery. I think you would call that an engineer." That didn't translate perfectly into Sath.

"You built seige engines?"

"No, not those. There were other machines. . . We use them instead of wagons. Also things like. . ." I trailed off helplessly. "I think your speech does not have the words for them."

"Well, then where did you learn your strategy?"

"History is a good teacher," I replied, touching the cold stone of a merlon. Off in the distance a wolf howled and another even more distant answered. "I have been trained. . . and my kind has had a long time to learn about things like this."

His green eyes blinked at me. "You have not actually been in a situation like this before?"

"No."

"You have been in any kind of battle?"

"Only war games."

"Games?" He sounded incredulous. "You have not actually fought?"

I shrugged. "Our last war. . . well I never saw action. My unit was not assigned. The games were just larger versions of the exercises I had you do, more soldiers, weapons. . . all that. Our way of life is. . . different from yours, so we had to be taught things you would take for granted."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Hunting. Killing and preparing food."

He looked like I'd offered to shave him. "But that. . . who does not know how to do that?!"

Well, here perhaps. There were enough people back home who'd never had to kill anything in their lives. With all their food provided by others, their idea of roughing it is to park a Winnebago in a campsite and worry that they won't be able to use their satellite dish when the extension cord doesn't reach the outlet.

I shrugged. "Like I said, life is. . . was different."

"You miss it?"

"What, with all this to keep me busy?" I waved a hand at the town and battlefield somewhere out there in the dark. "Yes."

Chirthi's ears flickered then settled down, slanting backward slightly: Caution. "You often go off to be alone, sir." His tongue flicked around his thin lips and he scratched his muzzle with a clawtip. "You are uncomfortable around us?"

"It is not that simply put." I turned and leaned my forehead against the cool stones of the wall. "It is not you personally, it is just that sometimes. . . I do not know how to say it; I need time to sort things out with myself." I paused, then added. "Sathe are strange."

He hissed. "You find US strange?"

I shrugged. "You have lived with it all your life. I am always finding out new things about you. Some of the things I learn are. . . disturbing, such as childbirth."

"Ahh," his head rocked back a touch, a stiffening of his posture, then: "It is not proper to talk about that." I saw him glance toward me, "Your kind do not. . .that does not happen to you, does it."

"No."

Again: "Ahh."

There was another silence. There was a thin mist forming in the darkness, moisture falling from the clouds. Droplets were beading on his pelt, glittering in the tufted fur of his ears like minute pearls, scattering when his ears twitched. "Did you hear that?"

Nothing but a few voices back in the town, rattle of a wagon as supplies were moved from damaged warehouses.

"Rot it! I heard something. Voices, out there."

"You see anything?"

"Uh. . . No. Plagues! I heard it!"

I hadn't heard anything, but I wasn't one to question a Sathe's hearing; as good as their night vision. I couldn't compete, but I could compensate. I snapped open a cargo pouch and produced the flare pistol. "Do not leave home without it". The orange plastic gun kicked in my hands and a trail of smoke snaked up into the darkness above the fields.

Even through the mists the flash of light was dazzling. A red sun hung in the sky, spitting sparks and smoke while casting blood-red light on the ground below. The four Gulf troopers out in the fields were thrown into sharp relief, freezing motionless in surprise and fear. The three wounded soldiers they were trying to drag back to their own lines must have been lying there all day. They were covered in muck: dried mud and blood. Those of the conscious ones stared back at me along the barrel of the rifle, another closed his eyes and kicked feebly with his legs, whimpering something.

I took my finger off the trigger. They were unarmed and unarmored and in no condition to fight anyway.

The flare drew attention from both camps, guards shouting and running to see what the commotion was. Eastern sentries leaned over the battlements, waiting for me to blow the Gulf Sathe to hell and back. I didn't, I lowered my gun and shouted out, "YOU! GET YOUR WOUNDED AND GET OUT OF HERE! GO ON, MOVE!"

The flare sputtered and died and the darkness rolled back in.

"Are they going?"

Chirthi squinted into the darkness. "I think so. . . yes. Why did you do that?" he hissed.

I slipped the safety on again. "They were unarmed. It could not hurt to let them reclaim their wounded."

"But that is crazy! We are trying to kill them and you help them?!"

I sighed and leaned against the wall, damp stone soaked my jacket.

"Also, if we let them take their wounded back, they have to look after them, do they not?"

He turned and flicked his ears in an amused smile. "So they have still more useless mouths to feed. More of a strain on their resources and supplies."

I looked at him and twisted my mouth. I had a sudden craving for a cigarette. "Yeah, that too."

My eyes snapped open as soon as I felt the touch on my shoulder, my heart jumped into my throat, my fist stopping before I decked the Green. I'd grown touchy; three days with about six hours sleep all told was beginning to take its toll.

"What the fuck do you want?!" I rasped. My mouth tasted like a stable floor.

"Apologies, High One!" he blurted. "Sir, R'R'Rhasct sent for you. It is important."

"Uhhh," I muttered, sat up, swearing as I struggled into my boots. "Okay, where to?"

The guards at north gate had spotted the wagon as it approached the town not ten minutes ago. There was nobody driving it, the llamas pulling it just ambled up to the gates at their own lazy pace and began rooting up grass.

Now it rested just inside the gate, a few guards in a wide circle around it.

I gave it a second look. Just a wagon: wooden, with spoked metal-bound wheels, two llamas. . . Whatever was in the bed was lumpy, immoving, and covered by a stained burlap tarpaulin. There was no sign of any driver or passengers.

R'R'Rhasct intercepted me as I approached. Her ears were drooping and there was an expression on her face that I can only describe as glazed. "We are cut off," she said. "There are Gulf forces to the north. Probably not many at this time, but enough to stop caravans going through."

"You are sure?"

She hooked my elbow and drew me to the back of the wagon. There was a fetid, heavy stench that stuck in the back of my throat. When a couple of guards pulled the tarp back a cloud of flies rose into the air. I gagged, the smell was overwhelming. It took a while before I understood what I was looking at.

Eventually the garish lumps lying in there - mounds streaked and ribbed with red, yellow-white, and purplish-blue - focused: There an arm, a head resting on a leg. Five Sathe, four adults and a cub.

They'd been skinned. All of them had been skinned.

My last meal tried to climb back up.

"Their teeth," R'R'Rhasct said in a flat voice. "Their teeth and their claws. Gone. Trophies, decorations."

I gagged and turned away as my stomach leapt, clutching the side of the wagon and breathing hard to keep my last meal down. R'R'Rhasct caught my arm, led me away from the grisly scene. "You alright?" she asked.

"Y. . . yes," I choked. "Give me a minute." I sat down heavily on a porch fronting one of the buildings lining main street. "Oh, shit."

"You were right," she said. "They are around behind us. We are cut off. We do not know how many of them there are. We cannot afford to escort caravans out of the town. . . ." she trailed off. Her pink tongue whipped around her thin black lips and her leathery nostrils flared.

I nodded. Unless we got reinforcements, we weren't going anywhere.

"Sir," she said. "I am sorry you had to see that. I did not know you would be so badly. . . affected."

I shook my head. "No. You did right. It gives me a reason to fight them." I looked at the sky, then dropped my head into my clenched fists.

"Damnation! They were Sathe. They were people!" I hissed.

The Sathe's eyes went wide. "Rhasct," I grated. "If any Sathe under

my command treats a prisoner like. . . like that, I swear I will have his ears for a necklace! Spread it!"

The M60 hammered and Sathé howled and tumbled to the dirt. I shifted my aim to a clump of enemy infantry and clamped the trigger back, the spent brass ringing off the stones beside me.

They were trying again. This time at least trying to plan their attack: a massed, two-pronged attack at the east and west corners of the town walls where the least amount of firepower could be brought to bear. The problem with that manoeuvre was that they tended to bunch up, presenting choice pickings for the Greens and their automatic rifles and GPMGs.

A crossbow quarrel thunked into a nearby sandbag. A nearby green took aim and felled an archer who was busy recocking his bow. They had advanced beyond the punji spikes even though many of them had been left clutching their feet and limping wildly, but there were more surprises.

Give them full marks for guts though! Or stupidity. The regulars charged forward, into the teeth of automatic fire, then they hit the covered trenches. The front lines just vanished as the ground collapsed under their feet and the close packed ranks behind them tried to stop or jump the sudden hazzard. Some stopped, some teetered, then went over. The trenches were too wide to jump.

And they were lined with three-foot long spikes. You could hear the screams from the walls. Like dropping a bag of cats into a food processor.

"Jesus."

It was enough to make the Gulf Charge falter. Soldiers stood on the sides of the trenches, just staring, trying to find a way across. Some were reaching down, trying to help comrades out even as quarrels and bullets rained down on them. They had guts, but whatever nerve they had deserted them when the balloon went up.

As big as a house, it rose over the buildings of Weather Rock. A patchwork canopy climbing into the still evening air, swaying slightly in an errant breeze. It steadily lifted, higher and higher, until it was hanging a hundred metres above the town.

For the Gulf forces it was the final straw. Many threw down their arms as they turned and fled. One by one, the defenders on the walls realised that the Gulf soldiers were running from something behind them. They turned and stared at the balloon floating above their town, not a few of them looked like they were about to go over the walls after their enemies.

I tipped my helmet back to stare up at the balloon. "Well, I'll be damned, it works!"

Getting it put together in time had been a real bitch. To start with, the Sathé don't have silk, not real silk. How can they? The caterpillars that produce the silk don't exist in the States, not in this world nor mine. The closest they can come is a tight-woven, lightweight cotton that doesn't hold air that well by itself. But lacquer it with a coat of the varnish Sathé make from pine gum and it'll hold air well enough to get you off the ground. What with the weight of the bag, the thing couldn't take much in the way of a payload, but it could manage an observer and enough fuel to keep it up for a while. Provided the weather decided to cooperate. For intelligence it was invaluable, giving us a birds eye view of the entire battlefield. We knew what the Gulf forces were up to almost as soon as they did. We could pinpoint troop concentrations and foresee just where they would strike next. That gave us the time to move arbalests and mangonels into position along the walls.

It also gave us the first warning of the worst news possible.

From the gondola of the balloon I watched in dismay as more ranks of Sathé marched from the forest road. Reinforcements; swelling the diminished ranks of the Gulf army beseiging Weather Rock. Tendrils of soldiers were making their way eastwards, forming another camp downstream from us. In the town below Sathé were crowded along the ramparts, watching the enemy reinforcements in silence.

There were a hell of a lot more than five thousand; eight, maybe nine thousand at a guesstimation. Where had they come from? I guessed that the Gulf armies were sweeping up through Eastern territory in three prongs, maybe more. We had stopped one of those prongs, and now another had joined it; whether through a request for reinforcements or a prearranged meeting, I didn't know.

I sighed. At least the air up there was clean. Down at ground level the miasma from the dead of war was noticeable all the time, at its worst around midday. Up there the stink the coke fire burning above my head. I looked across at the Gulf encampment, a hollow feeling settling inside me. Maybe we could hold them for a bit longer, but not forever. Never forever. It was only going to be a matter of time. A gust of wind set the basket rocking gently, creaking. For a few seconds I eyed the guy rope: it'd be so easy to cut it, float away over another world.

Yeah, it'd be easy. Shaking my head I waved to the ground crew way below. The balloon bobbed once, then started to descend.

Someone over there, maybe the commander of the recent reinforcements, had started to use his grey matter.

Damnation!

Trenches and low walls of earth braced with wooden beams zig-zagged their way across the fields to where Gulf troops laboured at raising bulwarks against rifle fire. They'd learned to keep their heads down when they discovered that three hundred metres is not an M-16's maximum effective range. Nobody bothered - or dared - to recover the bodies, they still sprawled on the earthen breastworks that grew hourly.

Now they stretched in a gentle crescent the width of the town, east to west.

Again, thank god for our eye-in-the-sky. From the walls - even the three-story ramparts of the Keep - it was impossible to see what was going on behind those bulwarks. From over a hundred metres above the town it was obvious, but there wasn't much we could do about it.

With a crack and spray of granite chips, a rock the size of my head struck the top of the wall and pulverised a merlon. Another arced over and kicked up a dusty cloud as it impacted the packed earth of the courtyard. A soldier was being carried off, screaming and thrashing with a smashed leg.

The battery of Gulf catapults were hidden from line of sight behind hastily constructed breastworks. I could see their spotters giving directions. There was a volley of muffled thumps and dark shapes curved towards us.

I ducked back behind a merlon as stones clattered against the wall. There were muted impacts as more hit the sandbags over our heads.

Chirthi looked across at me from behind his piece of cover. "So, what do we do now?"

"I am working on it. Can our catapults hit those things?"

He peered around the stone. "Only with small stones. They may crack a few skulls, but nothing we could throw would have much effect on their machines."

"Even if we could, they would simply build new ones," R'R'Rhasct pointed

out.

"How many have they got?"

"Last count: fourteen. They fire them in volleys."

Another projectile flew in with a whirling hiss to shatter against the wall, knocking another merlon loose. The piece of fortification tumbled out of sight.

Shit! You ever have one of those days. . . ?

I tipped my helmet off and scratched my head. I needed a bath. "Okay, the Sathes using those things, they are their engineers? The ones who build their equipment?"

"Yes."

"Then we will have to take the catapults and their operators out at the same time."

"Wonderful," Chirthi said. "Just one question: How? You have an idea?"

"Uh-huh." I surveyed the town for a few seconds. "Okay, get the balloon up with a spotter crew and get the catapults ready and crewed." Messengers scampered off into the town.

"Alright, Chirthi," I said, slapped my hand on his shoulder to pull him along. "I will explain on the way."

The smoke-stained wall - all that remained of what had once been a house - shattered under the impact of a boulder. I heard the crack and turned in time to see Sathes scurrying clear as the two story shell of a building slowly folded down on itself in a rumble of falling masonry and a rising cloud of dust.

Weather Rock mangonels thumped in response, sending stones sailing back at the Gulf lines on lazy, graceful arcs to land with inaudible thuds and puffs of dust against the Gulf breastworks.

Gulf soldiers waved back at us, their jeers carrying on the wind along with the stench of rotting carrion.

I leaned back against merlon and squinted up at the balloon, the chaos of colors, like a patchwork beachball against the bottomless blue of the sky. I patted the M-60's forearm assembly then swung the weapon up to settle it on a sandbag. About forty metres out. Dial the sights. Ease breath out, hold it, relax, first pressure, adjust aim, squeeze. . .

Muzzle flash burst and the Gulf trooper flipped over backwards. Instantly the others were down in the mud, scrambling back for their lines. The one I'd just hit was still kicking, the round had been a little low.

I ducked back behind the merlon and yelled down to the Greens in the courtyard behind the south gate, "Down, three marks."

Finder waved back to me. "Ready!"

I gave the signal: "Fire one."

The hollow phthonk of a 81mm mortar firing echoed off the town walls like a firework in a trash can. Seconds later a blur plunged down into the Gulf fortifications. The blast of high explosive sent a cloud of dust fountaining into the air. I could see a log flip upwards, tumbling end over end to hit the ground and cartwheel to a standstill like a caber. Perhaps the throwing arm from a catapult.

In the balloon above us a spotter sent the signal 'on target'. A lucky first shot. The spotters changed their flags, waving out corrections to the mortars.

There were more distant thumps and a volley of heavy boulders slammed into the walls, knocking masonry loose. I saw one knock a chunk out of the corner of the gatehouse where it rose above the walls, spraying chips of pulverised rock and clouds of mortar on the parapets below.

The three mortars fired more volleys, one after the other, in a dozen raggedly spaced coughs. Sathes cavorted on the walls, howls and yelps of triumph rising as the rounds burst along the length of the Sathes trenches.

Columns of dust and smoke rose and spread above their fortifications, drifting down like a black fog as the concussion of the blasts died beyond even the rolling thunder of echoes. Sathe emerged from the haze; just a few, dazed and wounded, hauling themselves over the breastworks to lie twitching in the mud and trampled grain.

From the balloon I heard a cry, "In their heart!" The flags waved directions for the next volley: down fifteen marks, left two.

A single mortar thumped. The round struck further back, amidst the tents and pavilions of the Gulf camp. Again the spotters waved corrections and again the mortar fired; five more times. The Weather Rock catapults joined in, lobbing grenades over into the Gulf positions, the sharp explosions mixing with the blasts from HE mortar shells. Even when the mortars fell silent - with only a few rounds left - the catapults continued firing. Sathe, male and female, stripped in the heat of the day, laboured to haul down the ponderous oak arms. The whole assembly kicked like a mule when those arms slammed up, one after the other, three more volleys of six grenades. Then more towers of smoke were climbing toward the sky; screams wailed across the fields.

In their heart !

Two hours later and trails of oily smoke were still rising from the Gulf siegeworks, the sounds of panicked shouting shrilling on the air. Chirthi turned his furry back on the panorama and regarded me with bright eyes. "What other tricks have you got hidden away?"

"Not enough," I ran my fingers through greasy hair. "I saw the Gulf messenger. What was that about?"

"They wish to parley and Fres's accepted the offer."

"Uh," I nodded. "Good. At least we can buy time." A thought struck me and I bit my lip. "That WAS her reason?" I asked. "Just buying time? She does not plan to. . ."

He turned and led the way toward the southern gatehouse. "I think so sir, but. . ." he broke off.

"But what?" I prompted.

"She has to consider her people. There is the chance - however remote - that perhaps she does wish to surrender, despite her oaths to the Realm."

"I think that she is not the type for that," I replied. She had already defied the Gulf Realm, and seriously pissed them off. If she surrendered, they might just pound the Fres's clan into the dust from sheer spite.

"I hope you are a good judge of character, because there is now no doubt that the Gulf realm would do anything to get your knowledge."

"It is one thing to have the mind, but it is another to find out what is inside it," I grinned at Chirthi with a lot more confidence than I felt.

He didn't look convinced. "Failing that, I think Hraasa would be satisfied to have you impaled and roasted over a spit."

I grimaced. "Thanks. Hey, if something does happen to me, make sure that Rehr knows about it. It is very important. All right?"

He bowed his head: "As you wish."

Fres's was waiting at the southern gate along with several of her lieutenants. I caught the scroll she carelessly tossed me and stared at it helplessly. The Clan Lord looked surprised when I ruefully told her I could not read.

"Their lord says that he wishes to meet on the road halfway between our camps. There are to be no more than five in our party," she looked at me, "and it must include you and myself."

Going out there. Finally face to face with the bastard who'd put me through hell and back. I felt my heart lurch and glanced toward the heavy wooden gates. "You are agreeing, High One?"

"Yes."

"Do you wish to surrender?"

She hesitated before answering: "I do not know. You have seen their new forces arriving, they have siege engines and many thousands of fresh troops." Her claws punched through the paper she was holding, "Unless you know of a way to stop them cold. . . No? I did not think so; and your weapons will not stop them forever. If nothing else, I may be able to give us some time."

"Do you really think they will offer reasonable terms?"

"No, but I have to search every branch for a solution," she rubbed her muzzle. "Are you willing to accompany me?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Sir!" Chirthi protested. "You cannot. . . "

"Yes I can!" I snapped, wiping my hand across my face, bringing it away covered in grime.

"You don't trust that turd?"

"No, I don't. There is something I need from the barracks. . ."

R'R'Rhasct's yowling shriek echoed off the walls behind us as our small group rode out of the gatehouse.

"I told you she would not be happy," Chirthi muttered.

I glanced back over my shoulder. "That was a good reason for not letting her know." Felt good to get back at that furball for what she'd done to me. Behind us, I could hear Sathe voices howling in argument as R'R'Rhasct tried to persuade the wardens to open the gate. They had their orders and they stayed shut.

The smell around us became incredible as we passed through the centre of the battlefield, the Sathe riding and me walking: nothing would persuade me to try and ride a llama. I'd look ridiculous. Besides, it was extremely doubtful they could carry my weight any distance. Flies buzzed around bloated corpses, what remained of the casualties from earlier battles after the scavengers had eaten their fill. Flesh had putrefied, turned to black slime. Faces from which the fur had fallen swollen and black, bone and eye sockets and rib cages squirming with maggots and decaying flesh. More recent cadavers were still recognisable as individuals, unseeing eyes - their third eyelid half drawn in death - staring at us.

I shuddered and turned my head away, to see the same view on the other side. The Sathe were gasping through their mouths and for once I pitied their superior sense of smell.

As we drew further away from the town, the stench grew less. It was by pure misfortune that the town lay on the down side of the prevailing winds. In the distance ahead we could see riders setting out from the Gulf camp to our south.

"There are more than five of them," Chirthi observed glumly.

"They're holding the cards," I said. The Sathe all looked at me.

"Forget it."

The two parties stopped a goodly distance away from each other. Nine warriors in their black and red armour cloaks, all carrying swords and bows at the ready, spread out across the road while their leader rode forward to meet Fres's halfway.

Hraasa. Hraasa, the enemy I had plenty of reasons to fear and hate but had never seen. Now I was looking at him. I wasn't that impressed.

True, as a High Lord, an autocrat in the Sathe aristocracy, he was larger than most, but beyond that he wasn't staggeringly exotic. A patch of silver-white fur on his muzzle made an arrow targeted on his broad nose, but otherwise his fur was an unobtrusive fawn. His armour was a matt black that seemed to soak up the sun. Hot.

The wind whirled small clouds of dust over my boots as I stood and waited for something to happen.

Finally Hraasa laid his ears back slightly and looked down his nose at Fres's. "I am glad that you decided to listen to our terms, Fres's."

"I had nothing better to do," she replied just as easily, as if talking to an old acquaintance. How many noticed one corner of her thin lips curled to show a flash of white? "What is it that you want?"

"I want to know why you continue to resist us," he snapped, all pretence of amicability vanishing under the sodium harshness of his glare. "You know that you cannot win. We have thirteen thousand warriors and engines of war. More than enough to level your pathetic town to rubble."

"I am not ungenerous. I am offering you the chance to survive. Any of your warriors who accept my amnesty will be gladly welcomed and well treated. Surely you do not want to be responsible for the complete demise of the Fres's Clan."

"The Fres's Clan has chosen, unanimously, to fight you," Fres's replied; level and cool. "You have played games with honour, you have murdered, stolen, lied, raped, and destroyed. There is no way that I would surrender our cubs to your soiled claws."

He bowed his head slightly. "Only an idiot would claim that war is a clean exercise," he said. "Those traps that litter the ground outside your walls, are they honourable? I think not. We are taking back the land that is rightfully ours. I know when you stole it from us, you showed us no mercy."

Fres's looked incredulous. "That was so long ago there are not even any records. Our Realms did not even know of each other's existence! And there was no mercy needed; there was no fighting. That land was empty! You cannot claim what no-one owned!" Fres's spat.

"Temper; outbursts like that do not become you," the other growled. Then looked over Fres's' shoulder, seeing me as if for the first time. "I have heard much about this creature, Clan Lord, but it is even stranger and uglier in the flesh. You: come here!"

I looked at Fres's. At her beckon, I reluctantly handed my M-16 to Chirthi, then stepped up alongside Fres's'. All the Gulf warriors stared at me and I tried to ignore them.

"You have caused me much pain," the Gulf commander told me.

"You should talk," I replied coldly.

His eyes widened slightly, then he flickered his ears in amusement. "Ah, you speak better than I had expected. Do you know that when I was told that a monster had saved the life of Tahr ai Shirai, I had those responsible for the failure executed? Huh. . . ." He shook his head.

"I can believe that," Fres's muttered.

He ignored her. "Your name is K'hy? Yes? Good. You see, I endeavoured to find out as much about you as I possible could when I learned that indeed you did exist. You would be most interested to find out how that came about." He cocked his head to one side; inviting me to ask.

"How did you learn?" I asked through clenched teeth.

"There was a commotion on the docks one day. A fishing boat had come in with a strange catch; a yellow boat literally made from air, and an incredible creature," he said, then grinned at me. "Unfortunately we did not realise how ill the creature was. We took his reluctance to cooperate as belligerence; He died in our. . . care."

I felt numb, hollow. I gritted my teeth and said nothing. A man. Another human, and he had killed him. That HURT!

"Tell me," he continued. "Why do you fight for the Eastern Realm? I can offer you great power, wealth, whatever you wish."

It was my turn to laugh; grimly. "What I want, you cannot possibly offer."

"You wish to return home?"

"You have done your homework." First Fres's and now him. Was there a book out about me or something?

He tipped his head quizically but didn't ask, instead said, "Why do you oppose me? This war is really none of you business you know. It is a Sathe

affair, Outsider."

"No," I shook my head. "You made it my business. It has been my business since I came here and witnessed murder. It has been my business since you had me drugged and kidnapped, beaten and tortured. You would not leave me be. I had to take sides."

He wrinkled his muzzle, the silver fur rippling and the thin black lips drawing back in a grin, "But if you are killed here, then what will become of your female?"

That jolted me again. "If something happens to either of us, you will be the one to regret it."

He looked amused. "I doubt that you have that kind of power."

"You have no real idea of what powers I have," I grinned deliberately. "I have made sure that should we fail here, the Eastern Realm will be even more powerful."

He smiled lazily. "If indeed you do have such powers, why do you not use them against us?"

"Perhaps it is because I have a . . . conscience. Should I become responsible for the death of not just these thousands, but untold millions in the future, I would be no better than you."

"Ah, very noble," he grinned. "Yet you would happily decimate our brave troops with your weapons."

"Not happily," I replied. "Never happily. But I would rather kill those I consider my enemies than have my friends killed."

"You would consider THESE your friends?"

I looked at the Eastern Sathe lined up behind me, then turned back. "Yes."

"What do you see in them that is lacking in us?"

"Do you really want a list?"

That got him. His jaw tightened and ears trembled; looked like he wasn't used to people talking back. "Fres's," he hissed to the Clan Lord. "There is another path that you may take, one that should be more appealing to you. I offer you the chance to end this war here and now."

"Look around you, look at the death. You can also see that your town really has no chance. You are their Clan Lord. It is your duty and your honour to protect them, to let them live. You can still do this."

I could see the truck coming.

Fres's bit: "How?"

"Simply give this . . . this abomination into my hands."

It wasn't such a surprise but my heart lurched then began a staccato dance against my breastbone.

The Gulf Lord continued without so much as a blink: "I swear - as I am willing to before an assembly of Clan Lords of all realms - that all our forces will return to the Borderland River and the southern provinces will be acknowledged as belonging to the Eastern Realm."

"Think of it Hystf ai Fres's. You could end this fighting simply by handing the outsider into our care."

It was bait well chosen and Fres's nibbled like a trout after a dry-fly. It was me or her Clan. I looked at her sitting as though frozen on her tooled leather saddle. It was her decision.

I knew, as I had never been certain about anything, what it would be like if Hraasa got me. I don't claim to have much of a threshold for pain and Hraasa had had a human. There had been time for him to have his little games. He would know how I worked, what made me tick. . . what made me scream.

And there were their drugs.

Perhaps deep down that scared me more.

Perhaps I could beat torture, but chemicals. . . I didn't know.

Damnation, they're chemists before their time. Their thamil would knock me cold with just a whiff. They had other concoctions to paralyse, neuromuscular paralytics that would disconnect the brain from the muscles, opiates that would leave me babbling at clouds for hours afterwards. They had

other substances - more refined and effective - that they used on each other. If they had anything like thiopentone sodium. . .

I couldn't fight something that ate away from the inside, leaving me malleable like a piece of wet clay on the potter's wheel.

Eventually Hraasa would have what he wanted from me, then the Gulf Realm would be back, swarming over the Eastern Realm like ugly on a bulldog. And Hystf ai Fres's knew this.

And she hesitated.

"Think," Hraasa goaded, his voice becoming silky-smooth. "The chance to finish this dying lies in your claws; simply reach out and grasp the opportunity!"

The Clan Lord of Weather Rock clenched her right hand, then flexed it and gazed with slitted eyes at the tiny opalescent scythes that curved from her fingertips as Hraasa's words washed over her.

"Why do you hesitate, Fres's? Do you place this creature above the safety Clan, above the lives of your cubs? What Outsider can mean so much? You heard it say it has the ability to destroy us, yet it chooses not to. Instead it plays games with your people, watching them die to save its own miserable hide." Hraasa smiled slowly, smugly. "I leave the decision in your hands. Decide, Fres's."

She made her decision.

"Hraasa, you can shove it."

Hraasa's ears shot up. He must've been as surprised as I was. Where the hell had she learned that? She must have overheard something I said.

"That means no?" Hraasa asked.

"Exactly."

"Then I think this meeting is at an end," the Gulf Commander said, nodding slightly in a token gesture of respect. Fres's returned the hollow honour and reined her llama about. I turned to follow but was stalled by the Gulf Lord's soft voice, for my ears only:

"Pause, K'hy!"

I stopped and turned to him.

"A gift from your fellow creature." He pulled a small bundle out of a pouch at his belt and threw it. The bundle unrolled in the air, dumping the contents on the ground.

A severed hand lay there in the bleached dust; a human hand.

I just stared at it, not quite believing what I was seeing.

"I thought that you would like to know his hide is still intact. . . excepting that piece of course," Hraasa continued. "A shame the skin is so delicate though; it makes stuffing that much harder. At this time his hide is the centrepiece of attraction in the great hall, the rest of him. . . really, he was delicious."

The words took a second to sink in, then I slowly raised my head to stare at him, the shock turning to anger.

"You. . . did not."

He grinned, then ran his tongue around his lips.

"You. . . you Motherfucker!" The one step I took toward him was all the provocation he needed.

One smooth move and the Gulf commander was holding a stubby .38 revolver. For a split second I was staring down a muzzle that to me seemed the size of a cannon's bore, the savage grin of Hraasa behind it.

Even as I tried to dodge thunder exploded in my face, burning pain and another hammer and dirt and dust was choking me while I gasped for a breath that wouldn't come. Another hammer. . .

"Get him inside! No, gently! Gently! . . . over there! Where is that festering physician! Hurry!"

Hands caught at me and every muscle in my chest tried to tear itself

apart. I was aware of being carried, then the heat of the sun was cut off, as was the noise.

"How is he? I had no idea that. . . "

"You! Because of you this happened! Look at him! His death is something you are going to have to explain to the Shirai!"

The voice sounded familiar, and it was annoying me.

My face burned, my mouth was swollen, sore, and filled with a metallic taste. Every shallow breath hurt.

"Fool! You had your orders not to let him risk himself, but what do you do? You go and. . . "

There were other sounds in the distance: The muted sibilants of Sathe shouting, the bleat of llamas, the distant bustle of the town. That voice was familiar:

"Rhasct," I croaked. "Shut up."

She did - abruptly - then hands touching my cheeks. "K'hy?"

I opened my eyes, staring straight into her astonished face. Chirthi looked just as surprised.

"K'hy?" R'R'Rhasct wiped fingers down my chin: they came away red. "Bring water!" she snapped at a guard who disappeared out the door. I was lying on a stretcher in a small room with solid stone walls, cool air. The gatehouse?

I moved my arm and moaned out loud. Damnation! This is what a punching bag must feel like. My entire front felt like a single bruise, my head throbbed in time with the lights in front of my eyes and there was an overwhelming taste of copper in my mouth.

Alive.

I felt fantastic.

"Stay still," R'R'Rhasct urged, pushing me back. "Do not move."

"Bullshit!" I mumbled again. My nose. . . shit, it felt like it was broken. That explained the blood. With a groan I sat up and started fumbling with my cloak. "Oh, shit! Chirthi, help me with this."

He started to, but R'R'Rhasct slapped a hand into his chest, stopping him, "You have done quite enough. . . "

"Rhasct!" I said softly and she shut up. She watched as Chirthi helped me remove the cloak and shirt; he had to cut them away as I couldn't lift my arms without pain. Two Sathe - one a guard and the other a physician - hovered in the doorway.

"He knew what he was doing," Chirthi said.

The Kevlar and glass-fibre flak vest had stopped the .38 softnosed rounds, spreading the shock of their impact out across my entire torso. The bullets hadn't penetrated, but my entire chest was burned and bruised. Better than dead any day. Chirthi fumbled with the straps and fastenings and I grimaced in pain when he lifted it off over my head. Two deformed bullets fell from the tattered glass fibres to rattle on the floor.

R'R'Rhasct's ears went flat when she saw my torso: old scar tissue, black and blue, but unpunctured.

Chirthi snarled at her, then threw the flak vest aside and stalked out, pushing past the physician on his way through the door. The doctor glanced after the retreating soldier, then said, "I was told there was an emergency."

R'R'Rhasct spat, then snapped, "Yes. Him."

"That?!"

"Him," she snarled. "Check him. See if there is much damage. And K'hy," she levelled a finger at me, "one word of complaint, we have ten guards in here to hold you down. Understand?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it again.

"Good." She slapped the physician on the shoulder. "He is all yours."

I don't think the doc even really knew what he was looking at. He grimaced at the scars covering me and gingerly began his examination, hissing, exclaiming to himself, looking up at Rhasct in surprise. "Is he supposed to have twelve ribs here?"

"Yes," I muttered. " Shit! Ouch! Careful."

"Sorry," he said, then reared back in shock.

"Yes," Rhasct sighed, "he talks. Keep working."

He did so. I forced myself to lie back and capitulate to his poking and prodding. Ribs flexed and nerves screamed their protests under his pads. A rib sprained or cracked. Nothing broken, so the physician said.

I'd never dreamed that Hraasa may actually have a gun!

The skin on my abdomen was starved by contusions, rapidly turning black and blue, the muscles knotting and cramping painfully. "See, Rhasct? Nothing wrong with me." I tried to stand, gasped and went light-headed with pain, and sat back down on the edge of the bed, hugging myself. My nose started bleeding again.

"I hear you are going to live." Fres's was standing in the doorway.

"High one. . ." Rhasct started to speak.

"Out," Fres's jerked her hand, indicating R'R'Rhasct and the doctor. They left. She closed the door behind them.

"High one," I tried to stand again, to bow. . .

"Do not even try it," she pushed me down again. "You look terrible. . . Saaa! Your nose."

"Nothing serious." I dabbed at the blood on my upper lip.

She hissed again. "Shave you! Perhaps I should have gifted you to the Gulf Realm, K'hy. That was an incredibly stupid thing to do. If Hraasa had known that you lived we would not have been able to stop him taking you. You would not have woken in Weather Rock."

"Yeah," I said dryly. "That would have come as a bit of a surprise."

She fleered lips away from needle teeth. "It is no joking matter. I saw you when Hraasa offered those terms; you were terrified! You know as well as I what would happen if they hooked their claws in you."

I winced slightly. Did she have to use that metaphor? "Then why did you take so long to turn him down?" I asked.

She looked guilty, then confessed, "It was a . . . tempting offer. Tell me, would it be so bad for the Gulf realm to have you?"

I started to say something, stopped, tried to put it another way and couldn't, remembering the pain of claws, the hissing of Sathe voices, the hand falling in the dirt and a mental picture of a human figure, motionless, gazing out across a smoke-filled room, aswarm with shadowy cat-like figures, the fireflies of torches reflected from cold glass eyes. . .

"K'hy?"

A lionesses face was staring into mine, her breath hot and rank. My muscles were still trembling but my voice unnaturally calm, "High One, should they take me, kill me. Please."

From high on the walls of the keep I watched yet another assault on Weather Rock being beaten back. Someone in the Gulf camp had been using his grey matter. They had advanced behind shields this time.

There had been a lull in the fighting, then the Gulf forces advanced from two sides, sheltering behind two metre high shields made from heavy half-rounds that needed several Sathe to move them. They managed to absorb the crossbow fire. The catapults could bowl them over like ninepins, but they were too slow, too unwieldy. It was the guns that stopped them. Even a round from an M-16 went straight through, and the M-60s chopped the shields to toothpicks and tore into the masses ranks behind. I guess they were screaming, but with the distance and roaring of gunfire, I couldn't hear anything. Even so, a small group of them actually managed to make it on to the walls, where they quickly disappeared under the blades and flamethrowers of the defenders.

Black shafts of smoke drifted up from the battlefield. Seen from my angle the fires that caused them were hidden behind the city walls. Surviving Gulf warriors - those who were left - fled back to their respective hosts.

There were not many of them.

My chest ached as I limped down the narrow stairs, stepping aside to let the occasional surprised warrior past. The halls of the keep were large and airy, with polished stone floors and huge lattice windows. Tapestries, paintings, and glass sculptures decorated the hallways and chambers.

I jumped as I almost collided with a guard coming around a corner, his arm and sky-blue armour sodden and dripping blood onto the marble flooring. He gazed at me with tired eyes and limped off down the corridor. I stared after him and felt guilty.

The barracks were empty when I got back; the beds lying empty and shafts of sunlight streaming in through the dusty windows. A panicked mouse scuttled across the floor and vanished into a hole between two ill-fitting planks in the floor. I rubbed a clear spot in the grime coating the small window overlooking the street and watched as a precious few Sathe went about their business.

Subdued groups of cubs wandered about, many of them had probably had their homes burnt on that night a year. . . No, only a couple of weeks ago. Wagons clattered by, taking weapons and supplies to the walls; bringing the wounded and the dead back across the river. Work had been started on a barricade on the bridge, but nobody held many illusions about being able to hold the Gulf Realm with that.

Despite the drawbacks it could cause to the Eastern forces, it had already been decided to destroy the bridge rather than let it fall into enemy hands. That would only delay them for the few days it would take them to build another bridge or ford, but it was better than nothing.

The wooden stairs creaked as six of the Greens wearily stalked into the room. They chattered quietly as they took off their jackets and bulkier pieces of equipment and left them strewn about on their pallets. Going off for food, they said. Perhaps sex as well. Alright, food I could believe, but if they had the energy to get it up after their extended shifts they had more stamina than I gave them credit for. I wished them luck and declined an invitation to tag along, warning them to have their pants on if the alarm gongs sounded. They laughed, slung their weapons over their shoulders and left, jokingly remarking that that may be the last chance they would have to enjoy themselves.

Maybe they're right.

But God only knew where they got the energy.

I stood at the dusty window, watching the traffic down on the street. God, sleep was something I needed, but there was so much to think over, so many things to do. How long would the ammo last? What if the weather didn't hold and we couldn't fly the balloon, where would they attack? Could we hold out? Would I die here?

Outside, I saw R'R'Rhasct cross the street, walking slowly toward the barracks. She paused and looked back the way she had come - toward the walls - then entered the building. A few moments later she trudged up the stairs and went straight to her pallet where she dropped her rifle and rubbed her fawn mane with her hands, raking her claws through the tangles. Tired, worn, and upset.

"Something wrong?"

R'R'Rhasct whipped around, then relaxed. "Oh, sir. I did not notice you."

"That is a first," I smiled.

Still watching me, she sat down on her mattress. "Sir. . .K'hy, may I talk with you?"

"Sure," I went over to sit on the pallet opposite her. "What is up?"

"What is. . .?" she began.

"I meant what is happening."

"Oh," she rubbed at her muzzle, then it twitched into a half-hearted snarl. "We fight against impossible odds and. . . My Ancestors! Why are males like that? I was wrong! I admit that freely. Why does he hold that

against me?!" She suddenly turned away from me and curled up, trembling violently.

"Hey!" I reached out and cautiously touched her bowed shoulder; surprised and puzzled. "This is Chirthi you are talking about?"

"Of course. Who did you think. . ." she broke off into an agitated chattering, her jaw jerking.

"Hey, Calm down," I touched her mane, stroked it. "Please, Rhasct, what are you talking about?"

Still curled in on herself she muttered, "I asked him. . . and he refused."

"What did you ask him?"

The trembling resumed. "To be my mate of course, what else?"

That threw me. I flinched back, then carefully asked, "Rhasct, I am not so sure I can help you with this. Would it not be better to talk about this with another Sathe?"

She hugged tighter in upon herself and hissed, long and slowly, like a tyre being deflated. "Sir. . . K'hy. . . you are different. Male, yet not male. And you know so many things. I can trust you," she forced a smile then and I touched her furry ears.

"Thank you, I think." I smiled uncertainly, pleased but also bewildered. Why did she come to me like this? I was no ancient, white-bearded philosopher; able to hand out profound advice on call, but maybe I could help. . .

"K'hy, why did he say no?" she mewed piteously. "What is wrong with him?"

"You hurt him, Rhasct."

"What? I never harmed him! I never would!"

"I am afraid you did," I glumly observed. "You did call him a fool. . .

"

"I was afraid for you!" R'R'Rhasct protested.

"And angry at him," I pointed out. She began to tuck her head under again. "Rhasct, come on!" I implored. "Please do not do that! It is not all that bad. Give him a bit of time, apologise, explain, talk to him for Christ' sake! He will understand, just give him time."

"We do not have time," she whispered.

For that I had no reply. Again I touched the luxuriant fur of her mane; so soft. "How old are you?" I asked.

"Fifteen years."

So young! God, a soldier at the age of fifteen. Perhaps be killed in battle at the age of fifteen.

She was still trembling as I touched the bunched muscles around her shoulder blades, then her neck, started rubbing them. . .

She started in surprise. "What are you doing?"

"It is to help you calm down," I told her as I kept kneading her muscles. I felt her flex inquisitively under my fingertips, then, one muscle after another, the tension begin to drain away. The young female. . . woman. . . slowly straightened out, rumbling slightly, until she was sprawled out on her stomach.

"Feeling better?"

"That is. . . wonderful," she murmured drowsily. "Can you not go lower?" I flushed: "That is not for me, Rhasct."

She gave a small snarl of mock protest but didn't protest again as I kept my hands up out of those dangerous areas.

"How long have you known Chirthi?" I inquired carefully.

Her voice was steady this time. "Ahhhh, since I enlisted," she said. "We were in basic training together, then assigned to the same garrison-house in Mainport. That was. . . ah, two years now."

"Two years. . . You took your time getting serious about your relationship," I said. "There must have been better times to ask him."

"Uh. . . Yes," she shuddered under my hands. "We have copulated a couple

of times. It was some of the best I remember. I should have asked then, but it was not serious. I always thought that there would be a better time. Now it seems, perhaps not."

"It is not impossible," I somehow managed to sound assuring. "The Gulf forces are getting nowhere fast. We just have to hold them back until reinforcements arrive."

"And when will that be?" she hissed. "Perhaps not until after the Gulf realm have overrun the walls."

It was my turn to shudder. Past run-ins with Gulf forces were still black scars across my memories.

"Saaa!" R'R'Rhasct hissed. "Not so hard!"

"Sorry." I eased off.

"Where did you learn to do this?"

"A female of my kind, she taught me."

"Back at Mainport, that one?" the Sathe rumbled.

"No, not her. Years ago. I was still going through school."

"She must have taught you well."

I chuckled. "I am almost less than an amateur. There are those who do this professionally. I would not try and compare my skills to theirs'. Also your. . . bodies are different."

"And fur must be different from bare flesh," she hissed, then turned her head and reached up to touch my hand where it was rubbing her shoulder. "Your skin is so thin. What does it feel like to have no fur? Cold?"

"Sometimes," I admitted. "Very cold sometimes. But I feel more than you do: the wind, sun, rain. . . and I do not have to worry about fleas so much."

Her ears flagged amusement before she settled down and was quiet. I let my hands move in their own patterns. Why was I doing this for her? I was supposed to be her superior, and here I was giving her a rub-down! Also there was the little matter of the fact that she'd drugged me, played nursemaid. I know it was under Tahr's orders, but how was I supposed to get anything done if she kept deciding it was too dangerous?

Well, despite all that, I still liked her; she and her seemingly stormy relationship with Chirthi. Give them both a little time. . . God and the Gulf willing. Chirthi was a little pissed with her at the moment, but they were both right for each other, they just needed to realise it.

Or was it right to encourage this? They were part of a team, and what we didn't need at this time was someone's personal feelings distracting them from their duty. If one was in trouble I didn't want the other doing something stupid and risking more lives.

Damnation! The Sathe army had no segregation of the sexes in its ranks. Males and females bunked in the same barracks. If a pair wanted to screw: fine. They went for it. They didn't worry about pregnancy: outside of their Times it was impossible for a female to get knocked up. Even during their Times it was a mixture of hard work and luck. Because the sexes were so evenly matched physically, a single male couldn't force a female, nor vice versa.

However, that was just a casual hump. I didn't know just what their pair bonding entails. I knew it was more relaxed than marriage, but not much more than that. Was it for life? Did they divorce? How would it affect their. . .

I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts I never noticed the floorboards creak behind me. A wordless snarl, claws grabbed my neck and sent me sprawling over the bed and onto the floor, rolling to scuttle away from whoever was attacking me.

Chirthi. Furious.

"Get away from her!" he almost howled and launched himself again as I tried to clamber to my feet. I scrambled backwards. "Chirthi! Hold it! Goddam it! I don't want to fight. . ."

He lashed out. Claws stung on my arm as I raised it to block. "Shit! Chirthi. . ."

"Chirthi. . . stop!" R'R'Rhasct caught his arm, drawing him up. "He was

not trying to harm me," she tried to explain. "It was not sex!"

Chirthi stopped but still glared at me, burning with something I had never seen in a Sathé before. This was a Sathé who knew me, knew how I fought, and he was armed with claws and teeth. I was scared and he could smell it, his nostrils twitching violently as he scented the air, my sweat. "Do you want to challenge me for her?" he growled.

"No!" I gasped, hands out before me. "Chirthi, I was not trying to do anything!"

He snarled at me - a rumbling, bass roar that froze my muscles - then turned to R'R'Rhasct, kneeling down beside her and laying his cheek against hers. "R'R'Rhasct, what you asked me earlier. . . I accept." He moved his head and gently bit her neck. R'R'Rhasct looked at me over his back, her eyes wide in surprise. Then her eyes closed and she nuzzled him in return.

I stared at the pair for a second, then made a break for the door.

The air on the keep's battlements was clear, the night sky glittering with stars while the fireflies that were the campfires of the Gulf camp seemed like harmless sparks on the distant horizon. The scratch on my arm had crusted over. I picked idly at the scab. I don't know how Chirthi found me up there, but I started in fright when a hand touched my shoulder.

"No, Sir, I will not do that again," Chirthi said, glancing at my cocked fist. "I am sorry about what happened today."

"I was not trying to hurt her," I said. "I was not trying to do anything with her. . ."

"Sir," he waved me to silence. "I know," he said. "R'R'Rhasct explained. I am sorry. . . I came in and saw you and I misunderstood."

"Why?" I couldn't understand this. "Do you think I would try to. . . steal her from you?!"

He looked at me, then twitched his ears in rueful laughter and moved back a couple of steps until all I could see of him was his silhouette against the grey nimbus surrounding the moon. "Your wording is strange. No, I think you would not, but another Sathé male might try. . . I am afraid I was thinking of you as a Sathé. There was that female in the Red Sails whom you had howling the walls down," I saw his ears flicker again, "then there was the reputation you have."

Reputation?!

"You do not know?!" he laughed incredulously as I shook my head. "That way you have with females. We have kept our mouths shut, I swear it, but it was all over the citadel how you had both the Marshal and the Shirai vying after your services. There have been suggestions going around the female quarters that you have a 'way' with sex. Quite a few have been curious about that." He leaned against a merlon and grinned when he said that.

"Oh, Christ on a crutch!" I grimaced and leaned my head against cool stones.

"What is wrong?"

I rubbed my hand across my face. "I never knew about that," I told him. "That is the last thing that I need."

"What is the matter with that?"

"Just say that I do not WANT females chasing after me," I muttered. Well, not Sathé females anyway.

"Do not want. . . !" Chirthi hissed incredulously, scratched industriously at his crotch. "You are beyond understanding, K'hy. . . but you know why I was worried about R'R'Rhasct?"

"Yeah, I understand," I replied. "She told me why she was sharp with you and I think that not all of the blame lies with her. I am sorry Chirthi, I should have told her about what we were going to do, about the armour I was wearing."

Chirthi cocked his head to one side. "How did you know he would do

that?"

"He is an asshole," I explained. "I was expecting something like that, but not the gun." I had an all too vivid recollection of that pistol's barrel.

"I heard what he was saying about that other. . . H'man they found," Chirthi said. "I am sorry." I heard him sigh and his ears, silhouetted against the sky, flicked and dipped. Then he looked directly at me: "How many have come here from your land?"

"I wish I knew," I shrugged.

I skidded around a corner, gasping out a curse as my shoulder slammed against a wall, staggering me.

The news from the balloon was not good: Gulf forces were amassing for another attack against the town and although the fields were strewn with their dead like wheat after harvesting, there were still thousands of them.

They were preparing themselves on two fronts, getting ready to assault sections of the walls weakened by previous attacks. When we put the data the Sathé aeronauts had compiled onto the maps of the area, there was one fact that was instantly obvious: "I think we're up Shit Creek!"

It was midday when they made their move.

There'd been reports from the North gate. The few guards who'd been posted there had seen Gulf troops out beyond the walls skulking about, watching the town.

I'd gone to check it out.

Now I was headed south again. As fast as my feet could move me.

My boots beat a tattoo against the flagstones on the bridge and the sounds of battle grew louder: the clashing of steel, the sound of battle cries and death screams. Like the sound of the sea it was; a continuous roaring, a riot of white noise mixed with clashing of metal.

I sprinted around the corner of a blackened and gutted house to find myself in the middle of the fighting around the gatehouse. A young Weather Rock soldier was being pushed back by the vicious onslaught of an obviously more experienced Gulf warrior. The black and red armoured warrior tried to turn as he heard something behind him and his jaws shut with a sharp CLOP when I hit him with an uppercut. He dropped his sword as the Eastern warrior ran him through, then left him to die noisily, scrabbling at the hole in his gut.

My rifle was on the wall, the south wall, and there were Gulf between us. The Gulf Warrior's sword felt insubstantial, like a toothpick. However, those toothpicks were lethal and a Sathé could wield one a hell of a lot better than I ever could. I threw the scimitar aside and cast around for something a bit more substantial. The only thing that immediately came to hand was an iron bar, about six feet long, rusty, but it had reach and heft.

The Gulf forces had broken through the wall to the east of the gate and every second that went by more of them clambered to the top of the wall. Militia reinforcements and Greens with grenades and automatic weapons were rushing to defend the breach and the fighting on the ramparts and on the ground below it was a small war unto itself; bloody and fierce.

A Gulf warrior finished off his opponent with a slash of his claws and turned to face me, his eyes burning with battle-lust. He was so far gone my appearance didn't faze him in the slightest. His scimitar struck sparks off my bar as he slashed and lunged and I parried for my life, blocking a stroke at my neck, dodging back, then swinging the bar like a baseball bat in a move S'sahr or Remae would've chewed me out for.

Hell, it worked.

He was good, but he couldn't block the raw power behind my blow; the bar punched right through his guard, clipping his head, stunning him. My boot came up into his stomach and he doubled over. A blow on the back of his head and he was sprawled at my feet, blood seeping into his mane.

Almost immediately I found myself facing another Gulf soldier with blood on her sword and fur. More cautious this one. She jabbed and I knocked the blade away. My return blow scraped her jaw, making her jump back. Blocking her again, I almost lost my fingers in the process. Again her sword came around and I kicked out at her wrist. She dodged that and fell back a step, looking surprised then wary.

As she sized me up, a Gulf Warrior behind her brought his blade around in a shimmering backhanded arc that caught his Eastern opponent by surprise, slashing across his forearm, cutting to the bone. With one arm out, the hapless soldier was quickly disarmed, then dispatched by a chop across his neck as he turned to run.

The Gulf warrior looked around then moved to aid the one attacking me. Shit! Two on one. . . that's not fair !

Fair or not, those two didn't look like they gave a damn. They spread out to give each other room to work and advanced slowly on me. I retreated before them, waving the bar before me, until I found I was backing into the ruins of a gutted house, rubble crunching under my boots. Maybe they'd step on a nail. . .

The one on my left attacked, her scimitar a flickering blur in the midday sun. I frantically spun the bar out and the sword spanged! away in a flurry of sparks. That was when the other one moved and I was barely able to bring the metal around to block his swing. I felt the jar go up my arm when metal met metal and his sword had a notch in it when he drew it away.

The two went back to circling me, their swords still describing slow patterns in the air before them, trying to distract me. I took another step backwards and found myself up against a crumbling wall. The two Sathe slowly spread their lips in vicious grins and their movements became more deliberate.

I licked my own parched lips and my hands were sweaty on the bar, I could feel iron flakes sticking to my palm. Suddenly things seemed to go into slow motion; the Sathe both moved, one aiming high and the other low. The bar in my hands spun wildly and the impacts struck sparks from the iron. Several more times they attacked with blinding speed and somehow I managed to turn or dodge the worst of their blows, but when they did drop back, I was gasping for air and bleeding from a minor gash on my leg and another across my shoulder. There was no way I was going to win this.

Frantically I looked around. I was in a cul-de-sac, the shell of a gutted building, with broken, sooty walls on either side hiding this particular little tussle from the Sathe on the fortifications. . .

My foot stumbled against something, a length of two by four. Clutching my bar in my right hand, I scooped the wood up with my left. . . just as the Sathe attacked again.

The female's sword flashed around on my left and I threw my left hand up, feeling splinters lance at my hand as the wood was torn from my grasp. In my other hand the metal bar rang and was knocked against my neck. I gripped it tightly with both white-knuckled hands.

The female cursed loudly, her sword stuck in the wood. In the second she spent trying to shake it loose, I spun the bar and landed a solid blow across the side of her face, another into her stomach, across the bridge of the muzzle, on the back of her head. . .

There was a faint look of puzzlement on her ruined face as she fell.

The male stepped aside as she collapsed. I shifted my grip on my weapon and parried as he feinted at me. His blade flickered around my guard like a live thing and caressed my arm. Blood welled, reluctantly at first, then flowing freely down my arm.

I winced and he plastered his ears flat against his head and grinned.

It was then I realised I really didn't have a chance. Only my reach and the strength in my blows were holding him back, but I was tiring. I clipped him a couple of times, he recovered too fast. It was only a matter of time, that time coming too soon when I stepped on something that rolled treacherously under my feet, taking other pieces of rubble with it. My feet

shot out from under me and my only defence flew out of my grasp and clattered loudly to the ground as I went over backwards.

With sweat running down my face I faced the Sathe and knew that I was going to die; everything but the Sathe went out of focus. I opened my mouth.

. . .

He gave a triumphant yowl and lunged, then his cry cut off and he sprawled across my body with a force that knocked the breath out of me, then lay in a twitching heap over my stomach. I just lay there for a second, then frantically shoved him off, scrambled away and crouched staring at the feathered shaft that protruded from the back of his neck then looked up at the Sathe who stood on a pile of rubble, still holding a spent crossbow, an M-16 slung over her shoulder, grenades at her belt.

"My Ancestors. . . You just cannot stay out of trouble can you?"

Then she rushed forward in concern as I doubled over and threw up.

The arrangement of copper tubes and the brass kettle hanging over the fire hissed and dripped. I winced and twitched as Fen bandaged my arm. "Hold still," he muttered as he tightened and tied it off. I flexed my hand; stiff and sore, but it still worked.

"Will I be able to play the mandolin when this comes off?" I asked.

"Of course," Fen said.

"Incredible! I have never been able to play it before," I said, straight faced. He looked uncertain, then laughed. Old joke, but new here. I grinned, then flexed my hand again, "Damn!"

R'R'Rhasct was sitting on a pallet nearby, staring at me.

"I guess I had better thank you," I said to her.

That was enough to set her off. Her ears flattened and she hissed, teeth bared. "What were you thinking!?" she exploded. "Attacking Gulf warriors without even armour or sword! Where was your own weapon?"

"Sitting on the other side of a couple-dozen Sathe who wanted to make sushi out of me!" I retorted, taken aback at the outburst.

"You are crazy!" Her eyes were wide.

"You must be the hundredth person to tell me that. Perhaps there is something in it." Some of the things that I had done recently would get me locked up in an asylum back home. I was doing what the Sathe were doing, almost imitating them, maybe I had gone further than I had realised in trying to be accepted. Would the old Kelly Davies have rushed into a burning building? Maybe. Would he have raced headlong to almost get himself killed?

I doubt it. But things have changed and I am one of them.

"I guess I owe you one," I said to R'R'Rhasct.

"One what?" she looked suspicious.

"Anything," I said. "You did save my life."

"That is not necessary," she said, but her mane fluffed up.

"I think that it is. I am rather attached to this life you know. I have got used to it and it fits me well."

She twitched her ears. "It is my job to protect you. You do not make it an easy one."

One of the Greens, Hraisc, had stopped a crossbow quarrel with his shoulder. He was in a lot of pain as the steel tip grated against bone, but getting the thing out had to wait until we could get him relatively clean and have a patch ready. The few physicians that Weather Rock had were working on the many other wounded but Chir had done stuff like this before - God only knows where - so the task of removing the quarrel fell to her.

Hraisc's teeth clenched on the solid lump of wood between his jaws and he spasmed as Chir worked the bolt. She paused in her work: "Sir, he's going to have to be held down."

"Oath," R'R'Rhasch muttered, then looked at me: "K'hy, do you think you could make your size useful?"

So I held his arms while R'R'Rhasct sat on his legs.

Hraisc was breathing heavily and his jaws quivered as Chir grasped the slippery quarrel with both hands, braced herself, and yanked. The sticky tearing of the quarrel coming out was accompanied by a crackling sound as Hraisc bit the wood clean through. Two pieces of tooth-mutilated wood fell from Hraisc's suddenly slack mouth to lie beside his head on the pallet.

The bloodstained shaft clattered to the floor as Chir moved to staunch the blood that pumped from the shoulder. The bandages were still steaming from their boiling. Until my makeshift still bore fruit - so to speak - we'd have to make do with heat.

The unconscious Sathe twitched as Chir tied the bandages in place. He was not the only one suffering. In the town outside there were thirty dead Sathe and over forty more wounded.

That left us with about two hundred trained soldiers and another three hundred possibly unreliable militia to hold against perhaps ten thousand experienced opponents. We had very little ammunition for the rifles left - about sixty rounds for each of the eleven remaining Greens. The defences outside the walls had been breached in two places, and then there were the ridiculously low walls themselves.

Through the windows horizon was starting to turn red and the sky to cirrus-streaked blood. I was drowsily tending the fire, watching almost pure alcohol plunking drop at a time into a small bowl, steady as a water clock.

"Is it working?" R'R'Rhasct knelt down beside me and blinked at the arrangement.

"Yes."

She gingerly sniffed the glass bowl then drew her head back quickly, wrinkling her muzzle. She sneezed once then looked at me. "It takes its time. That is supposed to be a medicine?" she said with suspicion. "It smells like it can peel paint."

"Uh-huh. You can use it for that too," I agreed. "Or you can drink it."

She stared at the miniature still and made a sound like 'ugh', then was quiet for a while before speaking. "That thing you were doing to my back the other night, would you be willing to do that again?" she asked hopefully.

"Would Chirthi object?"

"Go ahead, K'hy," a voice from behind us called out.

The firelight washed across her, waking gold ripples from her fur as she lay on her stomach before the hearth. A low rumbling sounding from deep within her throat as I rubbed her shoulders. Despite our situation she was lax, completely relaxed, almost boneless in fact. Occasionally she gave vent to a Sathe 'ouch' as I touched a sensitive area, then sank back again with a sigh. "You could make a living doing this," she murmured after a time.

"You serious?"

"Very. I would that you could teach this to me, but. . . ." the low rumble in her throat stopped. "K'hy, before the sun rises tomorrow, you leave."

"Oh. You. . . ." My hands froze when what she'd said clicked. "Say what?"

She twisted around so she could see me better. "Tomorrow you go," she said firmly, staunching any protest I tried to make. "You said that you owed me; now I am calling your debt."

She sure didn't wait around. I swallowed: "You are sure?"

"Absolutely."

"But. . . ."

"Your word."

I simply couldn't think of anything to say. Finally I just nodded, "And what will you do?"

"Before it is light there will be some troops taking the last of the cubs and as many wounded as possible out. You go with them and try to get them past the Gulf forces to the north."

"The rest of you. . . .?"

"The rest of us will stay and fight."

"And die."

Her muzzle wrinkled but she said nothing. The fire crackled away happily, highlights from the copper kettle gleaming in red, orange, and gold. "My Ancestors, Rhasct! There is nothing you can do now. Get everyone out of the town."

"No," she simply said. "We swore to protect the Realm and we swore to protect you. We will do both; We protect you by sending you back to Mainport; we protect the Realm by staying to fight."

I turned to the rest of the Greens, "You are all of the same mind?" They were.

"It would seem I have a mutiny on my hands," I sighed and looked at the glass bowl; it was almost full of a colourless liquid. I dashed a bit on a hearthstone and touched a glowing splint to it: an almost invisible blue flame sprang up. Good, the stuff was pure enough.

Hraisc was sleeping. He stirred and opened his eyes as I moved the bandages aside. "This will sting," I warned him, but couldn't be sure he understood me.

He whimpered when I poured raw alcohol over the wound in his shoulder, but that was all. I washed the red flesh out with boiled water and dashed a bit more alcohol over the hole then replaced the dirty bandages with freshly sterilised cloth. All I could do.

A hand touched my arm. "K'hy?" R'R'Rhasct was kneeling beside me. "You will go? You will not try any tricks?"

"Yeah," I said in English.

"What was that noise?"

"Yes," I reluctantly rephrased my answer. "I will go."

I didn't know how I felt about that. It was a chance to get out alive, but in doing so I'd be deserting my squad. Hell, I didn't want to die! But the Sathe soldiers seemed to have death wish; a loyalty to their Realm that went beyond all logical bounds. As if they didn't have any thoughts of the future. But I'd lived with them, I'd fought alongside them; I knew they had lives and dreams and hopes and fears. Why were they so willing to throw them away? To their minds it was something that was perfectly natural to do, to die protecting their territory. I couldn't compete with their single-minded devotion to duty.

The sun hadn't yet even appeared as a glow on the horizon but Weather Rock's northern gate was bustling with activity. Llamas bleated and complained, axles squealed, wheels rumbled. Milling Sathe stood aside to let the small caravan leave, silently watching after it.

I watched the dark shadows of the town walls falling back behind us. Above the walls hung a giant Chinese lantern, the technicolor envelope lit from within glowing softly. Seen against the dawn sky it was an impressively beautiful sight. I began to get an inkling of how the Gulf Sathe saw it, but it wouldn't stop them from storming the walls again, for what would probably be the last time. Perhaps the balloonists would be able to get away. At the least they would burn the balloon, as they would poison the wells and food supplies. Except for the swords of the soldiers, there was nothing else to hold the Gulf Sathe back.

Several boxes sat near my feet. In those boxes were the M-16s and machine guns.

"Take them with you," Chirthi had said. "It would be disaster for them to fall into Gulf hands. You will likely need them if you should run into any Gulf bandits. With our ammunition, I think you will be alright."

The convoy rattled and squeaked through the early dawn; the last convoy that would be leaving the town. I looked around at the cubs. The oldest were also staring back at their home, the youngest keening in distress, unable to understand what was happening.

Why wouldn't the Sathe leave?

The question persecuted me as we drew further and further away from the doomed Weather Rock. I hung my legs over the back of the wagon and put my head in my hands, rubbing my temples. They were cats - highly evolved cats - but cats nevertheless. They still had very strong feline instincts, as their mating habits showed. I guessed that their territorial instincts were just as strong, perhaps even linked in some way.

You may wonder how a race that is governed by its hormones could survive. Well, there are more than a few humans who're ruled by their glands: what about phobias? And as for being socially oriented, humans are perhaps more so than Sathe. We flock together in herds of millions, we have a strong family instinct, and also a strong instinct to propagate the species. We live in a perpetual, almost hard-wired distrust of each other. Every human claims to hold a wish for world peace and brotherly love, but when you get large groups of them together, there is almost always some kind of argument involved. About the only time when people get together to enjoy themselves without some kind of conflict would be at concerts.

Are we really so different? Are THEY really so different?

It was a moot subject. I pushed my thoughts into a corner of my mind and closed the door on the musty chambers of memory to draw out and ponder over later. Meantime there were other worries. Gulf Sathe to the north of Weather Rock. I knew they were there; somewhere. Where?

As the sky to the east brightened, sunlight cycling from red through orange to yellow-white dashing across distant altocumulus clouds, the town was ten clicks behind us. I kept looking back, but saw nothing but the wilderness around us. It was one of the adolescent cubs who grabbed my sleeve and pointed out the armed Sathe riders blocking the road in front of us.

I cursed and grabbed for the loaded M-60 at my feet, readying the weapon while the riders milled and reined their beasts toward us. Then I hesitated: The riders were wearing armour of grey with green embossing, colours that I had never seen before. . . who the hell were they?!

Then I saw the blue and silver armour of Eastern Realm troops amongst the grey riders.

"This is K'hy," Tahr said.

One wall of the blue pavilion was drawn aside, providing a vista of wind-stirred treetops surrounding the hill. Sun streamed in through small holes in the sides and roof of the tent, speckling the inhabitants with tiny spots of light, moving as the tent fabric moved in the breeze.

Two guards stood on duty just outside the entrance, hands resting on their sword pommels; one dressed in blue and silver, the other in grey and green.

Inside the tent, I was standing facing five Sathe. Tahr glittered in her gold and silver jewellery and blue breeks, two rings jingling in her ear. Remeae in her comparatively drab armour waited a respectful distance behind her. The male to whom Tahr was speaking stared at me, his heavy pelt of red-brown fur turning grey in places, but it gave him a distinguished air. He was only wearing jewellery: a single silver wristguard.

A male and a female - his marshal and advisor - both wearing their grey and green and an occasional piece of silver or gold decoration, stood behind him.

"Tahr ai Shirai, I had heard reports, but even seeing it in the fur, it is hard to believe," the male wondered, his eyes taking in the details of my face and uniform.

"You grow accustomed to him," Tahr responded airily.

"He talks?"

"He talks," Tahr gestured to me. "High one, this is K'hy, a H'man and a guest of our Realm. K'hy, I am honoured to introduce you to K'Soo ai Sthr't."

His first title, it sounded like a sneeze. "Commander of our Lake Trader allies."

I bowed, a little stiffly. "Sir, it is an honour."

K'Soo's eyes widened and his claws peeked out of his fingertips, but he bowed in return; also stiffly. "He sounds strange, but perfectly comprehensible," he said to Tahr then looked back at me. "I never believed. . . ." He made an obscure gesture with his hands and Tahr gave a subdued hiss of laughter.

I ground my teeth. What were they doing? Every second wasted was one Weather Rock could not afford. "Tahr! Please!"

The Sathe looked at me, K'Soo's ears flattened a bit and he glanced at Tahr. "Forgive him," she appealed. "There are some things he cannot understand." She turned to me and gestured at a corner of the pavilion strewn with colourful cushions. "Sit."

I did so, followed by the two Sathe. The others remained standing unobtrusively against the tent walls.

"Now, K'hy, what has happened?"

I took a deep breath and managed to compress the major events of the past couple of weeks into a few sentences. The Sathe listened to what I had to say, but not all of them took me at my word.

"It is impossible!" K'soo snorted. "You cannot seriously expect me to believe that?!"

Tahr touched his arm. "Sir, when you have known K'hy as long as I have, you will find out that he does something impossible or at least highly improbable almost every day."

For a second he stared at her as if she'd flipped her lid, then at me. "How could twelve Sathe and. . . him, stop the Gulf Forces dead?"

"He just told us," Tahr said, deadpan.

He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut again and growled. "All right. The fastest scouts can be there within two hours." He flowed to his feet and swept from the tent, his two lieutenants in tow.

Tahr turned to her Marshal. "Remae, I want the First and Second scouts on their way already. Get the Shoso, R'sest, and Sireth clans ready for forced march. The others are to break camp and start after them as soon as possible."

Remae bowed, then was gone, the two guards at the door moving aside to let her pass.

Suddenly warm, furry arms were flung around my neck. "We got a single message from you, then nothing," Tahr rumbled against my chest. "I thought we were too late."

The guards at the entrance exchanged brief glances then turned their gaze outwards again.

Beneath the midday sun, the grass on the gentle hillside was swaying in the breeze, spreading like waves or ripples on water, two faint tracks of trampled stalks following us to the crest.

In the valley below, an army was on the move.

Columns of soldiers, like ants, were marching away from circular clusters of tents, pennants and flags emblazoned with garish clan devices fluttering in the breeze. The lines of troops, the wagons and carts, the mounted scouts, stretched off as far as I could see, until they were lost beneath the foliage of the trees to the north.

Rank upon rank of swordsathe, archers, engineers and messengers scurrying around between clusters of troops. Tents were being broken down and stowed away. Several squads were shifting wagons stacked with pikes. Hah, that brought on a twinge of pride. Now I knew pikes WOULD work. They were practical. Gulf tactics were to rush and overwhelm their opposition, their forces spreading out as the faster outpaced the rest. They didn't hit as a solid, cohesive unit; the proverbial irresistible force. But the Sathe pikes fully intended being the Immovable Object. With archers and regulars in support, they should be able to stand against any infantry charge.

In the valley below there was a disturbance, troops moving aside as over a hundred Sathes on llamas passed them at what on a llama passed for a canter. On their backs the riders wore bulky cylinders. Real firepower. I hoped they'd make it in time.

Tahr had flopped down in the long grass, her nostrils flaring as she tested the breeze, the distinct duskiness of sunbleached grass and airborne pollen. Then she sneezed and blinked up at me. I sank down beside her and watched the distant troops.

"You never did say why you left," she said.

"I did not have much choice. Rhasct. . . she had me by a promise I made. Anyway, I think that if I had not agreed to go that way, I would have woken to find myself drugged and chained in the back of a wagon." I looked at Tahr. "Why did you do it?"

"Their orders. . . is that what you mean?" She was suddenly interested in her hands, stubby fingers busy plaiting three strands of grass.

"You know it is."

"Perhaps I care about you." She threw the small braid aside and looked directly at me, "K'hy, you are a troublemaker. I do not know if you do it deliberately, but you always seem to be in the thick of something. I gave the other Greens explicit orders to make sure that nothing befalls you. But I never expected anything like this.

"All our intelligence told us their main forces were pushing up through the centre of the Realm," she moved her hands to illustrate her point. "If your messenger had not arrived, we would be marching to the west while the Gulf forces stepped neatly around us and tripped us from behind. They would hold the only river crossing for hundreds of kilometres."

"Maybe they do," I said, staring at the marching troops below. Clouds of dust were being raised by feet, hooves, and wheels. They were moving, but it was so fucking slow!

"We are trying," Tahr growled.

"Yeah, I know," I absently agreed, noticing her ear. I'd seen it before, but it hadn't registered. I reached over and brushed the fur in her ear. "Where did the new ring come from?"

"You finally noticed." She smiled and the two rings chimed delicately. "I am now mated to H'rrasch," she proudly stated.

That rocked me. I blinked stupidly. Pleasure at her good fortune? There was that, but also. . . disappointment? I never thought she would go so far as to take him as her mate; I'd kind of thought of him as my stunt-double, filling in where I couldn't. I kept staring, unable to think of anything to say.

Tahr cocked her head, giving me a funny look. "What?"

"Uh. . . I had hoped that you two would get along, but this I did not expect," I shook my head, then broke into a grin, "I think that congratulations are in order, Tahr."

She laughed and rolled on her back in the sunlight. "I thank you."

"Where is H'rrasch?"

"Still at mainport." She swiped at a bug and her jaw set, "I will not lose another."

It was simple enough. She'd lost too many already: old friends, her father, a lover murdered while she watched. There been too many deaths all round.

"You will not," I promised her and smiled: "I hope that you will both be very happy together."

"We will!" she hissed, and rolling onto her stomach, she linked her fingers, planted her elbows on the ground, and rested her head on her laced fingers. "K'hy, you are truly the most incredible thing that has ever happened to me."

Again I was lost for words and Tahr laughed again at my flustered expression.

Below and to our right, a group of blue and silver guards appeared from

amongst a group of tents, looked around, and doubletimed it our way.

"Huh!" Tahr snorted. "That is the problem with leadership: everyone is always following you."

I plucked a stem of grass and chewed on it while watching the soldiers running toward us.

R'R'Rhasct had changed out of her camouflage fatigues into a 'normal' flanged kilt and ribbed leather armour, as had the rest of the Greens; outfits better suited for swordplay. Fur still matted with dust and dirt and blood, reeking of smoke and blood, she stood to attention as Tahr and Remae swept into the room, then flinched when she saw me.

Tahr saw that. "It is all right. I ordered him to return with us," she told R'R'Rhasct. "He has told me that you tried to follow my orders, but as you know, he is a difficult thing to keep out of trouble."

I glared at R'R'Rhasct, then looked around at the other Greens and my heart sank: two missing. Wounded? Dead?

There wasn't time to find out. An orderly swung the ornate double doors at the far end of the room open and signalled us to enter. Tahr took point into Fres's's study, with Remae and I bringing up the rear. I caught a glimpse of R'R'Rhasct sagging in relief before the closing doors hid her from view.

The Clan Lord of Weather Rock was standing over at the window but she turned as the Shirai entered and returned to her desk. "High One, I thank you for coming." Shit, she looked exhausted. Her eyes were wide, her milky-white third eyelids were just visible, covering the corners of her green pupils, and her mane had been hastily raked back. "Please, sit," she gestured to us.

"Thank you," Tahr replied as she chose one of the chairs facing the desk. The Clan Lord sank down into the leather and carved wood monstrosity behind the desk. Remae and I quietly took the two chairs flanking Tahr. Damn Sathé furniture, still doesn't feel comfortable.

"Honoured Shirai," Fres's sounded as tired as she looked. "On the behalf of my Clan, I lay my arms at your feet and bare my throat for your claws. We shall follow your tail and may none stray from the path you lead."

The litany had been recited in a sing-song, in her eagerness to get it over and done with. I got the vague impression that she wasn't all that impressed with either Tahr or the formalities. With her town at stake, who could blame her?

I watched as Tahr touched her fingertips to Fres's's throat, just once, just enough to drag her claws lightly through fur. "Hystf Fres's. I return your arms to you. I stay my hand. I accept your submission. Now," she cocked her head as she regarded the Fres's Clan Lord, "I would know exactly what has happened here."

Fres's took a shuddering breath and began her tale. I listened as she described the days leading up to the Greens' arrival. They had heard tales and rumours of destruction in the south, but little was being done until the night when a quarter of the town was razed to the ground by the torches of the Gulf Realm. Tahr looked at me when she heard about the part I'd played that night, but she said nothing.

For over an hour Fres's went on, answering questions and reeling off figures and facts that meant little to me. Even though I thought that I was fluent in Sathé, her steady talking and frequent references to people, places, and politics that meant nothing to me often left me behind. There were still a lot of words I didn't know.

". . . it was this morning when I ordered that the cubs remaining in the town evacuated. It was only a couple of hours later. We had scarcely three hundred warriors on the walls when they attacked again." She took a deep breath and licked her thin black lips.

"They came as they had before, from two directions and we simply did not have the numbers to cover both approaches. They grew bolder when only crossbows were fired and they were on the walls almost immediately. It was like trying to hold the tide with your hands. . . We could not stop them.

"High One, if it had not been for your scouts and their flame weapons. . . We would have fallen. When your banners started to fly from the ramparts, they were routed. Still, it was not without a high cost." She opened a drawer beside in the desk and pulled out a bundle of thick, yellow papers. She dropped them on the desk and quickly put her hands on the desk, one resting on top of the other, but I had time enough to see how unsteady they were. "High One, this is a list of our casualties. The ones we know of."

Tahr silently picked up the bulky manuscript and turned to the first page. All the Sathes who had died protecting their home, immortalised and impersonalised on pieces of yellowing paper.

She was still holding the book and just staring at it when a scratch sounded at the door. At a gesture from Fres's, Remae was at the door, opening it on the steward waiting there.

"My apologies High Ones," he bowed. "The Gulf Commander is waiting beyond the south gate. He has called Challenge."

Tahr snarled softly and flexed the remaining fingers of her maimed left hand.

From the small room in the gatehouse I could hear the gates squeal as they swung wide. Through the arrow slit in the south wall a swathe of the road was visible, a group of three Gulf warriors waiting there with their llamas shifting nervously.

Off in the distance, the masses of the Gulf army watched.

The sound of hoofbeats in the tunnel under the gate. Six more Sathes appeared in my field of vision, riding towards the waiting delegation. Tahr was one of those riders and Hraasa had a gun.

My hands and armpits were damp and clammy with sweat. Beside me R'R'Rhasct's nostrils twitched as she caught scent-traces of my distress, but she said nothing.

The Eastern delegation met the Gulf riders. Terse bows were exchanged, then they talked. Whatever was said it was swallowed by the distance, but there were gestures: ears flattening, the twitch of a hand upon the pommel of a sword, movements stiffened by anger and hostility.

The sun had moved several degrees by the time they'd finished. As the two groups started to move away from each other, Hraasa called out and the Eastern delegates stopped, Tahr rearmost turning her mount to face him. The Gulf Commander said something that caused Tahr's ears to flatten.

She spat something back at him and reined about, galloping past the waiting Eastern Sathes and leading them back to the safety of the town walls.

The Gulf Warriors followed their leader back through the fields of death to their camps.

"Tahr, please! I am lost! What is going to happen?"

It was dark outside, and the small study in the keep was dimly lit by a single flickering candle. Tahr was honing her claws on a piece of wood while poring over reports scattered on her low desk. She looked up at me and twitched her ears in mild annoyance. "K'hy, at some times your ignorance can amaze even me."

I was on the floor, sitting on a brightly coloured cushion, my back against the wall. Besides the desk and chair, it was the only furniture in the room. Chagrined by her words, I hung my head, "I-am-sorry Tahr."

Those slitted emerald and gold eyes watched me for a second, then she

ran her fingers through her mane and gave a faint hiss of amusement; or was it exasperation? "Do not do that, K'hy. It makes you look like a half-drowned cub." She sighed and pushed the papers aside, stretching with a crackling of joints: "Very well. Hraasa knows that he cannot be sure of a victory. He knows how many of his troops will die if he continues with this conflict, so he has called a Challenge. It will be as it was at Mainport, at the Choosing. Two individuals will fight: tooth to tooth, claw to claw, to the death. The winner," She tilted her hands in a shrug, "The winner will survive. The winner's Realm will survive."

"The losing side will just. . . surrender?"

She looked pained. "The losing Clan will surrender, clans allied with them. . . it depends. Most will sway their alliances, others might continue to fight, others will grab for the opening, but they will lose. Without doubt they will lose."

"Then why bother with the armies?" I protested. "Why not just have the Challenge at the beginning and save all this bloodshed?"

Her claw tore a deep gouge in the piece of wood she held. "K'hy, it is an ancient prerogative of the Clan Lords. Fighting with armies always leaves some options: escape, retreat. . . This leaves nothing save complete domination for the victor and complete submission for the loser. If I recall correctly, the last time it was used was two hundred and twenty five years ago in the dispute between the Shirai and N'Fense clans; two rather insignificant clans."

"Shirai insignificant?!"

"Please, tell nobody I said that," she told me, then continued.

"After Syfee ai Shirai defeated his opponent, the N'Fense clan merged with the Shirai. His descendant became the first Shirai to stand above the Eastern Realm."

"'Stand above'? What does that mean?"

"Why. . . uh. . . it is a term used to show. . . dominance." Tahr's muzzle wrinkled as she tried to explain something she'd always taken for granted. "From long ago. A chief would force any challengers to lie on their backs, baring their throats and stomachs in submission. Do you understand?"

"Uh. . . Yes," I replied. "When you are called High One, does that mean the same thing?"

"These days it is just a term of respect, but yes, it does mean the same thing." Her claws were making scritch-scratch sounds on the bit of wood. "Ah, K'hy, you wander from the trail. . . you were asking about the Challenge."

"Yes. . . you said that two individuals would fight."

"I did," she agreed.

"Who?"

She looked at the stick in her hands, then deliberately set it down on the desk and came around to squat down beside me, her hands dangling between her knees. "K'hy, we will have the choice of selecting champions, or fighting claw to claw; him against me."

I'd grabbed her arm before she could move, making her gasp. "Champions! Tahr, I want to fight him. Dammit, I want to kill him!"

"K'hy."

"Look, I. . . "

"You are hurting me!"

I looked down and saw how deeply my fingers were pressing into her arm. She fell back when I let go, rubbing the spot and staring at me; the remaining claws on her left hand were poking out. Again I hung my head whilst my stomach sank, "I am sorry, Tahr."

Her pupils flared, then contracted and she laid her left hand upon my knee. Slowly, the claws flexed. "You will not fight. I do not know if Hraasa would fight personally. He may simply choose another champion to oppose you; and whoever Hraasa chooses, you can be certain that they will be good. I know that you can fight - in your own way - but could you have bested Thraest if he had used his claws and you had to fight naked?"

Remembering that fight, I shook my head. No. He would have taken me to pieces.

"I thought not. . . K'hy, your opponent would be just as good as Thraest, perhaps better. He would slice you to shreds at his leisure." To emphasize her point she jabbed her claws into my leg, making me wince.

"Perhaps more importantly there is also the fact that you are not Shirai, Eastern, or even Sathe," she continued. "If you did manage to win - and with your luck that is a possibility - Hraasa or other Gulf Lords would doubtless claim the Challenge forfeit. You would simply waste your time."

Defeated, I slumped back against the wall and realised what could happen. "Tahr, if Hraasa does win, what will happen to the Eastern Realm?"

She sighed, a slow hissing like the life was leaking out of her. "The Shirai clan will be taken into the Mharah Clan. Dissolved. The Realm would collapse. My defeat would be the defeat of the Shirai Clan. Shirai is the Realm. Without the Born Ruler, there is no cohesion, no Realm. Clans would fall apart: Some might continue to fight, some would lie down for the Gulf Realm, others might decide they are the ones to replace the Shirai clan. Lords would argue, clans would fight amongst themselves.

"Given time they would settle, a new Born Ruler would stand above the rest to bring the Clans together. There would be no time. The Lake Traders would return to their own lands and there would be nothing to stand before the Gulf Realm.

"The Lake Traders would return to their own lands. The Eastern Realm would be carved up among the Gulf Clans, any Lords who resist would be executed along with their kin. Few would choose to do so.

"It is traditional to destroy the symbol of a defeated Clan's, the heart of their strength. They would have the right to march into Mainport and destroy it until there is no trace of Eastern power left. Small towns and villages would have to turn to Gulf clans for protection against bandits, animals, and other Realms while any remaining Eastern warriors would be branded as outlaws and hunted to death.

"The Eastern Realm would be only a memory, and memories eventually fade."

A whole nation gone, just. . . gone. As Carthage was levelled by the Romans; when even the rubble of the city was ploughed level and sown with salt so nothing could grow there, so the Hraasa would do to the Eastern capital.

And what would happen to me? I was sure that Hraasa would not let me rest easy. . . and what about Maxine? Goddamn it, there was no way he was going to get to her! If I had to commit suicide by walking into his tent and gunning him down, I'd do it. . .

"What?" I looked up; Tahr had spoken.

"You have a problem," she repeated..

"No, it is nothing," I tried to shrug it off.

"You worry about what will happen to yourself and Mas?"

That startled me. "That transparent?"

"I have had time to learn to see through you, K'hy." Her ears danced and the rings chimed. "I have also given that some thought. If the worst does transpire, make all possible haste in returning to Mainport. Take Mas and flee. Go north, west. . . it does not matter, just leave this Realm."

"But. . ."

"Do not argue, just do it! K'hy, consider it my dying wish, alright?"

I started to say something, then swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Alright," I whispered.

"Your word?"

"My word."

"Good." She relaxed; satisfied. "Huh. . . Just stay out of sight and you will not have to worry about pursuit; they think that you are dead."

I blinked. "What?"

"Hraasa boasted to me how he had rid the world of the. . . Well, what

he said is not important," nor - I guessed - very flattering, "but the Gulf Realm believes that you are dead."

But surely I had been seen by Gulf Warriors since then! . . . Hadn't I?

"He seemed sure you were dead," Tahr assured me.

Ah me. If only the Sathe were superstitious, believed in ghosts or something, then maybe I could just jump out in front of Hraasa and yell "BOO!" and he would keel over. . .

While I'm at it, if only an aircraft carrier would happen by. Ifs are nice to dream about, but they aren't always very practical.

"K'hy?"

"Yeah?"

"You will go?" she beseeched me.

A small question, how could it hurt so much? I nodded minutely, "Yeah."

She reached out for my face and I felt a clawtip touch my cheek; it came away with a droplet of moisture hanging from it. The tear glittered as Tahr turned her hand, examining it as though it were a rare gem, then she stared at me.

"Good luck, Tahr," I choked.

She didn't say anything, she just hugged me. In return I drew her close, just holding her, feeling her muzzle press against my cheek, then a rough tongue rasp against my skin.

"Salt," she murmured almost to herself.

The shadows among the ruined buildings of Weather Rock were deep. The darkness and the piles and latticeworks of shattered masonry and timbers themselves sheltering me from wandering Sathe eyes. I wrapped the cloak tighter against the cool evening breeze that stirred the soot and the leaves of small plants starting to sprout amongst the debris.

In the space before the south gate of the town, inside the walls, a circle had been marked out on the ground; about five metres radius. It was deserted.

Far enough from the circle to escape scent and sound detection I crouched down in the shadows on a pile of rubble and leaned against a wall to wait.

A squirrel scampered into the circle. Start, stop, test the air, scamper onwards. It sat up in the circle and quickly preened itself, then suddenly bolted and disappeared over the town wall as though the obstacle wasn't there.

An even dozen red and black armoured warriors who appeared in the town gates. After all we'd been through to keep them on the other side of the walls, now they just walked in unopposed. Equipment creaked and jangled as the warriors crossed the court to form a crescent on one side of the circle. They stood like obsidian statues, even their ears motionless.

Blue and silver troops marched into view. Just as silently they took up positions facing the Gulf warriors, hands resting upon sword pommels.

It was so still that I found I was holding my breath. I let it out as silently as I could. Still it seemed as if they would hear me.

I wasn't supposed to be there. Except for these bodyguards, nobody was. They were the elite from both sides, impartial witnesses. By now the rest of the town would be deserted. The confusion as the populace left had been more than enough to cover my tracks as I slipped away, and now. . . I waited.

My field of view was limited to the circle, the soldiers flanking it, and the gateway beyond. The soldiers stiffened as a cloaked figure materialised from the darkness beneath the gatehouse and approached. From the other direction came another, the pair stalking toward each other from opposite sides of the circle.

Tahr and Hraasa.

They stepped within the boundary lines and slowly circled until Tahr was on the side nearest the Gulf soldiers and Hraasa the Eastern soldiers. Briefly they spoke; the soft words carried away from me by the breeze, then they stripped off their cloaks, throwing them aside. But for their fur they were both naked.

My heart fell when I saw them together. Not only was Hraasa taller than Tahr, but he was broader and must have outweighed her by fifteen kilos, and judging from the way he moved none of it was fat.

Tahr was worried as well. Her hands flexed; clenching and unclenching as she and her opponent exchanged stiff bows. When the claws came out and fangs were bared, I knew with a sick despair why Hraasa had declined a Challenge of champions.

There was a storm in the circle; the lightning strokes of claws slashed out and the thunder of snarls reverberated almost subsonically amongst the quiescent ruins. Tahr was fighting with every ounce of her speed and skill, and I could see it wasn't enough.

Dodging past Hraasa after the initial onslaught, Tahr fell back to the opposite side of the circle, panting heavily. The fur on her arms was starting to turn several shades darker as liquid seeped through it. Hraasa turned and advanced slowly upon her, and again Tahr darted past him, landing a raking blow across his ribs.

Looking surprised, Hraasa touched the mark and glanced at his hand, then quickly back at Tahr.

Tahr just hissed, jaws wide.

His ears flicking, Hraasa moved on his smaller opponent and again she tried to dart past him, but he moved, fast, and a blow from his hand snagged her shoulder. For a second he held her, then she twisted, slashing back at him and the skin and fur gave way and she ripped free.

Another rivulet started down her arm.

I watched helplessly. I'd been unable to get my hands upon my gun unnoticed, and if I tried to interfere the guards would doubtless cut me down and declare the contest forfeit to the Gulf Realm. Hraasa had only a few superficial scratches, but Tahr was being sliced and diced. . . slowly.

Tahr was faltering badly, unable to block many of Hraasa's strikes. For a second he paused as she shook her head, then went for her again. She dodged the first slashing left, and sidestepped a right, but then Hraasa was upon her, his jaws gaping, saliva glistening.

Their snarls were punctuated by cries of pain, too many of them Tahr's, and then they were rolling in the dust near the edge of the circle; grappling to keep claws and fangs at bay. Tahr was pinned and shaken like a dog, the back of her head impacting the ground with an audible thud.

Dark drops spattered on the ground and she stilled.

Hraasa climbed to his feet, his chest heaving and his eyes glued on Tahr's prostrate form. For a couple of seconds she just lay there, then her chest heaved and she rolled over onto her hands and knees, spitting blood. Hraasa gave her a second, then kicked her in the head: hard. Tahr was flipped over onto her back, spasming like a beached fish in a mixture of dust and her own blood, coating herself.

Her nemesis took a step back, falling into a combat stance, watching as she slowly recovered, sucked air, and hauled herself to her feet.

My God, after that pounding, she could barely stand!

I stared, horrified, unable to do anything. It must have been willpower alone keeping her on her feet, and Hraasa knew it.

He snarled at her, circling her slowly like a waiting shark and she turned, staggering wildly with her head rolling as she tried to focus on him. Deliberately he stepped away from her, moving close to edge of the circle. There, he lowered his arms and grinned at her, taunting. She almost took a step but her leg betrayed her and she went down, kneeling before Hraasa with the blood covering her head and shoulders glistening like oil.

In his triumph Hraasa threw his head back as if to howl.

Perhaps it was the moonlight on my skin, or just that he was at exactly the right angle, or the shadows shifting enough. Whatever it was, he saw me.

And froze solid, staring straight at me.

I don't know how she did it, nor where she found the strength. Her lunge was feeble, but enough; her claws hooked into his chest and ripped down, just scratching, but pushing him back a step. . .

. . . out of the circle.

He didn't even notice.

Ignoring Tahr moving weakly on the ground before him, he spun to his guards, and I was gone. As I ducked out of sight into the shadows of the ruined houses, I could hear him screaming orders to his bodyguard.

And the soldiers as they scrambled over the rubble scant metres from where I hid, trying to stop my teeth chattering: "What is he talking about? Did you see anything? There is nothing here!"

"I know what I saw! It was that. . . that thing!" Hraasa hissed, then rounded on his aide and snarled, "And do not dare say that my mind must have wandered!"

The other Sathe cringed. "Sir, nobody saw anything. The warriors found no trace of it. I myself saw you kill it, I saw it fall. I saw the holes in it. How could it possibly be here tonight?"

On the other side of the tumbled wall, I pressed my back against the masonry and tried to melt into the stones. Turning my head, I could just see through holes made by fallen bricks to where Hraasa in his grey and black cloak was snarling at a subordinate.

"How do you expect me to know what tricks that thing holds. . . perhaps it had armour."

There was a pause. "Sir, you have seen what that weapon can do; it ignores armour." There was another pause, even longer. "It did say it had powers. . ."

"Shut it!" Hraasa turned on the other, eyes blazing and his ears laid back tight against his skull. "I will hear nothing of talk about 'powers'. That. . . thing is as alive as you or I, and I swear that its revolting head will lie on the ground before me, no matter what I must do to get it!"

"Sir! You forfeited! The Lords are going to be. . ."

"There are still paths open to me," he snarled. "Some care only about the gold and silver in their hands; the affairs of Clans they could not care less about. They will remain loyal to whomever holds their payment and they are the path I shall take. Saaa! I swear: for all it has done to me, it is going to suffer. That creature's female will go first. . ."

My heart stopped. No! Oh Christ, no! He couldn't! He'd lost! It was supposed to be over. It was supposed to be done with. Feeling faint I leaned against fire-blackened brickwork, clenching my eyes shut. After everything. . . the bastard had threatened Maxine. He wasn't going to stop; I saw that then. He'd never stop. Wherever we went in the Realms, Hraasa's agents would dog our heels.

Their voices died away as Hraasa strode through the arch beneath the gatehouse, his retinue strung out behind him. After a while there came the sound of many hoofbeats, fading off into the distance.

As long as I lived he would hunt me. . . us.

I leaned my head back against the wall and looked up at the clouds pushing across in front of the moon. The stars were glimmering like things alive; laughing at me, a lunatic.

As long as I lived. . .

. . . or as long as he lived.

My fist slammed against the wall as I made my decision, then I was off: South.

Scratching at my door. I gritted my teeth and wrapped the sheets a little closer before answering. Remae's dark form was waiting outside. Sickly dawn light glowed through the small window at the end of the corridor. "God! Remae! How is she? What happened?"

"I knew that would be the first thing you would ask." She pushed passed me, closing the door and leaning against it. "The Shirai is. . . badly hurt."

"What? How badly?! REMAE. . . "

"Do not shout," the Marshal said as she gathered her thoughts. "She has lost a lot of blood, her collarbone and jaw have maybe been fractured, and she has been badly bruised, especially around her face. She sleeps now. The physicians cannot say. . . "

I sat down on the edge of the circular bed and hitched the sheets up, trying to hide the discomfort that caused. It wouldn't do to have them slip down. "She won?"

"Yes, she won, but I cannot fathom out why. She was more than three wholes dead while Hraasa was hardly scratched. Then. . . something happened: he seemed to freeze. She caught him unawares and pushed him out of the circle." She waved her hands in a shrug, "He was winning. He had her. I cannot understand why he would falter like that, can you?" Remae was suddenly watching me intently, sniffing.

"How should I know?" I hastily provided, trying to look innocent.

"Some have been saying he saw something."

"What?"

"I am not sure. Something that startled him enough to throw away the Challenge. Where were you last night, K'hy?"

My guts clenched. "Around. Worrying."

"Ah. I do not recall seeing you."

"Why, I did not see you either. What a coincidence."

"You were not anywhere near the Challenge?"

"You know nobody was supposed to be around there. . . Wait. You think I was. . . Damnation! If you want to know what Hraasa saw, why do you not just ask him?!"

She studied me, then carefully sniffed the air and her muzzle wrinkled, "An excellent suggestion. You do not know that Hraasa is dead?"

"Wha. . . What? When? How?!"

"There have been rumours from the Gulf camp that he was found dead early this morning. He died in the night. Perhaps honourable suicide after what happened last night?"

"That would sound reasonable." That look again: "The rumours also say that he was found dead in his bed, still warm; and but for the cuts Tahr had given him, there wasn't a scratch on his body, however his throat had been crushed. Completely crushed. I would wonder how he managed to do that to himself. . . In fact, I would wonder how anyone could manage to do it; and the guards saw and heard nothing.

"I have never heard of anything like it. . . And there was a purse of gold right beside the bed. It had not been touched. Who would pass by something like that?!" She paused, then grinned, "I suppose nobody would wish to take that furball's foul money."

"You do not sound like you will miss him."

Remae hissed, missing my sarcasm. "Miss that impotent bastard?! He was responsible for the destruction of my home! Miss him?. . . Huh!" she snorted in disgust at the thought.

I was quiet for a while. "Would I be able to see Tahr?"

"I thought you would also ask that," she sighed and scrubbed at her facial fur. "I do not know. . . I will tell you when she wakes. The physicians still are not sure. . . are you all right? You look. . . strange."

"Yes, I am fine. . . just worried." I smiled at her.

"I understand," she grimaced in an imitation human-style smile and then the door was swinging shut behind her.

I stood there, just staring at the carved wooden panels of the door. Shit, she suspected me. If she'd arrived just a few minutes earlier. . . Shaking my head I returned to the desk, sat down and opened the drawer where'd I'd swept the small bottle and bloodstained cloths when Remae had scratched at the door. Letting the sheets drop to the floor I laid my bare arm on the desk.

My arms, my shoulders, my chest were slashed and streaked with burning red lacerations where claws had flailed at me; first in disbelief, then in utter desperation.

The alcohol ached terribly as I rubbed the contents into the wounds, but there were limits to what it could wash away. I grimaced, salt water running through my beard, dripping and stinging as much as the alcohol.

Two more weeks on the road.

Two weeks of making sure I stayed covered up to avoid awkward questions about the new wounds that adorned my arms; the painful red ribbons wrapping themselves around and over old scars. Keeping them clean was hard; almost impossible. I'd had my tetanus jabs, but nevertheless my right arm started to stiffen up, the muscles around a slash on my biceps twitching.

Mercifully, that was all that happened. My muscles bunched up and my whole left arm ached abominably for a while, but it went no further than that.

The allied armies were moving north again, their numbers much depleted, but not by losses. About seventy percent of the Eastern forces had continued southwards, sweeping the Realm clean of any remaining pockets of Gulf troops. Twenty percent of the forces of the Lake Trader alliance had gone with them and they would march to the southern border between the Eastern Realm and the Gulf territories. They would draw Eastern Clans to them as they passed the remaining small southern settlements and towns of the occupied territories, further bolstering their numbers with conscripts and garrison troops.

I guessed that they wouldn't stop at the Borderline River.

The army of the Gulf Realm had collapsed like a house of cards. A couple of Clans tried to rally and fight, but. . .they never had a chance. Weather Rock was littered with surrendered weapons and armour, shocked and confused Gulf Troopers hundreds of kilometres from their homes just dropping them were they stood. Now the few hundred being escorted northward had nothing, not even clothing. The few light tunics were tattered and torn. They were fortunate that in the heat of summer clothing was not really a problem.

It was difficult for me to understand, to accept. They just. . . surrendered. Remae had reared back in disbelief when I asked what would happen if they reneged on their surrender.

"K'hy, they would not!"

It was gospel. Whether it was a single individual or a whole realm; if you surrendered, you surrendered. There were no ifs, whys, or buts.

The Gulf warriors were a formidable force no longer. Their Clans had been torn apart by their captors, their Clan crests burned and the ashes trampled into the dirt, then their left ears were lopped off to show they were POWs. Frightened and homeless Sathes were then taken into Eastern and Lake trader clans as slaves. No. . . I think serfs would be a better word. They would work on the land and in the holdings of their foster Clans. They would have very few rights: Being forbidden to possess weapons, living in conditions bordering upon poverty, but they were bound by oath to their Clan Lord, and in turn to the Realm itself.

Oh, in time they could gain status. Perhaps their grandchildren would become successful traders and landholders. Perhaps they would see the land their ancestors had left behind. Perhaps. . .

But in the meantime, these soldiers were soldiers no more. They could

try to forget about any families they might have, but I wondered if any of them would succeed.

For the lower clans and families, their loss in the conflict just meant a change of bosses, not too much of a change in the daily routines of life.

However the larger, older, and more influential clans would not alter their allegiances so readily. There would be fighting and probably Challenges and certainly more deaths. . . But the war was all but over.

Yes, the war was over. Those few words are easy enough to say, but always there were reminders. Reminders such as the twenty five wagons in the train behind us.

On bad nights I sometimes still have nightmares about what those wagons carried.

The army stopped for a day or so, taking on water and hunting food. You'd be amazed how much it took to feed this many hungry Sathes, and that food had to be hunted. It was during this break that Remae had come to me asking if I could help their physicians. I protested that I was no doctor, especially when it came to Sathes, but she persisted. Sathes were still dying from wounds that the physicians had no experience with.

I finally gave in to her requests. While we camped the wounded were tended to in shelters set up well away from the bustle of the central camp. You could hear the moans and cries and smell the stench from well outside the tents. Inside. . .

I burst out again, retching and gasping. "Shit! Oh, Jesus!"

If just the smells had been indescribable, the things I saw in those tents were in another reality, straight out of the worst slasher flick..

A favourite target of the sword is the gut. Large and soft, the blade flickers in and out, often without killing, but leaving the victim open for the killing blow. If that blow doesn't come, the agony before death would be maddening.

Sathes lay in that sweltering tent with dressings and bandages the only things holding their intestines in: Peritonitis would be inevitable for most of them. In others cases sword strokes had laid the flesh on arms bare to the bone - like whittling with limbs.

Sathes with glazed and dull eyes watched me. Many of them were Gulf. When the Eastern Realm had defeated them, so they had taken their wounded, and the Gulf Realm had many, many wounded. Teeth and bone jutted from torn skin and fur. The air was thick, hot and muggy, a heavy cloying smell floating in it. . . like a slaughterhouse on a hot day. My gorge did somersaults. I swallowed hard to keep my last meal down and pay attention as Remae introduced me to a harrassed, be-spattered Sathes medic.

They were trying, working to the best of their ability, but there just wasn't much they could do. The physicians and their assistants had patched the wounded as best they could and now all they could do was hope they'd heal.

Hope they'd heal.

Jesus. For those Sathes troopers, being patched up could mean anything from having a banage slapped on to a limb sawn off. After that it was even odds if they lived or died. Infection got some, shock and blood loss others. I don't know what the mortality rate was, but in one hour three died. To make matters worse, they were dealing with a new kind of wound: the entry holes were small, but they shattered bones, pulverised organs and left a hole the size of a tennis ball on the way out.

The physicians took me around the tents, a guided tour of things I hoped I'd be able to forget. I was shown cases with gunshot wounds who just weren't improving. Most were laid out with torso wounds. They'd been sutured or bandaged, but the Sathes physicians had to be shown the fragments of metal and splintered bone floating around the body cavity; the lethal slivers that could rupture vital organs. As time went on, I fought my queasiness and began fishing pieces out myself; Ape-descended fingertips were more nimble than Sathes pads burdened with their retractile claws.

There were a few other suggestions I could give, seeing about getting

some clean air in there. Tearing the flaps covering the entrances torn into vertical strips let fresh air in and kept flies out. Bandages and instruments and water needed sterilizing. Hands and what bedding they had needed washing. Sulfur could be used as an antiseptic, as could alcohol. Not much, I know, but it was all I had to offer.

Of course, there were a few not exactly ecstatic for my help.

I remember a female, her fur almost bronze colored. Her upper-right arm had been smashed by a bullet. The compound fracture had been hastily set in a crude splint; if left like that she would probably have had to lose the arm, an operation that would in all likelihood kill her.

Screaming imprecations and struggling wildly, she had to be held down by several guards while I cut the splint off her arm. She gasped once and passed out when the bones clicked into place. The scabbed-over wound where the bone had punctured the hide had to be cut open again and cleaned out. Probably just as well she wasn't conscious to feel that.

I did my best at helping, but it isn't easy when although you know that a limb could be saved, there is no way you can do it when there is no operating theatre, no skilled doctors, no blood transfusion or I.V. feeding facilities, no sterile instruments, no oxygen; just knives, saws, and bandages that were seldom clean. The Sathé did have drugs that could be used as crude anaesthetics in an emergency, but not nearly enough to go around. They were reserved for the very worst cases amongst the elite.

For the two days we camped I spent time working in that hell of shattered bodies. Two days of slaving over wounds I knew I could have caused. Every bullet that I pulled out was one that I could have fired and without a doubt, some of them were. But there were so many of them, and the simple soldiers weren't the only casualties of war.

A bloated fly buzzed drunkenly around in the stuffy heat of the covered wagon, repeatedly butting against the canvass roof.

"Tahr?"

The gaunt figure lying on the cushions moved her head and opened her eyes, trying to focus on me. Her fur was coming away in tufts, patches of bare skin showing around the bandages that covered the worst of her wounds. But for the bruising and swelling, her naked skin was paler and greyer than mine. "Hmmp? . . . Hello, K'hy."

"How are you feeling?"

Through the bandages, her ears twitched mirthlessly and she grimaced as the wagon lurched. "I have. . . been better."

That fight had nearly killed her. It still might.

She was covered with scratches and bruises, minor and serious. Her jaw was fractured, and I was no doctor but I knew concussion when I saw it. Half dead after the fight, she had insisted she was alright, then promptly collapsed.

She went downhill from there, losing weight at an alarming rate. We had to practically force water into her and food she couldn't handle at all. Consciousness came and went. Sometimes she was lucid; others she mumbled with glazed eyes.

I had watched over her while she slept, listening to her chirr in pain as the wagon bumped her around. . .

"Do you feel like eating?"

She gagged slightly. "No. . . "

Tufts of fur stuck to my hand when I stroked her mane.

Tahr saw. "If. . . goes on. . . I'll look like you," she tried to joke, but it fell flat. "You think I'll make it?"

"Course you will!"

She smiled slightly; ever so slightly. "Huh. . . don't hold your breath," she breathed. "Oh, K'hy. The strangest dreams. . . " Then the light

in her eyes faded and her muscles sagged.

"Tahr!" I grabbed for her wrist, then her neck. The pulse was there, but faint. For Christ's sake, this can't go on!

When we stopped for the evening, Remae was at the wagon, anxious for news.

"It is not good," I told her, then looked at Tahr. She twitched in her sleep. I took Remae outside: even unconscious ears can hear. "She is. . . She took a lot of punishment. I do not know how serious it is, but she needs time to recover. Not in THAT thing though, the ride is killing her. She needs somewhere quiet, clean, and still."

Remae hugged herself and laid her ears flat. "There is a town: Ice Blue. But it is off our path."

"It is the nearest?"

"Yes."

I rubbed the side of my head, hissing through my teeth. "Nothing for it then. How far?"

"Perhaps a day's ride."

And it was that and a bit more. It was the middle of the night when we arrived: a troop of soldiers and a single wagon riding into the small town of Ice Blue.

The inn was a simple, single-floor half-timber construction - not large - and the innkeeper was not happy about being roused out of his sleep in the small hours. He tried to take out his annoyance on Remae, haggling over the price with her, until I stepped into the room with Tahr slumped in my arms and a pair of armed guards at my side.

"Good sir." I reined in my temper with difficulty. "The price can be settled later. We require any available room immediately. And hurry; I am tired and hungry." I placed particular emphasis on the last word and grinned.

He didn't even notice the other Sathe, just gaped up at me, his ears going flat against his skull. "Saaa. . . of course, of course. Here, this way madam. Here. . . a fine room. . ." he prattled on as he scurried into a back hall. Remae threw me a warning look and followed. I trailed after. The innkeeper took great care to keep the Marshal between us as he led us to a room. "This is what you are wanting?"

I pushed past him into the small room and set Tahr down on the circular bed of animal furs as gently as possible. She stirred, as if she was waking, then slipped back under again.

"All right?" Remae asked me.

"It will do." I'd have preferred an emergency room in a proper hospital.

"Very well." She looked at Tahr and I saw the worry crawling across her face. "I will get the others settled down and arrange a guard. She will be as safe with you as with anyone."

"Guards!?" the innkeeper yelled. "Good lady, what is going on? You are not leaving THAT here? High One?. . ." He cast me a terrified look and dashed off after her.

The rickety door creaked shut by itself. Slumping down to the floor beside the bed, I watched over my friend.

Remae came in with the sun, bearing a tray laden with food: A loaf of meal and meat, some fruit, and water. "How is she?"

I glanced at Tahr, the skin showing through the patchy fuzz on her muzzle, her ribs like sticks under fabric. "She slept better last night," I said. "Quieter."

Remae handed me the tray and watched as I tore a hunk off the loaf and bit into it. "Did you have to say that to the innkeeper last night?"

"What?"

"About you being hungry. You scared him half to moult. He called the local guard and I had to answer some questions by the Clan Lord."

"Well," I shrugged, "I was hungry. . . I just didn't say what I ate."

"K'hy!" Remae warned.

"I am sorry," I said, feeling a deep ache when I looked at Tahr's emaciated figure. It'd been a typical male human reaction: When worried, act flippant. Be tough, be macho. I stared at the half-eaten bun in my hand then at Remae. "It worked out did it? That business with the Clan Lord I mean."

"Of course. We have their full cooperation," she looked a little surprised. "Who would refuse to help the Shirai?"

"Oh yeah, of course," I muttered as I took a bite out of the bun.

"We have been offered shelter in the town's Keep," Remae said, "but I am thinking that this inn will serve us well enough. And it is better that we do not move her too much."

Sounds from outside drifted into the room: Sathe, draft animals, wagons. The sounds of a town.

"K'hy," Remae asked, her head tipped to one side and a thoughtful expression on her face, "I wanted to ask you: are you happy about Tahr and H'rrasch?"

I stopped chewing for a second; the question had taken me unaware. I swallowed the mouthful. "Uh. . . What exactly do you mean? I am pleased that she found a mate with whom she is happy. They seemed to get on well enough. . . "

"Yes," she agreed, "They do. I just know you were close to her and was wondering if perhaps you might be slightly. . . ah. . . "

"Envious?" I chuckled. "You are right. I am. I envy him because I know that anything between Tahr and I would have been impossible. He is something that I could never replace. She is Sathe and I am human. East is east and west is west. It could never have worked."

Remae's head tilted to one side as she regarded the Shirai. "True. Still it is strange that one of her status would take a mate who is no more than just a common soldier."

I also looked at Tahr. "Does it really matter who it is as long as they are right for each other?"

"I suppose it does not. Still, it is uncommon," she sighed, then scratched her muzzle. "I wonder what caused them to meet in the first place. She was with you during her Time, then suddenly he appeared. . . "

Remae stopped as two and two fell into place with an almost audible click. She stared at me with emerald eyes: "You. . . you had a hand in this?"

I considered lying, just for a second. "Uh. . . sort of. I did not actually think it would go this far."

She was staring at me in open amusement. "My Ancestors, you seem to have a claw in the flesh of everyones' lives. I would wonder how else you have affected her life."

I laughed with her then. More than you know, Remae. More than you know.

I shook Tahr gently to try to wake her up. Her jaw quivered, then her eyes opened, her milky-white third eyelid half extruded. Propping her up gently I tried to persuade her to take a bit of soup. She mumbled incoherent protests, struggled weakly, her eyes closing again.

"No! Tahr, don't!" I dampened a cloth and dabbed at her face, wiping the crusting stuff around her eyes and nose, trying to keep her awake. "Tahr you must eat! Please! C'mon, just a sip. A little, please."

She tried to turn her head aside, but I held her and put the spout of the mug between her lips. She swallowed a few drops and I gently stroked her threadbare mane whilst waiting for the soup to settle on her empty stomach.

After a few minutes, I made her take a bit more, then a bit more, until the mug was half-empty and she raised her hand to clumsily paw it away.

"That was good, Tahr, very good," I whispered softly and patted her shoulder as she snored and muttered. It was the first sustenance she'd had in days.

It was a slow, anxious time patched with moments of alarm, but over the following days she continued to improve, starting to become more aware of her surroundings. Sometimes I think she recognised me in her lucid moments. I stayed in her room, eating my meals there and sleeping on a pallet on the floor beside her sickbed, only occasionally taking a brief walk outside when Remae insisted I stretch and get some air.

The reactions of the townspeople were the usual and still succeeded in making me remember what I was.

Tahr slept soundly and heavily, but often she would wake me in the middle of the night when her breathing became laboured and she cried out; sometimes in what sounded like pain, sometimes in something else. Occasionally I heard my name. For hours after she had settled down again I would lie awake and listen to her rasping snores. What was she dreaming?

The weather that day had been miserable. Low-lying grey clouds looking like lumps of half-molten lead roiled across the sky. Strong gusts of wind rattled the shutters in their frames, driving the rain against the slate roof with such vigour it sounded like hail.

That was the way it stayed all day. At night I leaned back in the darkness, dozing, listening to the sounds of the wind, the creaking of the building, and Tahr's measured breathing.

The steady rhythm sped up, became deeper. There was a small, puzzled-sounding mewl, then a silence, not even breathing:

"Tahr?" Fear clutched at me. "Tahr!"

"Who. . . ? K'hy?"

I groped after my jacket and fumbled the lighter out of the pocket, touching the flame to a lamp. The walls danced with red ochre light as the flame sputtered, spat, and caught. Tahr was flat on her back, her head turned to watch me. Her eyes glowed when the light struck them, the pupils contracting slightly. Threadbare patches in her fur and mane shone dull against the her tawny pelt. The swelling of her jaw had gone down but there were still bruises. Slowly, she blinked at me: "How long have you been there?"

"A while. You have not been at your best."

"Oh." She looked up to where the invisible rain was drumming a steady tattoo on the roof. Distant thunder rolled, long and low. "Where is this place?"

"A town called Ice Blue. We had to stop here. The travelling was not doing you any good."

She kept staring at the roof. "I remember. . . I have been sick some time."

Sick? Oh, Jesus, Tahr. "Over a week. How do you feel?"

A sigh, then her head lolled over. "Alive," she replied and raised a stick-thin arm, staring at it as if it wasn't part of her own body. "I look like an old rug."

"No. . ."

"Yes. Look at me. You could have kept the moths off me, K'hy." Then she smiled and those eyes flickered with a vibrancy I hadn't seen for too long. "We talk?"

After those days of lying there playing tag with the old Reaper, she suddenly wanted to chat. "You are sure? Your mouth looks sore. You do not want to rest?"

"No," she said calmly, meaning it.

"All right," I nodded slowly. "If you think you can manage it, Okay,

talk. Talk about what?"

"Huh," she looked up at the roof, gathering her thoughts. "What has happened? The armies? What are the Lake Traders doing? Hraasa? Has he been taken? Why did he forfeit like that?"

I tried to answer as best I could, telling her what I knew. What I didn't know Remae could fill in later. Tahr listened, staring up at the ceiling while her chest moved slowly. When I told her about Hraasa she stiffened then squinted at me. "Dead?"

"Yes."

"Suicide?"

"No. Remae said he was murdered." I filled her in on those details also, what Remae had told me, keeping it brief.

"Rot his honour," Tahr hissed when I was finished. "I wanted the privilege. No ideas who did it?"

"No. There was a lot of confusion that night. Please, are you sure you do not want to rest."

She raised her hand in a feeble swipe at me. "Ah! Do not mother me. You look too strange for that." There was a hesitation, a faint clicking sound audible over the rain: Tahr tapping her claws together, then she said, "K'hy. What are you going to do now? You and your female."

I blinked. "Why that?" Twenty Questions time and the first thing she asks about's my private life.

She squirmed, a pink tongue running over sharp teeth. "I. . . I had some strange dreams. You and Mas. . ." she searched for words, then surrendered. "I cannot explain. What are you going to do with her?"

"You make her sound like a possession. Not MY female, Tahr. She has a will of her own. I am not even sure what her opinion of me is."

Tahr out on the balcony watching Maxine and I arguing. . .

"You are afraid," Tahr said abruptly. "Our mating. You are afraid of what she thinks."

I sat up and crossed my legs, leaning back against the rough wooden planks of the wall while staring at the flickering lamp flame. Dammit, what had she been dreaming about in that delirium? She'd hit the nail on the head. That WAS what I was worried about! How could I ever expect Maxine to accept me after what I had done.

"I am sorry, my strange one."

I looked up, surprised. "What? Why?"

"I never realised how it would affect you. I had no idea that anyone could be upset by what we did." She lolled her head back, staring up at the rafters. "I was wrong to lead you on as I did. At first. . . I thought it a game."

"Tahr. . ." The floor creaked as I hauled myself to my feet and perched myself on the edge of the bed. Her fur was still soft under my hand. "Look, do not go around blaming yourself. I was as much a part of that as you were. I enjoyed it as much as you, and I do not regret it."

God, how to explain it to the human woman? I didn't know how Maxine thought of the Sathes. Did she regard them as just exotic animals, or did she see them as people in their own rights? Pray she'd learned to identify with that side of them. After all, what is wrong with love between two people?

I patted the fur beneath my hand. "I worry about what she thinks, but I may be worrying over nothing. I do not know. . . After all, who can understand the workings of the female mind?"

"You. . . !" Tahr gave a mock-hiss and swiped weakly at my arm; claws pulled. "How can YOU say that?" she sputtered in amusement.

"It is true! You are female and many times I cannot understand how your mind. . ."

Although still weak, the hand that grabbed my shoulder and pulled me over backwards onto the bed didn't feel like one belonging to someone who had been semi-comatose for over a week. The room seemed to lurch, and suddenly I was lying on my back staring up into brilliant emerald eyes. She was panting

after the exertion, her breath warm as blood and harsh enough to blister paint as she lightly nuzzled my bearded cheek and neck. "K'hy, why could you not have been Sathé?"

I touched her tufted ears and ran my fingers down into her mane. "Or you Human?"

It was soothing to just lie there; her fur warm, moving slightly with every breath she took. I sighed and relaxed, with her weight against me like a warm and heavy blanket, my arms around her, just holding her close, feeling her heart beating.

"Anyway, K'hy. What will you and Mas do now?" Tahr murmured after too short a time.

I twisted around and looked at her face. "The fighting is over?"

"I believe so."

"I have given it little thought, actually," I said, glancing at the window as a gust rattled the shutters. "I think that maybe it would be best if we went out on our own. Away from the Citadel, Mainport."

"What?" She started slightly in surprise. "K'hy, why?"

I swallowed and swirled the fur on her stomach between my thumb and forefinger. "You have a life to lead, and the two of us hanging around you may be a . . . burden."

"No! K'hy, you would never be a . . . "

"Yes, Tahr! I . . . we would be just that," I interjected. "You know things are never easy with us around. The way Sathé react to us . . . You could not live a normal life with us around and Maxine and I will have to learn to live without your help."

She drew back slightly. "Why? I can provide for you as long as . . . " she trailed off as she remembered. "Oh."

The difference in our lifespans. Although perhaps we couldn't expect to live as long as we would back home, barring accidents we could live to sixty, maybe seventy, maybe more.

And the average Sathé lifespan is what? Forty five?

"You cannot always be around; we will have to learn to fend for ourselves. Between us there must be some skills or knowledge we can scrape a living from."

"I think that you will manage. I was told that you built a flying device. Is that true?"

"We got lucky," I smiled.

"K'hy, just building and selling those devices alone would make you wealthy for life."

"Maybe, but any idiot can look at one of those and see how to build another."

"True, but they would not understand it. You built it. You know how and why it works and how to use it. Perhaps they could be used to go to the moon."

I laughed at that, and she growled, then pushed closer against me. Difficult to carry out a constructive conversation with a hot, soft body like that rubbing against your own. She also knew a few things about me . . . like where and how to touch to elicit a response.

"Tahr!" I caught her wrist and pushed her hand away. "No! You are supposed to be sick for Christ's sake! Besides, you are mated now."

She hissed and pushed back against my hand. "So? How could H'rrasch be jealous of you? It would be ridiculous." She tried a smile with her mouth. I could just about count her back teeth.

"Ridiculous, huh?" I grinned back. "Well, I will tell you an interesting tale. Something ridiculous happened to me not so long ago. I almost got my face ripped off by a male who thought I was trying to . . . ah . . . seduce his female."

"You?!" Tahr did a poor job of stifling a laugh.

"He did have a good reason," I continued. "It would seem there is a rumour going around the citadel. Something about a 'reputation' I have."

"A. . . a reputation?" Tahr asked, suddenly cautious. She wasn't laughing anymore.

"Uh-huh. Something about the way I am built. Also, that I have 'a way with sex'." I propped myself up on my elbows and raised an eyebrow, "I would wonder where that came from, eh?"

"Oh," said Tahr.

"Tahr, I am flattered by the praise, but it makes things most difficult for me when Maxine hears of our exploits from Sathe I do not even know, and when angry males feel the urge to rebuild my face with their claws."

Her ears went back in a hesitant, almost sheepish smile. "I was wrong. I had no idea that it would go this far."

"Just please do not talk about us anymore," I asked. "Please."

"Very well, K'hy," she sighed, then hissed in her version of a giggle. "It will cost you," she smiled.

I sat up; wary. "How much?"

For a reply she stiffly rolled over onto her stomach and wriggled her shoulders, "Please, ease my muscles."

"You have a nerve," I half-snorted, half-laughed, amused at her gall, then settled beside her and started kneading the threadbare hide of her back. With a low sigh she went limp under my hands, luxuriating in the massage. Those times I'd been bed-ridden sprang to mind. God, could I have used something like this back then. Maybe it was fifteen minutes later when the scratch at the flimsy door disturbed us.

Remae was waiting there. The faint, flickering, reddish-orange from the guttering oil lamp out there did weird things to her black fur and green eyes. Off down the corridor from the common room came the muted background sound of crockery and ironmongery rattling, Sathe talking, laughing.

"High One," Remae murmured, ducking her head in surprise and respect when she saw Tahr sprawled on the bed, half-awake and watching her. "How are you feeling?"

Tahr smiled back. "Tired, stiff and sore, but much better, thank you."

"I am pleased," Remae smiled. "I came to tell K'hy that food is ready and to. . ." She looked from Tahr to me to the rumpled sheets, back to me, and realization dawned in her eyes that she may have committed a boo-boo. "Saaa. . . I did not mean to intrude."

For a second both Sathe were watching me. Then Tahr's ears flicked back in amusement, "No, Remae, there was nothing going on. Please, come in. . . and, K'hy, there is no need to look like that."

I felt heat rising into my face like mercury in a thermometer. Hastily I backed out of the room, closing the door behind me. I tried not to imagine the two friends laughing.

The inn was busy that night. Other travellers sheltering from the unseasonal downpour. They kept pretty much to themselves, but they choked and sputtered on their food when I made my appearance. The fare was simple: a meat and vegetable stew, bread, and a choice of water (a risky choice from a village well), llama milk, or ale, but the Eastern soldiers seemed to enjoy it enough. I wondered if they ever got splinters in their tongues from licking the wooden bowls clean.

It was another three days before the storm abated and the mud on the roads had dried out enough to make travel possible. The innkeeper was not unhappy to see us depart, even though he made a handsome profit from our layover.

Very quickly the fields and pastures surrounding the small town gave way to wilderness. The road forded small creeks swollen from the rain, wound its way through evergreen woodland, crossed broad stretches of gold and green grassland.

We worked our way north; a single covered wagon and seventeen

housecarls mounted upon lamas. We took our time; taking it slow and easy. The weather remained fine after the storm, the skies were crystal clear and the nights warm.

And Tahr had recovered with a vengeance. During the first few days she ate enough for two, rapidly filling out the gap beneath her ribs that she'd cultivated during her convalescence. When we stopped for the night, her almost hyperactive restlessness would often lead her to disappear into the wilderness, causing consternation amongst her guard.

And I had a lot of thinking to do.

Light shifted through the intertwining branches of the trees above the small pool, playing across the surface of the water that rippled every so slightly as invisible cat's paws stirred it. A rivulet of water trickled through moss-covered rocks; sparkling and glittering as it dropped the metre or so into the pond.

A soft splash. Ripples spread.

Settled in a patch of grass, my back against the solid trunk of a sugar maple, I flicked another pebble from the small horde I clutched in my hand. Light twinkled as more ripples spread before the first had entirely stilled.

Tahr had been in the right with her questioning at the inn; what WAS I going to do with my life now?

I'd been born and raised in a culture where it was always someone else who had the knowledge, the skills. Whatever I needed, I just went out and bought and all the skill needed was the ability to drive a car and write a cheque.

Oh, I was pretty mechanically inclined. More than average. Certainly I was no technical prodigy, but I was comfortable around machinery. My general knowledge was pretty good, I knew how things worked and how they were made. I was capable in metal and woodworking, but that was with tools far more advanced than anything the Sathes used. I could easily plane a length of wood or weld up sheet metal, but would I be as effective if all I had to work with was an adze or forge?

And how many gaps were there in my knowledge?

Another stone plunked into the water.

For my entire life up to the point when I arrived here, I had been deluged with the continual flood of disjointed snippets of information I picked up from television, radio, and casual reading. I could draw a detailed diagram of an internal combustion engine and how it's supposed to work, but what of the materials it's made from? How exactly do you make a magneto?

I shifted the M-16 into my lap, running a finger along the scratched and scarred stock. The gun had taken a lot of abuse, the metal itself was nicked in places; gleaming steel exposed on the raised sections of the mat black surfaces. I wasn't sure I knew how to forge a metal like that, let alone how to make the synthetic compounds that made the stock and foregrip.

No, I frowned, that was still not the real problem.

Would I . . . we - aliens - be able to make a home in this society; not live out our entire, overly long lives as freaks on display for all to see? I mean, we couldn't exactly settle down in the town, could we . . .

I say, George. Look what's just moved in next door.

Oh, shit. There goes the neighbourhood.

No.

And what about children . . .

My God, children.

My thoughts were interrupted by a splash. I looked up to see ripples spreading out across the water. I hadn't thrown that . . .

"Why so dour, K'hy?"

Tahr got up from where she had been crouched on a boulder across the other side of the small pool, her head cocked to one side in her study of me.

"You followed me," I accused her.

There wasn't a sound as she dropped from a rock onto deep moss. The worn blue and brown cuirass and kilt she wore didn't quite blend in with the

foliage behind her: "No. I was out by myself. I just found you here."

My thumb flicked the safety catch back on as I looked up at her. Twigs and small leaves were matted into her mane as though she'd been lying on the ground. "You have been running off by yourself a lot lately. Any reason?"

She laughed and flopped down beside me, leaning up against my arm. "Just restless. My legs just want to stretch after all that time doing nothing." I reached out and plucked a twig from her fur. "It is good to have a chance to run, to hunt." She stretched, then craned around to look at me. "Do you never have the urge to do that?"

I blinked. "To run. . . sometimes, but not usually to hunt."

She gave a half-hearted snort and watched as I flipped another pebble into the water. "I was watching you for a while," she said. "What was troubling you?"

"Troubling me?"

"Oh, K'hy." She flashed teeth in annoyance. "No games! Your face has more expressions tucked away than a piece of soft clay. I think I can read many of them well enough to see that you were. . . well. . . not happy."

"Okay, point taken," I sighed and told her.

"Children?" she was puzzled. "I do not think I understand."

I got up and paced a couple of times before slumping against a boulder. "Tahr, if Maxine and I reproduce, the result will be human children."

"'Reproduce'," Tahr's ears twitched in a smile while the velvet of her nose wrinkled at the same time. "You know, there are words for that which bear more warmth."

"I was not trying to be poetic."

"Sorry. Please continue."

"If we have children, they will be human. Eventually Max and I will both die and they would be alone here. Absolutely alone." I swung around to face Tahr. "Do you understand now? All they would know of where they originally came from would be what Max and I told them. They would be. . . different. All their lives."

Tahr got up and slowly ambled past me. Leaves rustled as she pushed aside a branch. "Yes, I can understand that."

I fell in beside her as she padded through the forest. My boots made a lot more noise than her bare pads. Aside from the wind and the incidental sounds of nature, that was the only noise there was for a quite a while, then: "K'hy, what do you know about Hraasa's death?"

Ohshit!

"Well, Remae told me he had died in his sleep."

She paused before answering. "He was killed in his sleep; yes," she agreed. "Strangled. . . his throat crushed. Not an accidental death. There is no assassin I know of who would use such tactics." Her green eyes latched upon mine. "No Sathe assassin."

I stopped in my tracks and stared at her.

She also drew up short, folding her arms, hands hooked over her shoulders. "K'hy, the Marshal has done some asking around, and the thing that strikes both her and myself as peculiar is the fact that nobody can remember seeing you on the night of the Challenge."

I felt my jaw twitch.

"Remae has also seen Hraasa's corpse. She inspected it perhaps a little more thoroughly than did the guards who found him. He did not die peacefully; he fought. His bedding was soiled with blood that did not come from the scratches I had given him. There were traces of a strange scent on his body. There was more blood on his fingers and claws and chest. She also found shreds of flesh under his claws that did not come from the challenge. They did not come from a Sathe. She saw you the next day. You smelt of blood and medicine.

"K'hy, your tunic. Take it off."

I swallowed and stepped back a pace, backed up against a tree. "Tahr. . . I. . . ." I shook my head and bit my lip.

"I thought as much," she rumbled. "Did you also have something to do with his loss in the Challenge?"

My shoulders sagged. I gave her a feeble, glum nod.

"Saaaa ! "

Birds startled by her cry flapped into the air. "K'hy!" she blazed, turning to howl at the forest. "You could have ruined everything! Why, in the name of my Ancestors! Why did you do it?!"

I shook my head helplessly, despairing at her anger. "He was going to kill Maxine."

Tahr stopped in mid snarl, half-turning with bared teeth. "No, K'hy, impossible! Hraasa gave his surrender! His troops saw! He could not have!"

"He was going to use a Scirth Warrior," I told her. "Are they not outside the agreements that bind you and the other Clans?"

"Scirth Warriors?!" she choked on the title. "K'hy, they are lethal! I hold no power over them; no Clan does!" Her jaw twitched violently. "If he has hired one to kill Mas she is. . . "

"I took care of it," I said.

She gaped at me, her expressions spinning between fury and astonishment at a mile a minute. Finally: "I am lost. Now - from the beginning - tell me what happened that night."

We started walking again while I talked. I reluctantly told her about the accidental part I had played in Hraasa losing the Challenge and went on to tell her about the conversation I had later overheard.

"I swam the river. Your kind are not the best swimmers, so there were very few guards. Hraasa's tent was around the other side of their camp. . . Anyway, I dodged the sentries and circled around.

"He had a physician come to dress his wounds, then someone in a black cloak was brought to see him. I was able to get close enough to hear their conversation. He was talking with a Scirth Warrior, hiring him. . . Did you know that the going rate for the assassination of a human is twenty five gold pieces?"

Tahr said nothing.

"Well, anyway, I followed the Scirth Warrior when he left. I caught up with him and managed to persuade him to forget about his job."

"How did you do that?" Tahr queried. "I cannot see even you defeating a Scirth warrior unarmed and walking away from it."

I fished a small metal circlet out of my pocket and tossed it to her.

She snatched the ring out of the air, turned it over, and stared in surprise again. "This. . . Where did you get this?!"

"Hymath. Remember her? She gave it to me."

Tahr stared at the ring, then slowly gave it back to me. "When? Why did you not tell me?"

"You never asked."

Tahr made a disgusted noise. "K'hy, take good care of that ring. I think that you do not know just how valuable it is."

That ring; the tiny silver Sathé's head baring minute fangs in a snarl. She was absolutely right; it was valuable in ways that went far beyond just the exquisite craftsmanship. I closed my hand over it and slipped it back within my pocket. "Where was I? Oh yeah. He was reluctant about going back on his word, but he agreed not to take the assignment. Before he left, he gave me the gold he had accepted. . . to return to Hraasa.

"I went back to the camp and hid until the lamp in Hraasa's tent went out. Their whole camp was. . . it was like they were going mad. There were fires and fights all over the place. The guards were watching a group fighting nearby. I got in under the side of the tent. They never saw me.

"There was just enough light for me to see by. I guess I wasn't as quiet as I should have been," I licked my lips and turned away from Tahr, suddenly finding something of interest in the patterns of pine bark. "He must have heard me. . . he woke. I hit him hard. . . here, in the throat. I crushed his throat, but it took time. He was. . . was awake - fighting -

the whole time. . . I. . . he. . . "

I choked off and slumped against a tree. Tahr said nothing while I pulled myself together again. "I left the money there and just. . . put my hood up and just walked away. . . nobody noticed me. That was the only reason I got away. . . Nobody noticed. Sheer, dumb luck. I swam across the river and circled around to come back in the northern gate."

"K'hy," Tahr stared at me. "It was suicide."

I didn't respond. I had known.

Her ears went back flat against her skull and she moved closer, her eyes about level with my shoulders. Reaching up she fumbled with my shirt buttons. I caught her hand. "K'hy," she almost growled, her ears going down.

I let my hand drop.

Buttons, one at a time down my chest, then she spread my shirt open. "My Ancestors!" Another tug and my arms were bared. Her wide eyes met mine, like pain-filled greenstone. "K'hy!"

The smooth curve of a claw traced a line of red scar and scab up my chest to the point where it ended just below my throat. Just one of a multitude. "My Strange One," she moaned, gently touching my chest again, then stepping away. "It is an ancient tradition you have violated. It is not so much you killing him, as the fact that you biased the outcome of the Challenge. . . you were NOT supposed to be there!"

I started walking again, rebuttoning my shirt. Tahr fell into step, slightly behind me. High above us the wind set the treetops swaying and rustling. "What will you do with me now?" I asked.

Tahr grimaced and took a swipe at a pine tree she was passing. Four horizontal scrapes appeared across the bark. "I am not sure. In a sense I am the law, but there are limits to my jurisdiction. I am the Shirai, but even I cannot change what has always been, and what will probably always be."

"I understand."

"Did you understand before?"

I bit my lip and studied the ground in front of me. "Yeah."

She breathed a steam-kettle hiss, her lips pulling away from her teeth. "And if you were found?! Did you think what your discovery could have meant for the Shirai clan, for the entire Eastern Realm?! You could have destroyed everything that we have fought to achieve! All the loss and sacrifice, all the death, everything would have been for nothing!"

I flinched away from the claws that were now hovering near my face, turned and sat on a fallen log smothered in moss. Tahr stood, keeping her distance, a shaft of sunlight cutting the air between us, glittering on the wings of insects. Suddenly I remembered a time a headstrong creature had tried to make her own way back to her people with her side held together with string and a prayer. Memories of chasing after her and finding her waiting for me, calmly waiting with her wound seeping blood.

Now her eyes burned with anger.

"Tahr," I said, "look at me."

She tossed her mane, her teeth flaring white. "I have been looking at you for the best part of two years now. What else. . . "

"Damnation! LOOK AT ME!" I exploded. "Look at me as other Sathe see me!"

Her eyes narrowed, then she spun and took a few steps away before turning back to study me again. Then she slowly squatted and took a stick in her hands, twisting it in her fingers. "What are you trying to say?"

I sighed. "You have grown too familiar with me. What am I? I am not of the Shirai clan. I am not of the Eastern Realm. I am not even Sathe! I am as an animal under your laws! If a. . . a squirrel had made Hraasa forfeit the challenge, could he blame the Eastern Realm?"

The Shirai stabbed at the ground with her stick, then slowly twitched her ears: "No, I think not."

"I made my decision and I am prepared to stand by it and take the consequences. I think that you would have done the same."

The stick moved again as Tahr pondered. "You have thought this out, haven't you," she growled.

"I tried to. It happened so fast."

"Then you know that while your . . . status may give you immunity from the laws of the Realms and Clans - and even that I am not sure of - it also means that you have no rights at all in our Realm, that you are, in fact, an animal in the care of the Shirai Clan. You could be brought and sold or even killed without the stigma that would be attached to such treatment of a normal . . . person."

I nodded. "I had suspected."

Tahr's muzzle wrinkled so as much of her teeth and gums as possible were bared. Her ears vanished into her mane and the stick scratched violent patterns into the forest floor, then she snarled and sent the stick bouncing off a tree trunk, splitting into two pieces. When she looked at me it was the look predator gave prey. "Rot it all, K'hy! When I think you understand, you go and do something like this. If anyone learns. . . "

I stood, carefully went to lay a hand on her shoulder. "He would have killed you. I . . ."

She snarled again and her hand whipped up, catching me across the side of the head. I yelped and staggered back. My face burned. I touched that place and there was blood on my hand. I stared at her in shock.

Tahr's snarl evaporated, turning to confusion, then. . . something else. She opened her mouth, then turned and bolted into the forest. Undergrowth hissed around her, then the foilage stilled and she was gone.

"Shit." I said, touched my bleeding face again, winced. Gone. No way I could catch her. Did I want to? I turned and set off back to camp.

Remae caught me as I walked back into camp. "K'hy, they need. . . what happened to your face?"

"Branch scratched it," I mumbled.

"Angry branch," she observed. She knew. Of course she knew, but she let it lie.

I went and sat by myself. The Sathe muttered and gossiped, glancing at me, but they left me alone. I touched the scratches on my face again. Why had she done that?

Anger? Fear? Exasperation?

Perhaps everything. Perhaps I deserved it. I didn't know. And she's never told me.

Goddamn it! A Sathe might be able to stand aside and watch while a friend was torn apart, but I'm not a Sathe. What I did I did of my own volition. If it came down to it I would take the blame, but no-one could drag Tahr or her clan into it. Hell, if someone wanted to they could pick a fight with the Davies clan. Good luck to finding them.

Tahr returned that night. A stiff wind whipped sparks into the night sky while we ate. I never noticed until Remae flinched, then laid her platter aside and went to join a figure standing in the gloom of the treeline. They exchanged a few words and eyes flashed metallic light as they glanced my way. I stared down at my meal. When I looked up again they were gone, into the trees: out of sight and earshot. I put my plate aside, not hungry anymore.

The Citadel loomed above us as the tiny convoy made its way along the narrow lane between massive inner and outer walls. Covered walkways spanned the gap high above our heads, arching over from one towering vertice to another. It was a lot like being in an alley between two skyscrapers.

The inner gate was open, the uphill-sloping tunnel beneath the gatehouse dark and chill. The sounds of llamas' hooves and iron-bound wheels clattering and grinding echoed from the walls of solid granite, then we were through.

For a second the sunlight breaking through the clouds above the vast

courtyard dazzled me, then the monumental bulk of the Citadel's Keep blotted out the sky; layer upon layer of walls and towers enveloping the granite crown of the hill, dwarfing even the outer walls.

Tahr's small fist tapped my shoulder: "Home." Her ears flicked in her smile. I blinked blearily and twitched my own lips at her.

The last few days and nights had been spent on the road, travelling nonstop, doing our best to catch forty winks in the wagons. I hadn't got much sleep. None of us had. The walking dead, that was us. I just wanted to lie down and die for a week or two.

The stir we'd caused in the town below had reached the Citadel ahead of us. Two ranks of Citadel Guards lined the steps and approach to the Keep. Faces massed at windows and parapets all around the courtyard as the small convoy drew to a halt.

As Tahr adjusted her armour and dropped from the back of the wagon, Remae caught my arm. "Walk with me." It wasn't a request.

Tahr preceeded us, her head held high and the clean armour she had materialised from God-knows-where flashing as inlaid silver caught the sun. Remae had no clean armour, but the blue and silver cloak she wore hid the scars, nicks, and stains in the purely functional battle dress she was wearing. Against them, I stood out like a cow in church.

Head and shoulders above the Sathe, my hair had grown so long the last couple of months that it resembled a Sathe mane escaping from beneath my helmet, even if the copper was so different from the more subdued, earthy tones of Sathe coloration. My cloak flapped around my ankles, not quite hiding my tattered, stained fatigues. I looked around at the continuously growing crowd and nervously hitched up the battle-scarred assault rifle, feeling exposed and vulnerable crossing that huge courtyard.

Cheering had started as soon as Tahr had appeared from the wagon, the howling sound of Sathe cheering. With Remae's claw hooked into my sleeve, I stepped out into a confusion of faces and sound. The Marshal noticed my nervousness. "K'hy, this way!" she hissed and tugged me along. "Don't worry so."

I'd been shot at, burned and beaten and given a choice I'd have rather been on the battlefield than in that courtyard anyday. Sathe everywhere, more than I'd ever seen in one place before, the entire population of the Citadel it appeared and most of them were looking at me. I scanned the balconies and ramparts and windows and doors, looking for distinctive non-Sathe features. If she was there I didn't see her.

More Sathe awaited us within the massive doors of the Keep. The entry hall echoed with hushed Sathe voices, the clatter of claws and metal accessories. Expansive cloaks with clan crests embroidered in glittering thread brushed against the lacquered parquetry in the wooden floor as their wearers bowed their heads before Tahr.

"High One," the honorific murmured from the tapestry-hung walls of the chamber, resounding among the galleries and balconies that rose to the vaulted ceiling far above.

Tahr respectfully returned the bows to the Clan Lords ranked before her and murmured something that caused ears to twitch in amusement; quickly suppressed. Finally Tahr approached the red-robed figure patiently awaiting her. "Shirai," he bowed when she stopped in front of him.

And there was one more Sathe waiting for her. Not a Clan Lord or high-ranking official. It took a second to sink in just who he was. A far cry from the embarrassed trooper who had worried about Tahr in the corridor so long ago. Now wearing the armour of the royal guards, a silver ring in his ear.

H'rrasch bowed. "Shirai," he said, and there was an emotion running far deeper than respect there. She touched his shoulder and he looked up. "I am glad you made it back," then he ducked his head again as though he was embarrassed. Tahr gave a stuttering hiss, then they were embracing and

nuzzling each other.

Been doing some matchmaking, Kelly ?

Behind them, Rehr made an Excuse-Me-For-Butting-In kind of sound, interrupting Tahr's personal homecoming. "Excuse me, Shirai, but there are a few thousand people clamouring to see you."

Welcome home, Tahr ai Shirai.

I was exhausted and hungry and exhausted and tired. The dust of the weeks on the road had ground its way into my very pores; a gritty feeling like sandpaper rubbing against my flesh. That last day had been the toughest, travelling all night so that we would make it to Mainport while there was still light.

The sounds of cheering and jubilation were swallowed by the tremendous solidity of the walls of the Keep; the stone absorbing sounds so that none reached the deserted corridor where I walked. Occasionally a servant would scurry past, but otherwise the place had all the air of a mausoleum. All along the corridors the walls between the doors were carved in bas-relief, ancient depictions of tailed Sathe: living and dying, laughing and crying. The joy and sheer exuberance of feline life immortalized in stone. I gave a jaw-cracking yawn and concentrated on planting one foot in front of the other.

The corridor opened into a T-junction in a groin vault serving as a landing for a broad, dimly-lit staircase. The steps were bare, undressed rock stairs cut directly into the hill and worn to almost-marble smoothness by the buffing of countless feet. How long ago had this part of the Keep been hewn? A passage to be measured in centuries or millennia?

"Kelly!"

The shout echoed down the corridor behind me, followed by the pounding of footsteps as a figure in checkered flannel shirt and blue jeans ran towards me. I lowered my pack to the floor and gave her a weary smile as she slowed down to a walk, staring as she approached. "I know," I forestalled her with an upraised hand, "I look like shit."

She flinched and gave me rueful grin. "Sorry." Then she stepped close and hugged me. I stiffened, then slowly hugged her back, uncomfortably aware of the feelings her human femininity sparked off inside me. Her hair was clean, soft, and smelling of. . . womanhood.

She suddenly stepped back, nervously avoiding my eyes, then smiled shyly. "Welcome home."

I blinked. "Last I knew you weren't talking to me."

She flashed a tight smile, like the ones I did with Sathe; trying not to show teeth. Was she developing that habit also? Whatever it was she smiled and said, "I'm just glad you made it back in one piece."

I managed a smile in return. "Thanks. . . Max."

"Here, I'll take that," she said and before I could protest she'd caught up my pack and slung it over her shoulder. "I tried to catch you back there with the others, but you took off alone."

"Yeah, well I wasn't expecting anyone to meet me. I thought I'd skip the homecoming. They won't miss me, and I'm beat."

It was a familiar route, one I'd walked many times before. The corridors became better lit, the tapestries, murals, and friezes covering the bare stone of the walls became more and more ornate and well-kept; banishing the spartan atmosphere of the less-populated areas of the Keep.

Maxine was keeping up a cheerful banter all the way to my rooms, but by then I was too tired to reply in more than monosyllables between the yawns. I fumbled with the latch, then stumbled inside.

The room was just as I had left it: papers sitting on the desk, a pair of breeches carelessly draped over the back of a chair. Although the air was stuffy with an atmosphere like a house that hasn't been lived in for a while,

there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen anywhere.

". . . realised what you must have felt like when you were here," Maxine was saying. "I wasn't sure if you were coming back or not."

I looked at her, then unslung the rifle and propped it against the desk. It overbalanced, clattering to the floor. "Hold on. Sorry, I've just got to sit down for a while. . . I'm stuffed." I nearly collapsed into a chair.

Maxine was suddenly kneeling beside me in a near panic. "Hey, c'mon! Don't flake out on me here! I can't carry you!"

I mumbled an incoherent protest as she hauled me to my feet again and guided me as I stumbled through to the bedroom. I don't even remember hitting the bed.

I was still rubbing my hair dry as I approached my quarters, whistling cheerfully. With the layers of grime I'd collected on the roads sloughed off in a blissfully hot bath, I felt ready to take on the world: any of them, or even all at once. That morning there was someone waiting at my door. I broke into a grin and called out, "Morning, Ms Wayne."

"Afternoon you mean. I've never seen anyone go out like that."

She didn't blame me for sleeping in. I had - she agreed - looked like shit. While I changed in the bedroom we exchanged smalltalk through the open door. I had countless shirts, all in a stylish shade of olive drab: part of the cargo from the wreck of the truck, but only a single pair of pants. The hardships these'd been through were beginning to show in the worn knees, the stains and holes in the heavy fabric. I glumly poked a finger through a rent in the seat, then chucked the pants aside and fished a pair of Sathe-made breeches from the chest. They were the type that finished around the knees, and I felt absolutely ridiculous in them.

"Why don't you try one of those kilts?" Maxine giggled.

"Too cold," I replied. "You know what the draughts in this place are like."

She laughed and watched as I tied the laces on my boots. "You know, I learned a lot about them while you were away. The Sathe that is."

I looked up at her. "You feel better about them now?"

"I don't really know. They're easier to get along with, but they're still . . . weird. Sometimes I just feel like it's not real, like it's all just a dream." She sighed deeply and looked at me. "How was it for you?"

"Eating, sleeping, drinking and crapping together. You have to get used to them," I replied absently, then looked up at her. "I never said it was easy, Max."

"Was the fighting bad?"

I felt my jaw tighten. There's no way I'll ever forget those weeks. "How can it ever be good? You know: war is hell and the food sucks."

She forced a smile, then said, "If you don't want to talk about it. . ."

"Thanks," I pushed my fingers through my overgrown thatch of hair, "Maybe. . . later, I think."

The rifle was on the desk, black and vicious against the creamy sheets of parchment lying underneath it. I picked the weapon up and touched the scarred and nicked receiver. There were gouges in the stock and the paint had chipped off the selector switch.

"So what do I do with this?" I asked myself.

The vault was buried deep underground, as is a vault's wont. The air was chill, the rough-hewn granite walls and vaulted ceiling glittering with moisture, streaked with soot from the sputtering torches in sconces. It was

just one of a string of such rooms storing the wealth of a realm. Inside, in the dimness, I could catch the glitter of gold and silver: Bars of precious metal, ornate weapons slung in racks. Locked iron-bound chests labelled with Sathé script were everywhere. Maxine picked up a gold statue the size of her hand, weighing it. It looked like solid gold. Nearer the door olive-green boxes and crates were stacked in neat rows around the walls, black stencilled letters and numbers seeming to twist and writhe in the shifting light.

Sathé guards and a single human woman were watching me as I checked the seals on the last case. The Sathé-made laminated box would remain airtight until either the wood rotted away or someone broke the seal around the lid. The rifle and ammunition inside were sealed in a solid block of wax, preserving both indefinitely.

I hefted the box and set it on a rack with the other cases.

The guards took the torches and swung the heavy door to as I left. The dull boom as it closed echoed down the dim corridor and the guards returned to their station. It was a safe bet that as soon as Max and I were out of sight they would be back to their game of dice. You couldn't really blame them; it was a boring duty to pull.

Maxine flicked on the electric lantern she was carrying, filling the corridor with a crisp, bluish light that was strange after the faint orange illumination of the torches.

I had that sensation you feel when you've been wearing a watch for years and suddenly it comes off for some reason: You feel as if part of your wrist is missing. That rifle had been near at hand for so long it had almost seemed a part of me. Now it was locked away behind more than a dozen metres of rock, I felt. . . naked. A comforting and familiar weight was gone. My hand kept reaching for a shoulder strap that was no longer there.

Maxine noticed my twitching. "Withdrawal symptoms already. You going to be all right without your little toy?"

"No problem, I'll just use the one you're carrying."

She looked startled. "How'd you know?"

"If you want to keep it hidden, you shouldn't bend over like that. Why are you carrying it anyway?"

"After what happened down in the town, I didn't want to take any chances."

THAT wasn't still an issue, was it? I thought it was history, just 'a day in the life of' to me. I suppose it had been a real shock for her, but it concerned me that she was still nervous about it. How long had it been now? Months, at least.

Sathé claws spattered on stone. A servant dashed down a staircase ahead of us and pulled up short, blinking, in the glare of the electric lantern.

"High one, the Shirai's advisor requests your presence as soon as is convenient." I saw him glance at Maxine. "Ah. . . alone."

Maxine shrugged and held up the light. "You're going to need this. I'll walk you up a few levels."

The guard was bobbing tensely. "All right," I told him. "Lead on."

There was no reply to my knock.

"You are sure that he is here?" I asked.

"He must be," the guard outside the door replied, puzzled. "He has not left."

The door was unlocked, opening easily when I lifted the latch. The guard was close behind me as I stepped inside the room, expecting the worst. Rehr wasn't getting any younger. . .

He was sitting in his chair at the desk, his back to me as he stared out the window. All I could see was the back of his head and his pointed ears. It was all I needed to see. Grinning, I assured the guard everything was

alright. He frowned, but he left.

I reached for the Sony DAC Walkman on the desk and switched it off.

The Advisor was fast for his age. He jumped with a yelp of surprise, turning, his shock turning to a glare. He plucked the earphones out. "K'hy," he said softly; dangerously. "You could have thought about announcing yourself."

"I am sorry, sir," I bowed my head. "I did. . . scratch; several times. You did not answer and I was concerned for you."

He glared at me, then looked at the Walkman. The thunderclouds behind his eyes cleared and his grey-tufted ears flickered. "Ah. . . No. The fault was not yours. I borrowed this thing from your mate. She said it was music from your world."

I took the proffered earphones and held one to my ear; the music he'd been so engrossed in was Nigel Kennedy's rendition of The Four Seasons. I pressed the reverse button. The flipside was halfway through QueensRyche, Silent Lucidity. Hmmm, eclectic tastes.

"You like it?" I asked.

"It is a change," he answered diplomatically. "So many different kinds of instruments, different music. . . ." The Sathé gave a steam-kettle hiss as he laid the Walkman on his lap. "Some of it is appealing, some of it is just. . . unusual." He tapped the stereo with a claw and looked up at me. "K'hy, I look at this object and I am afraid. Your people can make objects like this. They can build devices like that vehicle of your mate's. What would happen if your people could find a way to travel between our worlds at will?"

I shrugged helplessly and picked up a spare tape from the desk: Robert Plant, Fate of Nations. "I cannot say. I just do not know. In our exploration of our own world, we made many mistakes, but I am not certain that we would not make the same mistakes here."

"You speak against your own people?!"

"I merely say what is the truth. . . or what I believe to be the truth."

The Advisor rested his chin upon steepled fingers and stared at me, thoughtful. Had I said something wrong? Then his ears flicked like a fly had buzzed him and he asked, "What could your people do?"

I stared back at him. That was one question I didn't want to answer, for several reasons, the least being the paranoia it might generate toward the humans who were here. "I. . . I do not know exactly," I hedged. "I suppose it would depend on who found whom. Is this why you sent for me?"

"Not entirely," he said, looking momentarily disappointed. "I thought that you would want this back." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a yellowish rectangle of parchment with a glaring red wax seal: the letter I given him for safekeeping.

"Thank you, Sir," I took the letter and tucked it safely inside my jacket.

"I am pleased to be able to return it to you." He hissed again as he sank back into his chair, then smiled. "Hearing of some of your. . . ah, exploits, I am mildly surprised that you are standing before me today."

"I got lucky."

"Lucky! Saaa! There is the understatement of a lifetime!" He pulled another scroll from a wooden stand beside the desk and held it up in front of me. "Some of your Greens have given a written report on your actions and the Shirai is still trying to decide just what is to be done with you."

Oh shit!

Seeing me stiffen, he hastily set the scroll aside and coughed, almost apologetically. "Huh. . . I think that can wait. Ah yes, there was one other thing that I am not sure you know about."

In five days time there was to be a. . . a party? No, that wasn't the word for it; I think reception, or perhaps formal ball would be more accurate. It was a celebration of the Eastern Realms victory amongst the high fliers of

Sathe society: the Clan Lords of surrounding towns and the most prominent merchants.

"It is for them to pay their respects and pledge their loyalty to the Shirai," Rehr told me. "There will also be Gulfers present. A formal surrender of their Clan lands before an assembly after Tahr proved herself at the challenge."

THAT was something I'd screwed up royally. If I hadn't interfered in Sathe business - in that Challenge - Tahr would be dead. However, I had, and she was alive. Did that make her any less capable of ruling the Eastern Realm? I doubted it. Hraasa, now that was one I would definitely NOT like to see in the White House. Having Gengis Khan as your lord would've been only marginally worse.

"K'hy?"

"Huh?"

"Is something bothering you?"

"Oh, no. No." I gave him a weak grin. "A party; and here I am without a thing to wear."

"Something will be provided," he assured me.

Lights, torches and lanterns, were burning throughout the Citadel. Windows small and large all over the faces of the ancient structure were lit; thousands of points of light against the dark vertices of stone walls and towers.

The air that night was warm. A breeze curling in through the open window made the lamps in my quarters flicker and carried the raucous sound of Sathe carrying out preparations for the night to come.

Two females, each so different from the other, turned together when I walked through the door. Remae had never seen me in anything other than worn army fatigues or Sathe clothing, altered and cobbled together to fit my frame. Now she blinked in surprise.

Both tunic and trousers were black, with aquamarine trim, silver piping on sleeves and legs. The broad leather belt was glossy black with a simple silver buckle matching the buttons. The cut was a sort of cross between dress uniform and a tuxedo, except neither of those styles would have the cloak slung across my shoulder: night black.

"Isn't this overdoing it?" I asked Max. "Didn't you have a tux?"

"Quit complaining!" she snapped back. "You look great." She fiddled with something on my collar and asked Remae, "That is good?"

The Sathe Marshal rubbed at the small tuft of fur on her chin while she cast a critical eye over me. "Good," she finally proclaimed it. "Very good. Muted, yet suits him well, but you will have to something about his fur. Rot you K'hy, stop squirming! You will be amongst some of the most influential individuals in the realms, you must make a good impression upon them. Now sit and be still!"

I was pushed down into a chair to endure their fussing over me; adjusting this and that detail, what would look best. Fingers both hairless and furred yanked my head this way and that, claws raked and tugged at my hair and beard: pulling and rearranging while the two women debated between themselves what look I should have. A bit off here? no, it looked better long, like a mane. Tie it back. Did Sathe kids play with dolls? I didn't know.

Maxine had indeed come a long way. Her accent was still strong and her vocabulary was not quite as extensive as mine, but now she was able to work hand in hand with a Sathe. It wasn't that long ago that just a Sathe's touch made her shy away.

The sound of Sathe shouting drifted in through the window on the breeze and Maxine started to go to work on my patchy beard with a pair of nail scissors she'd produced from somewhere. While her hands tilted my head this way and that I had to wonder what she would be wearing to the reception the

next night.

I rapped my knuckles against the door. "Ms Wayne? You ready?"

Sathe Clan Lords and their retinues had been arriving in Mainport for the past week and the town was buzzing as merchants made the most of the sudden boom in trade. Further down the corridor a group of Sathe soldiers stopped to stare openly at us: probably out-of-town troops just looking around the Citadel. I glared back and they hastily moved off again.

The door opened. I turned back and began to say hello and left my jaw hanging open.

"You like?" Max asked.

I got a blurred impression of chiffon, lace, and flesh.

"I take it that drooling means yes?" Maxine smiled innocently, disarmingly.

I nodded stupidly, blinked several times. She was wearing. . . something not quite like a jumpsuit, not a blouse or dress, but unlike any evening gown I had ever heard of: white and tantalisingly semi-transparent in places. An intricate and somewhat daring neckline that would be completely lost on Sathe, looping down around her modest cleavage, melding with bloused sleeves. Down the sides of her thighs and hips the light fabric bloused out again, cut into vertical slits that hid just enough. Below the knees and elbows the white fabric was inlaid with silver and gold wire that made it hug the contours of her forearms and calves. More silver filigree wound through the auburn hair that fell about her shoulders. Shoes must have been a problem as the Sathe don't have anything approaching a cobbler: she was wearing white leather moccasins.

The evening-blue, floor-length mantle was fastened at her shoulder with a small disk of engraved silver. It made her eyes seem to glow.

"Well?" she smiled, "Are you going to stop gaping and escort me?" She didn't wait for me to answer, but hooked her arm through mine; half-dragging me, the cloak swirling behind her, brushing and flirting with mine.

There were guards waiting for us. They stared unabashedly as we passed, then hastily fell in behind us. More bodyguards.

"Where the hell DID you get that from?!" I finally blurted.

Maxine laughed and touched the filmy fabric of a sleeve. "Made it. . . with a bit of help and a few suggestions from friends."

"Who? Delmonte de Sathe?"

She didn't answer that, just smiled at me in a way that had me wanting to climb the walls.

The corridors throughout the uppermost tiers of the Keep were flooded with light; scores of servants replacing and relighting torches and lamps that had burnt themselves out. The smoke hung to the ceiling like inverted mist, escaping out open windows and doors. I could feel Maxine pressing against my side as we drew nearer our destination, then we ascended the final staircase and through the final doorway.

If I had harboured any fears that maybe we were dressed a smidgen. . . flamboyantly, those doubts were dispelled upon the first glimpse of the reception area ahead.

One entire wall of the massive room opened onto a terraced garden that overlooked the central courtyard of the Keep. Flowing arches and trellises wrapped in greenery blurred the interface between the interior and exterior, almost making it difficult to tell where the marbled floors and walls ended and the long grass of the garden began.

The doorway we were standing in was flanked on either side by columns towering up to the vaulted ceiling high above. A totally different type of architecture to that used in the great hall where massive rafters supported the weight of the roof by brute force. Here, the magic of slender arches easily shrugged off the mass of the ceiling. A cascade of broad marble steps

paved the way down into a sea of furry bodies.

The room was a riot of colour. Clan devices and flags festooned the walls and ceiling while the Sathes themselves were an insane palette of color and styles: breeches, parade armour, sashes, cloaks, furs, decorative splashes of paint on fur. . . all manner of Sathes' fashions and all in brilliant colours: Reds, greens, blues, pinks, yellows, purples, blacks. All these colours and more swirled and mixed while the sometimes-discordant, sometimes-smooth sound of Sathes' music from a small knot of musicians drifted above the muted hiss of the crowd.

A sea of catlike faces swinging our way, green eyes widening, leathery nostrils flaring. Sathes leaned towards their neighbours, whispered questions spreading in a susurrus across the hall. As we two humans moved down into the room Sathes stared at us, some moving away, others standing their ground, but laying their ears back. Claws slipped from fingertips in unconscious reflex as the owners were faced with something they did not understand.

Many of them had heard that the Shirai had. . . strange. . . guests but didn't realise just HOW strange. Although nobody felt inclined to start chatting with us we did make a nice topic of conversation and a babble of Sathes' voices rose in our wake. Being alone in a crowded room isn't a pleasant feeling.

Maxine and I moved across the room to an archway bordering upon the garden. The Sathes' ideal of an aesthetically pleasing garden differed from that of neatly trimmed lawns favoured by most humans; they preferred the grass wild, burrs and weeds and all.

I snagged a couple of ales from a passing tray and handed one to Maxine.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." I took a sip and pulled a face. "If this's their best brew, it's going to be a long night."

"Do you know anyone?"

I looked back into the crowded room. "Can't see any familiar ears."

"What about her?" Maxine indicated someone standing behind me.

"K'hy, greetings."

Surprised, I turned and looked down at the chocolate-brown Sathes who raised her goblet in salute and smiled up at me. Her mane was still the rust-red it had been in Weather Rock, but this time it was set off by golden strands of wire wound through it, individual strands coming together over her brow. Both her breeches and the light leather harness entwined about her torso were coloured brick-red and dark green, sometimes blending into, sometimes in contrast to her fur. The needle-like slashes of brilliant yellow and crimson across her harness were not a touch any human would have chosen. "It is good to see you again. There is so much that I did not get a chance to thank you for," Fres's said.

"Please, High One" I protested, "that is not necessary. It was my job. If you must thank someone, thank Tahr. . . "

"Ah, no," she waved my words aside. "You remember what Hraasa said? This was not your fight, yet you so nearly gave your life for us. For what you have done the Fres's Clan shall always thank you. You are welcome within our Clan circle and will always be welcome at any of our holdings."

"High One. I. . . I thank you." I didn't know what else to say.

The Clan Lord showed amusement at my confusion. Her ears flinched and she looked back at the crowd of Sathes in the room. "You would seem to be a little out of place here."

"We just do not seem to fit in, High One," I replied. "I cannot understand why."

The ears of the Clan Lord of Weather Rock twitched in mirth. "Aye, I would wonder how that can be." Then she turned to Maxine; blinked. "This is your mate? I had no idea that she would look so different from you."

Maxine looked sidelong at me. One of those 'give-me-a-break' looks.

"Uh, she is not exactly my mate."

"No? I would have thought that you would not have much of a choice whom you took." Why did everyone say that? "Tell me, does she have a name?"

"I-am-sorry. High One, this is Maxine. Maxine; Fres's, Clan Lord of Weather Rock."

Manners impeccable, Maxine bowed her head. "I am honoured, High One, but most Sathe find it easier to call me Mas."

Fres's ears perked up. "She speaks as well as you do!"

"Thank you," Maxine smiled.

By that time we had attracted a small congregation of amused and bemused Sathe dignitaries. A male decked out in gaudily decorated leather armour that would only have been of use on the parade ground stepped forwards: cautiously. "Fres's. . . you KNOW these?!"

Wrinkles formed up Fres's's muzzle. "Of course. I make it a point to become acquainted with all potential customers. Honoured folks, these are K'hy and Mas. They are H'mans." She clapped a hand on my shoulder - claws pulled - and grinned, "I should say they are more nervous of us than we are of them."

As if that was a signal, the Sathe moved closer, curiosity beating back their caution. Soon I found myself sitting upon a dark granite bench, one of several arranged in a circle in the overgrown garden beneath the dark branches of a Red Maple. Sathe clustered around on other benches, questioning me, commenting, laughing. I put up with curious hands touching my skin and hair, tracing unfamiliar bone structures, examining my hands.

As time marched on, Sathe drifted away, but there were always more to take their places. In so many ways these cream of the Sathe aristocracy were identical to the Sathe cubs I'd met: their curiosity, their questioning and touching. Curiosity killed. . . etc. , etc.

Nearby, Maxine was engaged in conversation with a young male in greens and golds. I glanced their way in time to see him fondling her breasts.

"HEY!"

Sathe eyes went wide and ears laid back as I vaulted the back of the bench and advanced upon the youth, my fingers clenching into fists. He turned at my shout then yelped and retreated before my advance. Sathe turned to watch. Several who had been talking to me followed me and I couldn't be sure if they would help or hinder me.

"Kelly!" Maxine had my arm. "What the hell're you doing?! God's sake, calm down! He was just looking."

"Dammit, he TOUCHED you!"

"So? They've all been touching you," she snapped, then her brows shot up and she grinned, "Jealousy?"

"What?"

"Kelly, are you actually jealous?" She gave an incredulous laugh.

I grimaced and scratched at my head as I turned to the Sathe youth.

"Sir, the mistake was mine. I misunderstood. I-am-sorry."

Maxine smiled at the Sathe. "He only thought he was protecting me. Please understand; forgive."

The youth looked from her to me, then back again. Abruptly his ears flicked. "Ah. . . of course. You are mated. Of course I understand." He stalked off to the watching crowd where he explained - loudly - to his friends that I was only thinking to protect my mate. She was, after all, the only one I had.

Embarrassed, I brushed through the long grass to lean on the railing of the garden. Far below - beyond the multitude of tiers - the granite of the ancient monoliths of the Clan Circle gleamed in the moonlight.

"Kelly?"

I didn't answer.

"Hey, it's nothing to get like that over. I mean, I'm flattered that you cared enough. You did stand up for what you thought was right."

I started as I felt a hand come to rest upon my shoulder. Maxine was looking up at me, amusement crinkling the corners of her eyes. God, but she was beautiful that night. Things, emotions, dreams stirred inside. Slowly, I

raised my hand to her cheek, brushing my knuckles over her skin. Wonder. Almost forgotten how soft it was. She smiled, pressed against my chest. I bent to meet her upturned face.

"K'hy! Mas!"

It broke.

That moment between us snapped and dissolved into the ether, fading as if it had never been.

Remae stood nearby, waiting with a puzzled tilt of her head. The Marshal knew she'd interrupted something, but didn't understand what. "K'hy?"

Maxine stiffened and stepped away from me.

I swear, Remae, this had better be good!

"The Shirai has arrived. The ceremony is to begin."

"Honoured Shirai. On the behalf of my Clan, I lay my arms at your feet and bare my throat for your claws. We shall follow your tail and may none stray from the path you lead."

The voice of the Clan Lord echoed in the quiet of the room. The musicians had fallen silent while the multitude of Sathe had formed into ranked groups. Individual Clans gathered beneath their standards whilst listening to the litany being recited on the raised dais at one end of the room.

Tahr raised her arm to his throat and I saw claws stroking the fur there. "I return your arms to you," she replied. "I stay my hand. I accept your submission and your allegiance. In return, as your protector, I swear to defend you, to aid you, to watch over you and your kin. My food is yours. My drink is yours drink, and my roof is yours. All I ask of you is your allegiance."

"High one, our hands are your own. We shall follow," he promised.

Tahr leaned closer, to breath into his face. His nostrils widened as he inhaled and she stepped back again.

"Shirai," the Clan Lord bowed then stepped down from the dais.

Without protraction another Clan Lord was called forth, toward the platform where Tahr ai Shirai awaited. She was wearing orange and red breeches, tied just below the knees and at the waist with tassled cords. Around her shoulders rested a high-collared mantle: a light reddish-ochre with patterns of black spots like a leopards hide. The clasps that fastened it at her throat bore a blood-red stone the size of an egg.

Again and again, for Lord after Lord the litany was repeated. Tahr touched claws to throats, breathed into the muzzles and accepted their allegiance, one after another.

A Lord in red and black with a jagged ear.

My jaw clenched: Gulf Realm.

The Gulf Lord wasn't openly hostile, but there were hints: the stiffness in his posture, his clipped replies as he took the oath and resigned himself to the Claws of the Eastern Lord. Perhaps she applied a touch more pressure than she had upon the previous Lords; the muzzle of the Gulf Lord twitched slightly, as if in discomfort.

Finally the last Clan Lord returned to his retinue. There was a pause, then the next name was called:

"K'herry ai Yaviis."

The human name was pronounced with great strain, a lot of practice behind it. And it took a second or so for me to realise that name was mine.

Maxine nudged me out of my shock. "Go on, " she grinned.

A corridor lined with dumbfounded Sathe had opened ahead of me, guiding the way to the dais. My boots echoed on the marbled floor as I crossed the huge room, climbing the steps slowly until I was level with the green eyes of the Shirai.

"For an Outsider to be adopted by a Clan is not unknown," she said,

almost as if she were speaking intimately to me, yet loud enough for her voice to be heard throughout the room. "However, for a Clan to accept one who is not even Sathé, that is an unprecedented event."

Tahr turned to confront the stares of the nobles below. "Not Sathé, but a person of intelligence and sensitivity enough to compare to any. It was nearly two years ago when this being and I first met. He saved my life and agreed to aid me, a time during which we both came to know each other and I say that he became much more than a friend to me. Were that he were Sathé, I would have taken him for a mate," she met my eyes again; ice-cool green depths, nevertheless glowing with warmth.

"That, however, was impossible.

"He has been through great pain at the hands of Sathé, yet still he bears us no malice, freely sharing gifts of knowledge from a distant and powerful civilization."

That drew some subdued muttering.

"And it was through his courage and honour that this Realm was able to hold its borders to itself. He has saved Sathé land and lives, putting his own at risk, more than once.

"It is with great respect that I ask this one whether he would accept the protection and loyalty of the Shirai Clan. Would he offer himself to the Shirai Clan."

I met her level gaze and swallowed. "High One, I would be honoured."

Claws touched my throat, gently, almost tickling. Through the pounding in my ears I heard Tahr speaking; asking me questions: "Do you swear to follow the Clan wherever it may lead? . . . You shall defend the common ground, the circle. . . Always uphold the name of the Ancestors. . . "

Questions, a lot of them. The ritual went on for longer than the previous ones had. It was a more important ceremony, for taking an Outsider into a Clan was not something to be taken lightly, the Clan Lord had to have complete confidence in the other's character.

Tahr knew me, knew me with the intimacy with which I knew myself. I could almost see memories flickering like pictures in her eyes as she gazed at my face. She had to know that some of the things she was asking of me were impossible, meaningless. A Sathé warrior would hold fast to these oaths until the end, but I couldn't place the same value on them.

Her breath was warm and tartly sweet.

"K'hy ai Shirai, you are now of the Clan."

There was a breath of silence, then hissing cheers of approval started. I turned to look out upon the hundreds of Sathé faces, the noise crescendoing until it sounded like a storm-swept sea breaking upon a gravel shore. It took an effort to keep my face in a neutral expression; breaking into a grin could prove disastrous amongst people to whom the baring of teeth was an insult or challenge.

There were individuals and small, scattered groups who weren't so happy; looking either puzzled or downright dissatisfied. Notably, several types in red and black turned and stalked from the room.

Things turned far less formal afterwards. The music started up again and other stimulants were produced. Some Sathé nobility added powders to their drinks, others took drags from small pipes, producing sickly-sweet clouds of smoke I went out of my way to avoid. The food was brought out on long tables decorated with patterned cloths and elaborate candelabra were laden with delicacies of all descriptions. . . well, the Sathé would call them delicacies. I'd have to be damn hungry before I'd get started on some of that stuff: raw and underdone meat, bowls of pinkish-grey things that looked suspiciously like brains; other small, round things that stared back at you, internal organs, external organs. I tried a small pastie that looked safe, but the meat inside was so tough I had to swallow it nearly whole after chewing

for a couple of minutes.

Maxine was also exploring the tables. She'd found some other kind of pasties, nibbled at one, then taken a larger bite. I was close enough to hear when she asked a servant what was in it. The Sathe gave a brief, one-word answer and hustled off in to the crowd. Maxine looked puzzled, then saw me, "What was that? Thifki? I don't know that word."

I swallowed, fighting a lurch in my guts. "Uh. . . You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

I shrugged and grimaced. "Alright. . . Testicles. Llamas'."

Maxine coughed and gagged, dropping the pastie like it was burning and grabbing at her mouth. Sathe who'd witnessed the exchange gave us curious stares mingled with sporadic laughter.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I think I need some air," Maxine gulped, looking decidedly green.

It was fresher outside. We left the noise and drug-stinks and lights behind as we walked the garden tier. Off to the right the time-worn balustrade overlooked the other levels leading down to the inner circle; like a stadium with the ranks of bleachers rising up around the field. Long, nightbound grasses parted like shadows before us as we walked, the music losing to the sound of the wind in the terrace trees and the soft voices of Sathe also out walking. Flickering oil lamps on poles were dotted around the garden, throwing lonely little pools of light. More lights burned around the interior of the Keep, far more lamps than usual, sparkling in the darkness like a grotto of fireflies.

"Feeling better?" I asked Max.

"Uh. . . Yes. Thanks. Goddamn. I thought there was supposed to be food here tonight."

"Same here," I sighed and looked up at the stars. They didn't twinkle in quite the same way as I remembered from back home. "You knew what was going to happen tonight," I said. Not really accusing her.

Maxine glanced at me. "Uh-huh. Tahr and Rehr talked to me about it earlier."

"Damnation, someone could have told me."

A grin creased her face. Pure humour that almost startled me. "We wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well better luck next time," I said nonchalantly.

"What? Bullshit!" she affected outrage. "You should have seen your face. If that wasn't surprise, I don't know what is."

"Okay, you got me. Guilty as charged."

"Those pledges you had to take. What were they? I didn't get all the words."

"Sort of like 'I pledge allegiance to the flag'. The Sathe version though, with things about following the High Lord, never straying from the trail, share the kill with clan and hearth. Etcetera, etcetera."

"They really are hunters," she breathed.

"Yeah. I wonder how old that ceremony is? As old as the Circle maybe."

She gave me a sidelong look: "How old's that?"

I was mildly surprised she didn't know. Still there was a lot for both of us to learn about Sathe. So, as we walked through the wild grass and trees and trimmed bushes and occasional oasis of lamplight, I told her.

It was peaceful out there. That garden ran around the interior of the Keep, a small park in itself. The Sathe we did meet - in pairs or small groups - sometimes greeted us, sometimes avoided us. The outer wall of the garden was the upper level of the Keep, hidden behind ivy-covered trellises. Down the far end of the garden we came across a simple railless staircase climbing upwards to the top of the wall.

Maxine gazed up to where the wall eclipsed the stars. "Shall we?"

"Do you want to ruin that outfit?" I asked.

"I'll chance it," she grinned back.

I followed close behind her up the narrow steps. The view was worth it.

The Keep's ramparts and roofs dropped away below us to the courtyard where bonfires burned. Further out, like contours lines on a map, the staggered walls of the Citadel wrapped the hill in concentric circles. Then there were the lights of Mainport, as bright as I had ever remembered. North, boats at anchor bobbed in the harbour with their lanterns shimmering on the water and beyond that the unbroken heartland of the continent stretched off into the moonlight. Millions upon millions of acres of unbroken wilderness. A new frontier.

Maxine wrapped her cloak closer against the cool breeze that wound its way amongst the towers of the Citadel, her hair stirring softly.

The light that fell upon the trees was such that it gave the illusion of moving water, as if the woodlands were some vast sea. Dotted around the horizon - indescribably faint - the lights of small farms and settlements, like ships in the night.

"Times like this I don't regret leaving the rest behind," I said.

Maxine nodded agreement. "Yeah, I know what you mean. It's beautiful." For a while we stood there; just watching, then she asked, "How did it happen? All this I mean," she amended, turning and sweeping her arm in an arc that encompassed the wilderness in front of us and the Sathé civilization behind. "The land, the plants, the animals, they're exactly the same as back home. I mean, if the Sathé evolved from native cats - something like the mountain lion or lynx - then wouldn't that've screwed up the food chain? I mean, they were one of the major predators. If they became agrarian, what happened to the herbivores? "

"Well, the Sathé still hunt them, and there would have been a corresponding increase in the number of other predators, you know: wolves and bears and all that."

"Yeah," she sighed. "Still, there should have been changes - major changes - right through the ecosystem. It's like tumbling Dominoes, you topple one, and the whole lot goes, one after the other. Something would've changed. Maybe new species popping up or something. There's also the geography; it's pretty much identical."

"'Cept the Arthur Kill's gone," I pointed out. "This isn't an island anymore. More like Staten peninsula. There must be more changes. I'd like to get a chance to see Arizona. You know, that meteor crater. Even Niagara would do."

"You could ask the Sathé about that. They've got settlements up there haven't they?"

I nodded.

The sounds of music drifted up from behind us. Sliding strains of an alien melody. Almost oriental. I crossed the battlements to look down on the garden where the party was still in full swing. Light spilled from the arches of the hall where multicolored figures moved between the towering columns. In the shadows and darkness of the garden there were glimpses of half-seen figures amongst the trees and bushes: Sathé, some walking, others - less inhibited than humans - enjoying themselves. I could still smell the food on the air and despite everything, it actually smelled pretty good.

"Kelly?"

"Hmmm?"

Maxine was across the battlements, leaning against a merlon stained by weather and moss. "Can I ask something? About the fighting?"

That wasn't something I really wanted to talk about, nevertheless I shrugged, "What?"

Her eyes looked really strange in this light. I guess I'd been seeing only Sathé for far too long. "I did some asking around. Some of the things they say about you. . . are those things they say you did true? Running into a burning building to save a cub, defeating ten warriors singlehanded?"

I hesitated before answering. "Rumours."

"Are they true?"

"I never defeated ten warriors in single combat! For the most part I was just trying to stay alive."

"But you did save a cub from a fire?" she asked. When I just shrugged vaguely, she smiled and said, "That does sound like the kind of stuff legends are made of. Kelly, why'd you think they cheered you in there? They've heard what you've done for them, they respect you. Tahr gave you what she feels is the greatest honour that can be given. What you've done won't be forgotten in a hurry."

How right she was about that? Was that reason Tahr had adopted me into the Clan? Or was it something else, something political. The hierarchy of Sathé nobility was a snarl of intrigues, alliances, misdirections, and misconceptions, all buried so deeply beneath facades of goodwill that only someone born and raised into the system could truly have a hope of understanding it; let alone manipulating it.

My interference in the Challenge had really pissed Tahr off. I still had the scratches. But there hadn't been just anger in her reactions, there was also fear. I hadn't been Eastern, not even Sathé; an enigma in the metaphorical eyes of the law. How could a person be recognised as such if they didn't even have clan and family? The Sathé word 'animal' translates as 'not Sathé'. That was us. By Sathé law I couldn't be called before a tribunal to be judged as a proper 'person' could but there was action could be taken against me. . . of an unofficial sort, a terminal sort, in a back room or side-street.

Eliminate the only random factor: Politics isn't a personal affair - it's cold and remote. Like an iceberg, most of it's hidden beneath the surface, and it's that part you can't see that's dangerous.

Thinking about that clenched a cold hand around my guts. If I was found out, if Sathé learned what had actually learned what had happened at Weather Rock, the best I could've hoped for was that caution to anger the Shirai Clan and reluctance to do away with something that could prove an asset to the entire Sathé race would at least preserve my life. That ceremony wasn't just an honor; it was an insurance policy, a shield. It wrapped me in the protection of the Shirai Clan.

But what would be done with Maxine?

"Max, has anyone said anything about getting you into the clan?"

She looked puzzled. "Uh. . . yeah. Tahr spoke about it earlier. She said that it'd 'take care of itself and in time you will join with the clan.' What'd she mean?"

"I'm not sure," I frowned. That certainly didn't sound like Tahr; too corny. What was she talking about. . . Then I put a couple of those words into the Sathé context. That could be what it meant. . . Could it? No. . . couldn't be. Still, thank God Maxine's Sathé wasn't quite up to nuances, riddles and puns. "You sure that's what she said?"

"Uh-huh. Word for word."

I shook my head. "I can't really say. I think I need a little talk with her." Again the smell of food drifted up to us and my stomach tried to remind me of all the hours since I'd last had a good meal. "Say, you hungry?"

She also sniffed the air. "Yeah, but not for Llama nuts."

I grinned. "Then how about we go somewhere we can get some decent food."

She brightened. "Sure. Where?"

"Uh, I think the Red Sails is about the only place in town that'd serve us."

At that her expression changed again. "Oh. What about what happened last time."

"That won't happen. They were in the Gulf payroll and we don't have to worry about that anymore. If you want we could get some Citadel guards to tag along."

"No trouble?"

I put one hand to my chest. "I swear. Scouts honour."

She pursed her lips, then shrugged lightly. "Alright. You're on. I'd like to get out of here for a while."

"You don't want the guards?"

"Nah, but do you mind if I get changed out of this lot?" she indicated the white eveningwear. "It's not the best stuff for walking around town in."

"Sure." To tell the truth, I wanted to get into something a little less conspicuous. I gave an exaggerated bow and held out my arm. "May I escort you to your quarters, madam?"

She giggled and took my arm, affecting a southern accent, "Why, sah. I'd be downraht honoured."

Ten minutes later I met Maxine at her door where she was still brushing her hair. She'd changed into levis, sweater, her leather bomber jacket, and solid hiking boots, all human made. I painted quite a different picture in a mixture of human OD shirt, boots, and my Sathe cloak and black breeches. Max looked me up and down.

"Sorry," I shrugged apologetically. "My other suit's at the cleaners."

She laughed. "Don't worry. You look. . . uh, great."

"Right. 'Uh, great' she says. Hell, who knows - maybe the look'll catch on. So, shall we go?" I fell into step beside her.

"You know," she said as we walked, "I don't really know much about you. I mean, where're you from? What did you do? What about your family? Huh?"

"Alright." I sighed and gathered my thoughts. "I'm from New Jersey originally. My parents, were killed in train crash when I was about two. I was adopted by friends of the family and grew up across the water in New York."

"Oh. I'm sorry," she said. I'd heard that too often. It seemed to be an automatic response from anyone who heard I'd lost someone.

"What? That I grew up in New York?"

She looked surprised. "No, that your parents were killed."

"There's no need to be. My foster parents were a great couple. I had a childhood a lot of kids would gladly trade their own parents to have. Anyway, it was a long time ago. Another world."

"Oh," she said again. "Why'd you join up?"

"Pay my way through the final years of college mostly," I said. "And I thought it'd be a change."

"No shit? Was it?"

"Well, yeah. I tell you though, I'd never realised how much I hated other people telling me what to do. I wonder what they've got me down as now: missing, AWOL, deserter. . . "

"I wouldn't worry about it," Maxine grinned. "What are they going to do anyway. Arrest you?"

"I don't know. If we ever get back there it could make it difficult.

'Gee, well you see Sarge, there was this planet inhabited by cats and they had a war and I was invited. Did I miss anything?'"

Max laughed.

Guards in ornamental armour stationed at corridor intersections stared as we passed, those who knew me standing to attention.

"Anyway," I said. "What about you? Your family? You told me your father's big in computer circles."

"Yeah. Well, he's got his Integrated Solutions and mom has her teaching job. We don't really need the money, but she enjoys it. The last of the philanthropists, I guess."

"Brothers or sisters?"

"Nope. Only child. I was on break from college and just wanted to get away from it all for a few days. I've got. . . had a thesis due and thought I might get some inspirations out in the mountains. Huh! Got a bit more than

that, didn't I."

"What're you studying?"

"Ahhh. . . Textile designs, some of the soft sciences: biology, psychology, English, struggling through calculus."

"Textile design," I noted. "That explains the dress."

She laughed, "Yeah. I showed Tahr sketches from my portfolio and she picked it out. I don't know what she thought of the other stuff in there."

The main entry hall of the Keep was around us now, our voices taking on the hollow tone they may acquire in a great cathedral. "I wish I could have seen that," I smiled, picturing it. "I think we confuse her enough as it is."

And we were down the steps and in the courtyard, walking through the pools of heat surrounding the bonfires that burned there, still chatting and learning. Servants bustled around, stacking wagonload upon wagonload of wood and keeping the fires stoked.

"You want to take the ute down?" Maxine asked me.

"Uhh. . . I don't think that'd work very well; we'd probably start a riot. Anyway, the parking's hopeless; probably get clamped. How about public transport instead?"

"Huh? What public transport?"

"I'll show you."

A few minutes later and we were riding. It hadn't taken much fast talking to get one of the Sathe carting wood up to give us a lift down; I think he was too terrified to argue. Anyway, he just sat there and drove, holding the reins and trembling violently while Maxine and I sat back on the bed chatting away. We got off at the bottom of the switchback road down from the Citadel and thanked him. He didn't speak, just continued to sit and stare at us with a stupefied expression.

Despite the hour, the town was busy and festive. There were stalls in the streets lit with strings of colorful paper lanterns. Merchants shouted, cheerfully praising their wares while decrying their competitors' produce. There were troubadours and acrobats performing. Maxine and I paused to join a small crowd watching a troupe tumbling and leaping with a little less facility than human acrobats could achieve and when we turned away we found there was a larger crowd watching us.

Oh, well. Only to be expected I suppose.

The Red Sails was a welcome haven. I greeted the bouncers at the door and they admitted us without a fifth glance. From the top of the stairs the crowd inside seemed about normal; the usual mix of wharfies, traders, craftsmen, and a few guards on their off-shift. The smoke of cooking and the oil lamps used still gave the place its own cloud ceiling. The odours of Sathe and food mixed and mingled with the clatter of mugs and cutlery, the snarls and spats of voices. Some Sathe stared, which was usual, and some actually greeted me, which wasn't. I suppose hearsay of the Red Sail's unusual patrons had spread.

"Hi, K'hy!" The cheerful greeting in a familiar mangled English came from behind the bar. Dun colored fur and a flash of white teeth came from behind a pile of dishes balanced precariously on a tray. "Be right with you," she called, navigating with the ease of long practice through the clutter behind the bar to the door leading to the kitchens.

She returned half a minute later wiping her hands on a grimy rag and once again I wondered about the health regulations in this place. "K'hy. Mas. It has been a long time. Good to see you."

"Same here," I smiled back. "How is life treating you?"

"A?" she blinked, then grinned and leaned against the stained countertop. "Ah! Not too badly. Not too badly at all. Now, what have you been doing with yourselves?"

"Not a lot. Max has been working on her speaking."

She looked at Maxine. "Any improvement?"

"I like to think so," Maxine replied.

"Hah!" the Sathe female flinched back in surprise. "She speaks as

well as you!"

"Well," I waggled my hand in an 'iffy' sort of way, "almost as well. . . uhnn!" I drew back as Max cocked her elbow again. "Alright! Uncle ! As well as I do!"

"You are lucky she does not have claws, K'hy," the Sathe chuckled. "Now, are you drinking?"

"Oh, sure. Max?"

"You have any Steinlager? Thought not. . . Ah, ale for me."

"Same here, two ales please," I asked. "Also a meal if you could."

"Ah," she grimaced. "Your burnt meat? I thought there would be ample food at the Citadel this night."

I glanced at Maxine who made a face "It is not to our taste. Too. . . fancy for us. We prefer something simpler; like last time, no internal organs. Oh, and you'll also want this." I handed my knife across.

She took it, flipped it over, then slipped it under the bar. "Remind me to return it, all right? Very well. There is something cooking back there; I'll make sure it is dead and burnt. Find a table."

"Thanks. . ." I started to say, but she was already skittering off to the kitchen.

We found our table, scratched black wood in a dim alcove. A single beeswax candle flickered, the wax running down the side to puddle on the tabletop. Jeeze, against this just the formica and cheap plastic of a truck stop would look like a five-star restaurant. Maxine squeezed in opposite me, settling herself on the rough planks that served for seats. The candle threw deep shadows across her face, but her eyes glittered. "Kelly, what's her name?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"I thought so. How long have you known her?"

I scratched my head. "Ahhh. . . Not sure. I met her a while back, before you arrived. She almost put a quarrel through me. I guess things went uphill from there."

"Friendly, though."

"Yeah." God, that she was alright. No prejudices neither, as that night way back when had proven. "It helps, you know."

"How do you mean?"

I drummed a short tattoo on the claw-torn tabletop: "A Sathe being so openly friendly. I mean, you know the looks you get just walking around the Citadel. When they're friendly it makes me feel like a person."

She nodded. "Oh. Gives you hope they'll maybe be able to treat us a human beings and not some kind of freaks?"

The two are kind of synonymous here, but I knew what she meant. "I hope so. Kind of weird though: humans of different races still haven't learned to live together and here we are trying to do that with a different species."

"You really think we'll have better luck?" she asked, brushing a strand of dark hair back.

"I hope so," I replied. "Damn, I hope so."

We were quiet a while, watching the Sathe watching us. I wondered what they were thinking when they saw the two of us sitting here. So many of them covertly glanced our way, met my eye, then hastily turned away again.

"Max."

"Hmmm?" she turned back to me.

"Something I picked up." I reached into a pocket and pulled out the heavy little circlet. It glittered dully in the candlelight, the filigree head of the eagle shining silver. "I thought you might like it."

She blinked at me, then picked up the amulet by the thin chain, holding it dangling and twisting in the light before breaking into a smile. "Kelly, it's. . . thank you."

I smiled back. "Try it on."

She did so, tossing her hair forward to slip the chain over her head -

it didn't have a clasp - then she touched the dime-sized circlet where it nestled against her throat. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah, it is," I agreed, meeting her eyes. "But it can't compete."

I think she blushed then. Damn candlelight: you can't see a thing.

Two pewter mugs banged down in front of us, spilling liquid. Furry muscular arms leaned on the table and a muzzled face grinned down. After that brief normality of Maxine it came as a slight shock. "Alright," she said, "Two ales. Warm and honeyed." Then she spied the pendant. "Ah. . . Very nice. A gift?"

"From Kelly," replied Maxine.

"Sathe made? I thought so, but I don't recognise the style. Not local?"

Max shrugged: "I do not know. Kelly? did you find this down south?"

"Uh-huh."

The Sathe started. "South? What were you doing down there? The war. . . " Then it clicked: "Weather Rock?"

"Yes."

"Then it WAS you! My Ancestors! I heard stories coming back about the fighting there. There was talking about a handful of Eastern warriors stopping the Gulf advance in its tracks and leaving the fields covered with their bodies. They said there was a monst. . . uh, something not-Sathe helping us and I thought it might be you, but every description I heard was different. Hai, were some of those things they said you did true? Killing hundreds of them? Tearing a Gulf officer's heart out?"

I flinched in shock. "Where did you hear THAT?"

"I do not know. Just some troopers. Rumours."

Rumours. More stories. Lies. I felt a surge of anger. "Shit, rumours like that I do not need."

I think she noticed my irritation; Her nostrils flared. "I get your food."

I watched her melt back into the crowd, one cat among so many, then I sighed.

"Hey." Maxine swatted at my hand. "Don't let it get you. Not all of those rumours are bullshit. I mean, you did save lives. You had to take sides somewhere."

A flash of waves of Sathe going down under machinegun fire. . .

I shook my head: "Did I? We could've run."

"Where? They'd just come after us, wouldn't they? We couldn't hide forever. . . What's so funny?"

I shook my head. "It's just an argument I had with myself a while back. Do I run? Where do I go?"

"Oh." She glanced out of the booth at the room. "You talked yourself out of it."

"Yeah. Like you said, I couldn't spend the rest of my life running."

"No." She took a sip from her mug, grimaced. "If you hadn't got involved in the first place. . . "

"Hmmm? How do you mean?"

"Tahr. When you first saw her. . . I mean, why did you help her?"

I tasted my own drink: warm and malt and slightly sweet. I'd had a conversation along these lines before. "I didn't have much of a choice at the time. They were trying to kill me. Afterwards. . . well, she was almost dead and I wanted to find out just what the hell was going on. I just couldn't leave her." I watched another bead of wax run down the side of the candle.

"You weren't scared of her? I think I would've run."

"Scared? Of her?" I chuckled. "Bleeding, half-dead. . . Hell, yeah, she scared me shitless at first. I mean, I didn't know her language, I expected to wake up with my throat ripped out. It took time before. . . well. . . before we. . . before we knew each other."

There was an awkward silence. Maxine took a hasty drag from her drink and I stared uncomfortably down at my own mug and mentally kicked myself in the head. Why did THAT have to rear its head? however unintentionally?

Then she cleared her throat. I saw something awkward coming. "Ah, Kelly. . . I never really apologised."

"Huh? What for?"

"What I said about you and Tahr," she replied, not able to meet my gaze. "You were right: I didn't understand. I thought. . . I didn't know what you'd been through together. I'm sorry."

Those words. Amazing how just that little bit of forgiveness lifted a weight. "Thank you."

She touched the amulet. "While you were gone, she was worried about you. I've never seen her. . . She was scared, Kelly, scared for you!"

"So was I."

And our food arrived, stacked high on a tray adroitly waltzed through the crowded by the female bartender. Back to her buoyant self she handed out the steaming dishes. "As you wanted: just flesh and burnt."

Burnt. . . Now that was a relative turn. Medium-rare was more like it. Still, it looked one hell of a lot more appetizing than that stuff lurking in the bowls back up at the citadel. The meat was actually cooked, and there were more plants than any Sathé would want: potatoes and a leaf that looked a bit like lettuce. A thick gravy smelling like peanuts spread across the meat and chunks of rough bread perched on the side of the dishes.

"Hrilya likes a challenge, but he cannot understand why you would want to ruin a perfectly good meal. 'Why not just throw it into the fire', he said."

I poked at a steak. "It looks fine to me."

She hissed. "I would imagine they would have delicacies you could only dream at up there tonight. A rare occasion indeed."

"Has this kind of occasion happened before?"

She scratched her chin. "Ahhh, I cannot say for sure. There was something. It was way before my life though. There was also the Lake Traders, but they settled their differences. Now they are gaining more land in the South. You would have seen their representatives at the Citadel this night."

"Yes, they took oaths from several Gulf Clan Lords."

"Only fair. They helped us, so we repay them." She picked up the tray and seemed about to leave, then stopped and cocked her head at me, then at Maxine. "What about you two. How did the Shirai thank you?"

"A new name."

She nearly dropped the tray: "You are serious?!"

"Yes."

She stared, the tip of her tongue lolling from a corner of her mouth.

"I would never have believed it. So, now what is your name?"

"Kelly ai Shirai."

"The Shirai herself. K'hy, you have some powerful friends. I would never have thought anyone would bring. . . people," a hesitation there, "like you and Mas into their clan. I mean, you are. . ." she trailed off, looking embarrassed.

"Yeah," I nodded. "But she only named me into the Clan. What about Mas?"

"Huh?" she blinked, then her ears flickered. "No, K'hy. You do not understand; You have been named into the Clan so your mate also carries the name."

"But we are not mated."

"What?" She looked taken aback at that. "Not mated?"

"No."

"I would have thought. . ."

"HAI! FERHIA!"

She looked up at the shout from across the room. That male who'd stopped me the first time I'd come here was glaring our way. "Shave you, Ferhia! You are not paid to move your mouth all night!"

"I'm not paid enough to do anything else!" she muttered. "Alright!" she

called back, then gave us an apologetic smile as I paid her. "Sorry. If you need anything else. . .

"Ferhia!"

"ALRIGHT!" she bellowed back. "Clear the way! Coming through!" and she was weaving her ways through the tables and Sathe back toward the bar.

We were quiet for a while.

"Uh, yeah, well." I picked up a rib and was about to take a mouthful.

Max was just watching me, ignoring her meal. "That's what Tahr was talking about, isn't it. That shit about 'in time'. I'm supposed to be your. . . mate, as she so delicately put it. Shit! Why'd she DO that?!"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Perhaps she thought she was helping us. . . "

"Helping?!" she looked insulted.

"Look. She was pretty torn up when she found out you were upset about. . . us sleeping together. She thought she'd been helping me, then she saw you were so shocked by what had happened. It confused her. She would never deliberately do anything that'd hurt us."

"No." Maxine quietened. "She wouldn't." Then she startled me: "She really loves you, you know."

I shrugged vaguely, trying to damp down the emotions her words stirred. What had they talked about while I was away? A lot, by the sounds of things, and Maxine had come to learn a little more about Sathe. . . and me. "It. . . it wouldn't have worked out."

"No." A corner of her mouth twitched. "I don't think so."

The next few minutes there wasn't much said. Three meals a day and not a lot of hope of anything in between, cold buildings, it all added up; You got hungry, and when food was available, you ate.

We ate. In silence. Every so often I'd look up to meet Maxine's blue eyes, watching me. The amulet at her neck burned warm red-gold in the candlelight, a circlet of reflected fire against the paleness of her skin.

Not fur; skin.

It wouldn't have worked.

She glanced up, her eyes meeting mine, then ducking away again. Blue eyes, with their whites startling in the dimness. It wasn't fear; it was normal.

Normal? What was normal?

Two females, one not even human, the other. . . Well, when we first met she'd tried to give me three adam's apples. Normal?

But she was beautiful. Not in the same way Tahr was; it wasn't that lean, predatory sleekness. It was something different: the delicacy of the face, the cheekbones and nose, the eyes, the waves of dark hair of a texture and sheen no Sathe mane could ever match.

"Kelly?"

"Huh?" I'd been staring. I blinked and smiled. "Yeah?"

She ran a piece of bread around the remnants of her meal, sponging up gravy. "What're we going to do now? I mean. . . can we go home?"

Home. . .

I shook my head. "I don't know. . . Tahr. . . you know a while back she offered some land. I laughed then, but now. . . well I might just take her up on that."

"Land? What for?"

"Make our own home," I said. "Get used to living here and find some way to make it on our own. I can't keep freeloading off her forever."

"Oh," she tore a piece of dark bread off and nibbled at it. "Somehow I can't see myself spending the rest of my life here, with them. It just doesn't. . . I mean, forever: it's a long time. . . "

"Hey," I reached over to touch her hand as she trailed off, getting that anxious look about her. She flinched, but didn't pull away. "Look; you're one hell of a gutsy and beautiful woman. You're not the kind to let this get to you." I held her hand.

She clenched mine back, then mumbled, "I can't," and slid out of the alcove, turning and stopping like she'd forgotten something; just standing staring across a smoky room of Sathé. A few turned to stare as she stood there, green eyes blinking curiously, voices muttering. More looked and she continued to just stand there, frozen on the spot, like a kid out on stage for the first time staring dumbly back at the audience. I saw her hand trembling.

"Hey."

Table legs squeaked on the floor as I pushed it aside, touched her shoulder. "Hey. Max?"

She just grabbed me and held on, her face buried against my neck as if trying to block the world out and I was holding her tightly, feeling her heart racing and her hands digging into my back.

The noise around us died.

Damn! I'd never thought! What had she been through? I'd had Tahr. I'd had a close friend, someone I could talk to, someone who'd been a warm presence on those dark nights. Soft words and gentle hands to comfort me when I'd had enough of the world, when I didn't understand. Max. . . she'd had no-one. I'd gone away and she hadn't known if I'd ever be coming back. For her Tahr was a stranger, even stranger than me, who'd had the best intentions, but who probably still frightened her.

How often had she woken up from nightmares? as I'd done.

So, in that crowded tavern, reeking of food and staring, overheated Sathé, I just held her, murmuring reassurances while she clutched me and shook. I don't know how long it was until a hand touched my shoulder. Greenstone eyes, ears tipped, concern:

"You are all right?" the barkeeper - Ferhia - asked.

"Max?" I whispered.

She pulled back a little with eyes running water, nodded.

"You want to go back now?"

She flinched. "Kelly, it's cold. . . empty. . . "

Cold. Yeah, it was. Perhaps I'd grown used to it. . . She'd never spoken and the Sathé had never known; how could they?

"Ferhia? Could we. . . ?" I glanced toward the ceiling. She understood.

"Ah. . . certainly. Here, this way."

We followed and I felt eyes on us as we left and I really couldn't give a damn.

It was a different room. She had the decorum for that at least. There was a window and a bed and a tiny fireplace. Ferhia lit a few candles and pointed at the logs in the hearth. "If you are cold. . . " she trailed off, then gave me a subdued smile and closed the door behind her.

Maxine slumped on the bed, her English out of place in that dark little room. "Oh, God. I made a dork of myself down there."

"I've done worse," I smiled as I checked the window. Quiet outside; Gibbous blue moon over the harbour. "Just get some rest, okay? It'll help."

In the dim candlelight she nodded. That bowl-shaped bed creaked as she leaned back into the furs and sheets. I moved to snuff a candle. "I'll sleep on the floor, okay? Just get some blankets and that. Used to do it all the time when I was with Tahr. I'm used to it."

"Kelly?"

"Yeah?" I hesitated with my arm outstretched, ready to snuff another candle.

"Would you stay? I mean, with me? . . . Please?"

I clenched my fist to hide the sudden trembling in my hand. Unexpected? Of course the idea we'd get horizontal had popped up. How could it not? That 'if I was the last guy on Earth. . . ' line taken to extremes. But that's all they'd been: ideas. Dreams.

Now, by the light of one candle she was mostly shadows, eyes watching me. Carefully, like I was walking on ice, I settled beside her, just sitting

and putting an arm around her, holding her close. Strange muscles shifted and smooth fingertips stroked my arm, my hand. "Max." I choked. I didn't know how to tell her. "We can't. . . If you get. . ."

Her hand took mine and guided it, touching her forearm and the tiny tube just under the skin. "Norplant." Her voice husked. "No kids, guaranteed."

Now, by the light of one candle the shadows shifted, a corner of her mouth quirked in a smile, the rest of her face hidden behind a fan of hair. Like mist on my hand when I brushed it aside. . .

A warm morning.

Sounds of the town woke me. Across the room, early light was trying to peek through cracks in the shutter, throwing dime-sized spots of light on the wall above me. Still half asleep I stretched, then rolled, draping an arm across warm skin and spooning up to a smooth back, lightly nuzzled the short hairs on the nape of a neck, drinking in our mingled scents. Married now. . . Well, sort of married. Funny, but I'd always thought I'd have known when it happened.

"Huhhnnn?" Maxine made a sleepy noise.

"Morning and waking," I greeted her.

Maxine stirred, yawned, rolling over and snuggling up against me, her breasts pressing against my side and an arm draped over my chest. "Morning to you too, lover," she smiled lazily. "How you doing?"

"Ah. Not too bad. Better than I have for a while." I replied.

From outside came the cries of gulls, a baker shouting that the morning bread was ready, the best in the Realm. Llamas bleated and hooves and wheels squealed and rattled on cobblestones.

A normal morning.

"What day is it?" Maxine asked.

"Dunno. Sunday?"

"Huh? How'd you know?"

"Feels like a Sunday."

She giggled and slapped my arm and for a long while we shared pillow-talk. You know. . . the kind of vital nonsense relationships are built from; just chatting about the weather, each other, whether or not Sathe could play baseball, why exactly do escalator rails move just that bit faster than the thing you stand on. Those little nothings. While we talked and laughed and touched, the sounds outside grew louder and the light brighter until the new day was something we just couldn't ignore.

"Ah, shit," I sighed, lounging back into the warmth of the sheets. "I guess we'd better start thinking about going back."

"Awww. . . Why?" she groaned and stroked my chest, carefully tracing the raised tracks of the scars that had startled her so much at first. "I was starting to like it here."

"Must be the company."

She looked thoughtful. "Nooo. . . I don't think so."

"Hey!" I affected hurt, clasping hand to my heart. "That wounds."

Her gentle touch turned to a playful thump on my chest, then she propped chin on fist and smiled down at me. "A good night?"

I let my fingertips play across her cheek. "The best."

"Better than a Sathe?"

That hurt.

"Hey! Sorry. Joke. All right?" she slapped my chest again and stared into my face, concerned. Blue eyes, smooth skin, auburn hair soft like fur like green eyes white sharp teeth. . .

Maybe Maxine saw the twitch in my eyes, maybe it was some other cue. Anyway, she smiled, then leaned forward to plant lips against mine. I responded and our breath mixed as our tongues wrestled until she pulled back, panting and smiling. "Is there somewhere around here to clean up?"

Ensuite bathrooms are not an option in Sathé inns. The nearest hot water would be down in the kitchens, and there was no room service.

So I was the one groping my way down a dark stairwell, fumbling with the buttons on my shirt and trying to avoid splinters in my bare feet. The door at the foot of the stairs opened into the Red Sails tavern and I stepped through, bracing myself for the stares and. . .

Tahr waiting.

The room was empty. Chairs were stacked on the tables as in any human bar after hours. There were a couple of narrow, barred street-level windows adding their dusty streams of sunlight to the feeble sputtering of oil lamps. The fire that had roared in the hearth was just glowing embers now. She was sitting at a single table in the centre of the room, a pitcher and two mugs before her.

"Morning, K'hy." Her voice was hollow in the empty room.

I stared in shock. "What the hell..? What are you doing here?"

"You vanished last night. No warning. You had a lot of people worried."

Not really an answer. "How did you find us?"

She shrugged. "Sathé see things. They talk. . . "

Floorboards creaked as I wove my way through the deserted tables, plucked a chair and lowered myself into it, still nonplussed. "We were followed, right?"

She actually shrugged, human style. "A drink? You sound dry."

I nodded and took it.

"So," she breathed, "Mas also has a new name this morning."

"You know?"

"I scent. You reek of her. It is hard not to notice." Her hands toyed with the mug, batting it back and forth on the table. "I had thought you were worried about cubs."

Yeah. I had been. Thank God for Norplant. "It. . . it is something we do not have to worry about for a while. "

"And you claim not to be driven like us," she smiled. "You enjoyed yourself?"

Second person that morning to ask me. . .

"Immensely. . . but, Tahr, why did you have to play games with us like that?"

"Games?"

"At the ceremony, could you not have done the same for Maxine there and then? Why this way? It seems so. . . risky."

"Risky?" she looked confused. "In what way? It is perfectly normal for one of a pair of mates to take the oaths. K'hy, people took you for mates from the instant they saw you. It would have been. . . awkward to name the pair of you. Questions would have been asked. Besides, what would we do if we had to name every bond servant in the Gulf Realm? I could never finish it in my lifetime! Anyway, it worked: you are mated and she is Shirai."

"But if we had not mated?"

"Why would you not?" she asked. "You are the only h'mans around. You are male, she is female. You are both leery of sex with Sathé. I think that limits your options."

"Tahr. . . Oh, Damnation! Tahr. Please, believe me! It does not work like that."

Her muzzle wrinkled, then her right ear slowly drooped. "I did wrong?"

"Yes," I nodded, then smiled. "But thank you. Your heart was in the right place."

She glanced down at her pelted chest, but the ears came up again.

I took a taste from my mug: Wine, slightly tart. Uhhh. I put the mug down again and asked Tahr, "How did things go at the Citadel?"

"Southerners gave their oaths to the Realm and the Lake Traders. The Northerners were pleased with that. Easy victory and easy land: a couple of lesser seaports around the Gulf. There were questions asked about Hraasa's

death."

"Oh."

"It was not from their Born Ruler. A couple of their Lords were asking some questions that were. . . well. . . enlightened guesses. They got no answers that could help them." She gave me a despairing look, "Strange One, why could you not have been a little more circumspect?"

My Furry One, if I'd had the choice, I'd have taken him out with a fucking tactical nuke.

However, I kept my mouth shut.

"Ah, well," she sighed. "As long as they do not try and follow the scent further, I think things will be interesting enough. Here, there is something I think you would like to see."

Outside, a body of royal guards was blockading the front door; that explained why the place was dead. Where was the staff? The guards stiffened to attention as we stepped out, some glancing at my bare feet. Tahr ignored them and pointed up the street to where the walls and towers of the Citadel were visible over the shingle roofs. Beyond those walls a patchwork, tear-drop shape was ponderously hauling its way into the flat, blue sky. The mismatched colours, the reds, greens, purples, blues, greys, yellows caught the sun as it rose from the shadow of the Keep and gleamed like a technicolor rainbow. I could hear shouts rising from the surrounding town and even jaws in the stolid Royal Guard dropped.

"You brought it back!" I stated the obvious, in case she hadn't noticed.

"Of course," Tahr's greenstone eyes were riveted on the rag-tag orb hanging above the ramparts and towers of the Citadel. "There were protests about your being brought into the Clan. Now that flies to show what you can give us." She smiled, "It has swayed more than a few opinions in your favour. Here, inside. I have a few more words."

Inside again. Tahr talking as she led the way back downstairs, "You see, that can be your future. There is no limit to what a Clan Lord would pay for knowledge like that. Enough trade goods or coinage to keep you in luxury for the rest of your days. It was a reason the Lake Traders did not press the land issue: they saw what you were capable of at Weather Rock and suddenly they are being uncommonly courteous in their dealings with us.

"You built that machine for the library and the scholars went mad over it. Already they are stretching the paper supplies, but they are sending quality texts across the Realm." She snorted, "Huh! some of them even began printing sheets of gossip and news compiled from traders and selling them around the town and the Citadel."

Huh? I blinked. Tabloids already? Sheesh, they didn't wait around. I rubbed my chin. "Tahr, bits and pieces here and there look good and may be fun to play with, but I would like to do more to help your people."

She stared back at me for a long while. "Do we need help?"

"Uh. . . I did not mean it to sound like that."

"Then how did you mean it to sound?"

"Knowledge like that is like a part of a puzzle, but only a very small part. I do not know exactly how to put this. . . Umm. . . Humans used to live to only about thirty or forty years."

"Wait," she tapped at her ear. "I could have sworn you told me you live to seventy or eighty."

"Now we do," I explained. "After many centuries of hard work." I went on to briefly recount the ages leading up to the time I had left behind: The Dark Ages, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, up to our own Atomic Era. "They always took us a little further forward in our knowledge, but we had to make sacrifices. Tahr, I have given it some thought and I think we can show you where some of the mistakes lie. We can save a lot of lives."

"But what does that leave us?" she replied gently. "What of our dreams? How would your people feel if a more advanced culture suddenly appeared on your world and told you how you should run your lives?"

"Yes," I wagged my head in a half-nod and shrugged, "I can understand

that. But look, farmers may work themselves near to death just to try and scratch out enough to see them through winter. If I know ways that would triple their crop yield, would that be interfering? I know that I could not just watch a cub die from illness or injury when there are ways of preventing or curing it. That would be murder. Where do you cross the line between helping and interfering?"

Tahr stopped, scratching her jaw while dust motes danced around each other in the sunbeam behind her. "Well, I think we can say that you are not forcing us to adopt your customs. I believe, if anything, the opposite has occurred." She looked pointedly at my Sathe breeks, then stepped closer to reach up and brush her hand against my face, stroke my hair where it hung to my shoulder.

"Kelly?" Maxine was at the door, watching us. I should've guessed she'd walk in. . . "What are you doing?"

"Having a mad, passionate affair with Tahr," I replied lightly. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason," she smiled as she walked towards us, swinging her hips and jutting breasts out more than normal; trying to catch my attention. She saw Tahr as a threat? Possible. "What's she doing here," she asked in English and that question was silk wrapped around sharp steel.

"I asked her the same thing." I spoke Sathe. "We left in rather a hurry last night. She came to see we are all right."

"You had a good night?" Tahr asked Maxine, her nostrils twitching.

"Very good," Maxine smiled back. I put my arm around her and felt her relax against me. Tahr's nose was working overtime. "What were you talking about?"

"Our future," I provided.

"With the things you already have you can be wealthy," Tahr said. "But K'hy had some other ideas."

"Hmmm?" Maxine looked interested. "Like what, lover?"

Tahr's ears flicked like heliograph shutters and I felt my own burning. "Ummm. . . starting from scratch, from the beginning. Tahr, you remember you said we may be able to gain some land of our own?"

"Yes. You laughed."

I nodded. "I remember. . . Tahr, I do not think we can stay at Mainport and live off your generosity. We have to learn to make our own way in your world. What I am asking would take time and effort before it started making a profit, but I think we can make it work. What I am asking for is a home."

The pressurised oil lantern hanging over my desk burned brightly. I'd copied Max's Coleman, improving on the Sathe design by putting a pale glass bulb and chimney around a hollow wick. My dinner sat on the edge of the desk, practically untouched; cold. The light threw shadows around the cluttered room as I rubbed my eyes, and sighed at the lines on the drawing board.

Six hours I'd been there, working on a way to improve our vacuum pumps. The filaments in the lightbulbs we'd started manufacturing kept burning up. Filling the bulbs with an inert gas was out of the question at the moment, the best we could do was a vacuum, but our current pumps weren't efficient enough. Yet.

"Put that away, lover," came a quiet voice from behind me. "You've been working at that all day. It's nearly midnight."

"Oh," I stretched and glanced at my watch. "God, I never noticed."

Maxine stepped up behind the chair and put her arms around my neck.

"Come to bed," she murmured in my ear.

I pushed the board away and reached up to hold those arms. "Hmmm, alright. I'll just clear up here."

"No, now."

I laughed and got up, hugging her against my chest with a mock growl.

She squealed and put up a token struggle before relaxing and wrapping her arms around my waist. We just held each other for a while.

"Told you we could make it," I murmured.

"Know-it-all," she retorted and a Sathe burst through the door, ears flattening when he saw what he'd interrupted. "Ah, High Ones? There are alarms. Possibly bandits."

"Oh, SHIT!"

Outside the skeleton of the windmill rose above the packed dirt of the courtyard; wooden bones cutting geometric shapes out of the night sky. Beyond the felled trees on the edge of the lower meadow, the forest was black, the night as dark as night, the branches a wooden tangle shades darker than the nightblue of the sky behind them. Faint light spilled onto the dirt as the doors to bunkhouses were thrown open, the Sathe inside spilling out, still buckling their armour on and preparing their weapons. The best fighters drawing their swords while the rest cocked their repeating crossbows and took their posts on rooftops and lumber piles around the courtyard.

The fortified roof of the guard house overlooked the whole area. Sathe waited there in absolute blackness, bleary-eyed workers. The officer in charge of the guards met us as we came up the stairs. "Sir, the alarms on the main road gave them away, then there were more on the game trails circling around."

"Not animals?"

"Not a chance."

"Alright," I looked out toward the main road. Clouds were blowing across the moon; at some moments I could see as far as the treeline across the meadow, at other times hardly the Sathe in the guard tower with me. Sathe weren't so handicapped. "How many?"

"They must be feeling lucky." In the dimness his teeth flashed. "About twenty on the main trail, another fifteen around the back."

Altogether our forces numbered sixty-five, but there were only a dozen professional guards. We never intended to do much fighting, but we could look after ourselves if we had to. I unlocked the cage covering a series of knife switches and pressed a small button; a needle clicked. The cells were charged and ready.

"Tell me when they reach the markers," I muttered at the officer. He nodded; a mannerism some of them had picked up from me and liked to copy for some reason I never had been able to figure out.

We waited.

"There!" one of the Sathe pointed.

They coagulated from the utter darkness of the trees. One minute the meadow was empty, the next silent shadows running up the track towards us. Their hope was to take us by surprise.

Fat Chance.

"They are about to pass the markers. . . NOW!"

I flipped half the switches down.

Down in the field, flashes of flame lit the night. Gouts of dirt and dust were flung into the air, preceding the pile-driver retorts of the explosives. The screams started before the echoes had died away.

The mines were intended as anti-personnel devices, jury-rigged claymores. Just an angled trench with a sealed barrel of powder at the bottom and a mixture of heavy and small rocks stacked on top. When the mine was detonated it sent a spray of debris blasting out across the fields before it like a beehive round in a field piece.

They were surprisingly effective.

The echoes of the explosions resounded off the distant hills of the broad valley, fading away, leaving only the cries of wounded and shell-shocked raiders: Piercing screams and whimpers that were even more horrible for all their helplessness. From the buildings behind us came a few final snaps and yells as crossbows finished off the raiders. Darkness is no great handicap for a Sathe archer.

Howls rang out and metal-wielding silhouettes dashed out from the

buildings, running towards the ruined figures of the raiders where they sprawled and huddled. The few raiders who tried to flee were quickly brought down.

I pulled the key from the console in front of me and tucked it into my shirt before going to join the workers as they rounded up the survivors.

All five of them.

I looked down at them huddled in the dust, hands bound behind their backs. Their clothing was tatty scraps of leather cobbled together to form some semblance of armour; grime seemed to be the only thing preventing many of the filthy outfits from falling apart again. All their swords were clean and gleaming, showing that care had been lavished upon the tools by which the bandits hewed their living. At least there weren't any glimpses of Gulf armour beneath the rags.

I picked up the weapon of one survivor: it was an Eastern soldier's scimitar. The wounded owner frantically tried to scramble away from me as I pulled the scabbard from his waist and sheathed the weapon, then lifted his kilt and took the dirk concealed on the inside of the leather strips. Seeing that, the workers searched the other captives for hidden weapons.

A small arsenal stacked up on the ground.

"Sir?" Tlase - the Sathe I considered the foreman - was waiting, a crossbow cradled in his arms. "What do we do with them?" he asked, pointing at the bandits.

"Lock them up under guard," I said. "We will turn them over to the garrison in Last Hunt tomorrow. The bodies. . . Bury them. They will make good fertiliser."

The foreman signed assent and stalked off, hissing orders as he organized the workers into guard details. I grabbed one of the bandits by his scruff and hauled him to his feet. He whimpered at my touch; a pathetic sound. They were locked away in a small, sturdy building normally used to store wheelbarrows.

There was a commotion from over where the Sathe were dragging corpses from the road and stripping them before burial. I started over in that direction and several of them saw me coming, breaking off and running towards me. Their excited gabble came so fast I was swamped, unable to follow them:

"SHUT UP!"

They fell silent.

"Now, what is the matter?"

"Sir!" One of the workers - a young male, grey in the darkness - held out a handful of trinkets: rings, a few strips of intricately embroidered cloth, a small chain with pendant. "Sir, my uncle. . . Nresan. These are his. He has a farm just north of here. These are his!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! Sir, my father gave this armband to his mate just last summer!"

My heart lurched. Were we the bandits only targets that night, or had they been busy. . . "When was the last time you saw them?"

"Ah. . . A few days ago. It was after. . . "

"Oh, shit!" I was already halfway to the shed where the ute was kept, yelling over my shoulder: "Tlase, get four of those guards! Now!"

The engine ground a couple of times, then turned over with a growl I hadn't heard for a long time. I revved a couple of times, watching the gas needle climb and settle at just over half-full. The passenger door opened and Maxine jumped up into the cab, the VP-70 still clutched in her hand. "What's up?!"

I tried to explain as I snapped the lights on, shifted into gear and floored it, the wheels spinning and throwing dirt against the shed walls. Tlase was running towards us with the four Sathe guards in tow. They all shied aside as the headlamps swept over them and the truck skidded to a halt. "Get in!" I bellowed out the window.

The Sathe fumbled with the lock, then yanked the door open. Three piled into the back while the other two vaulted into the bed behind the cab. I put

my foot down weaving through the buildings that turned to forest flashing through the lights as the truck barrelled down the narrow track, trees whipping past on both sides. Behind me, a Sathé in the back seat was keening in terror as the truck bounced and crashed on tortured suspension, the ruts twisted and wound in the headlights. For that split second it was something I'd been through before: road gone, headlamps sweeping across bush and grass, metal protesting. . .

A Sathé yelled and a wagon appeared across the road in front of us. The ute slewed sideways, not far enough, and wood splintered, crashing across the hood and windscreen and then the smashed remains of the wagon were vanishing in the glow of the taillights, the llamas tangling themselves in their harnesses as they struggled in panic.

The silence after the engine shut off was palpable. I stepped from the cab, one hand resting on the door as I stared at the remains of the farmhouse.

Fully a third of it was charred rubble. By some fluke, the fire had died away, but that hadn't saved the rest of the building. The door was lying several metres away, amid the remains of smashed furniture and tattered clothing strewn in front of the small house. The front porch had collapsed at one end where the supports had been eaten away by the fire and what looked like a bundle of rags had been wrapped around a post flanking the steps.

As we got nearer I saw they weren't rags.

I've seen a lot of senseless, horrific things over the years; they've acclimatised me to violence, but things like that. . .it was the remains of the farmer tied there. He'd been skinned and gutted, his innards dangling from the gash in his stomach, castrated. What was tied there didn't resemble a Sathé at all.

There were rumbling growls from the Sathé. Maxine turned green and bit her lip.

Tlase and I found the remains of his mate in the bedroom. Naked, stinking, and skinned. The remains tied spread-eagle on the stained furs of the small bed still had fur on the hands and feet and head, like her mate. . . Why? Why skin them!? Who the hell would buy a Sathé pelt?! It was sick.

I didn't let Maxine go in there.

We staggered out of that charnel house and slumped down in the cold glare of the Ute's headlights. I looked around at the faces of the other Sathé. One of them was the one who had said this had been his uncle. He stared at me with wide eyes and all I could do was shake my head. "I am sorry."

"They had cubs," he said in a faint voice. "Two."

What?!

While Maxine and three of the others searched the outlying farm buildings - the barn and ploughshed - the rest of us searched the little farmhouse from top to bottom. Finally a shout from one of the Sathé brought us running.

She was kneeling over a hole in the floor of the main room. The cover that had concealed the crawlspace was flung aside. It had been hidden by smeared ash spilled from the fireplace. The Sathé reached in and lifted out a couple of bundles of cloth and laid them on the floor then looked at me.

I knelt and looked at the tiny balls of fur in the bundles, neither larger than both my spread hands. The pair'd been inhumanly silent in their dark hiding place, now the little one mewled as I picked it up, wrinkled face with shocking blue eyes baring its minuscule teeth in an instinctive snarl. The claws were still soft as the hands grasped at my finger when I touched the thin fuzz of fur that covered its face. How long since they'd last been fed?

"Kelly. . ." Maxine stooped down beside me and gasped as she saw the cubs. "My God," she murmured and I smiled as she scooped the other bundle up, cradling it against her breast and touching the tiny muzzle with a delicate

finger. It chirred and nuzzled her finger.

"Two cubs," Tlase was staring openly. "They were very lucky."

Lucky. . . In some ways, yes.

I looked up at the Sathe; the nephew of the deceased farmer. "Would your Clan take these in to care for them?" I asked him. He gaped back at me and his ears went back in shocked surprise.

"Sir. . . it is impossible. . . you know. . . " he trailed off, nervous and uncomprehending, looking to Tlase for support.

Oh, shit. Yeah, I remembered about Sathe and their offspring. No matter what happened, it was only a matter of time. Shocked and lost, I looked down at the mewling bundle in my arms, then up at the faces of the Sathe.

"They cannot just be left here. . . "

"No," Tlase agreed with a mournful look at the cubs. "We can make it quick."

"You cannot mean KILL them?!"

"Well there is not much else we can do," he said sadly and with perhaps a touch of anger. It was a deep-seated wound in the Sathe psyche that I had touched; their inability to nurse another's cubs. It was natural - a part of them - but they were never able to completely accept it. Children were a rare and precious thing to them, and to be forced to kill them out mercy rather than let them die of neglect. . . that hurt deeply.

"No!" Maxine stood up and put her foot down.

Tlase stepped back, afraid of his employer's anger.

"Max. . . " I started to say.

"Kelly!" she snapped, horrified. "You can't! Look at them!"

I did. I looked down at the minuscule bundle of life I held in my arms. The tiny buzz of a purr was coming from its throat as it nuzzled up against me. Maxine moved over to me and leaned her head against my shoulder, the two helpless cubs nestled between our bodies.

I gritted my teeth and we made our decision. For better or for worse. .

.

The snow was being driven before the wind in a howling, opaque blizzard. From the windows of the house it was only occasionally possible to see the dark blades of the mills and the warm fireflies that were lights in the other dwellings as the flurries shifted and moved. A few Sathe muffled in cloaks and parkas pushed their way through the drifts as they tended miscellaneous tasks.

It was amazing the way a small town had erupted from what had been a cluster group of buildings only two years ago. And it was still growing. There were Sathe immigrants of all descriptions and professions, many of whom had just been drifters, passing through on their way from nowhere to nowhere, attracted by the jobs and technology that promised if not riches, at least a living. Even so, we were usually short-handed.

I let the heavy drapes fall back across the window and turned to look around the room with pride. The A-frame house was the product of two years hard work by Sathe and humans; a test of the construction techniques used for the other buildings around the growing community. It was also our home.

The living room was large and open plan with a sunken living area in the middle and a dining are situated off to one side. The circular stove in the centre of the living space was the first fruit of the cast iron industry we were firing up. The copper coils encircling it were part of the wet-back water-heating system, but would also become part of the central-heating once our steel-working techniques became refined enough to manufacture the necessary pumps. Above, the room stretched upwards to the peak of the roof while a mezzanine balcony led to the rooms on the second floor.

Wood proliferated throughout the room. The strong grain of varnished and sanded oak softened and highlighted at the same time by the illumination of gas and pale electric lamps. There were rugs on the bare wood floor and

pieces of furniture scattered about: a couch, cushions, a low table, and a couple of chairs in the living area. The stove door was wide open, the fire inside throwing light and heat upon the massive bearskin lying before it.

Maxine and I didn't have many possessions as yet and we definitely weren't what you'd call wealthy; both the funding we received and all the profits we made being invested in new ventures, but the trade our community was doing in textiles and other goods such as cast-iron stoves, spinning wheels, medicinal alcohol, clothes pegs, safety pins, cement, lumber, extruded wire, tools and a multitude of other utensils was booming. I'd seen the bearskin among the wares of a merchant passing through Last Hunt and brought it on impulse. For 'sentimental' reasons if you will.

I sank down on the cushions before the fire and relaxed in the warmth that poured from the open door. Within the stove the coals were glowing red, orange, and white; like untouchable gem stones.

"Dreaming again?"

I looked around and smiled as Maxine came down the stairs and padded bare-footed across the room to curl up beside me on the rug. She hadn't changed much: perhaps slightly taller, darker, and more muscular. . . well, we both were. We had to work hard to live.

"What are you staring at?" she murmured.

"The only thing around here worth staring at," I smiled and accepted her noncommittal 'hmmmp' as my due. "How are they?"

"Out like lights."

"Busy day for them, huh?"

"They loved the kite, lover. You know, you spoil them with those toys."

"Huh," I chuckled and caught her around the waist, snuggling up, just lying there together in a warm glow. Now we had a home. Beside me Maxine relaxed and for a while we both just stared at the fire before I got up to fetch some wine from the rack.

However the two goblets sat forgotten on the low black-lacquered table as we lay entwined in one another, her fingers playing with the small hairs on the nape of my neck. The wind moaned as it sought its way around the walls, but from the snow that seared the sky outside in cold flurries there wasn't a sound.

But the woman beside me was warm, so warm, and my fingers were beginning to wander. . .

Of course the doorbell jangled. "Oh, shit no!" I groaned. "Not now! Who the Hell's that?!"

Snow whipped into the small reception room as I pulled the front door open. It was well below zero out there and already drifts over two metres deep were banked up. Even with their fur, the Sathe waiting on the landing were bundled up against the cold: our guards wearing new quilted, down-filled jackets and carrying crossbows, the other pair Sathe wearing ice-encrusted animal furs and cloaks, frost on the pieces of cloth pulled over their muzzles for what little protection they offered against the biting wind.

One of them reached up wearily to snag the mask with a claw and pull it down; smiled stiffly at me through the frost beading her fur.

"Tahr?!"

There were guest quarters that any Sathe noble would have considered extravagantly luxurious with insulated walls, indoor plumbing, centrally heated rooms, double layers of glass in the windows and rugs on the floor. The guards at the gates had already taken the liberty of having the Shirai's escorts boarded there, dripping melting ice and looking half-frozen and slightly numb at some of the devices around them. It was going to be necessary to provide a staff to assist the guests who had no knowledge of stoves or electricity.

Tahr and H'rrasch would stay in the house.

I helped them hang up their frozen clothes to thaw off and dry out. The ice and snow covering them was beginning to melt, soaking them through and through. Incredible that they could actually walk through that blizzard outside without any footwear whatsoever, not a touch of frostbite.

I opened the inner door and led them into the house proper. Their eyes went wide and they stared at the alien architecture and the steady glow of the lamps. "My Ancestors," Tahr rubbernecked. "K'hy, you have been busy!"

"There is still much to do." I smiled then as she moved to hug me. Wet fur, but there was still a trace of that old, familiar scent of sun-dried straw, brushing against me as I returned the embrace. "Tahr, I have missed you."

"A year is a long time," she agreed.

Maxine was waiting to greet them, hugging both Sathe with abandon, then offering them clothing. The Sathe politely declined, they were quite warm enough in their fur. Together they sank into a chair before the fire with every indication of relief and H'rrasch stared at the cast iron oven with a wondering eye.

"Now," I said. "What the hell are you doing out here? I doubt that you were just passing and decided to drop in. What is up?"

"Kelly," Maxine touched my arm. "Haven't you noticed?"

I blinked. "What?"

"Dammit!" She punched my arm. "Look at her. She is pregnant!"

I did. My eyes wandered down to her midriff. There WAS a slight bulging. . .

"True?" I asked.

"True," she smiled and burrowed a little nearer to H'rrasch's side as he slipped an arm around her and nuzzled at her neck. "I am surprised you did not notice, K'hy," she said.

I realized I was still staring and broke into an uncontrolled, shit-eating grin. Tahr would understand what it meant. "Congratulations!"

"You asked why we are here," H'rrasch said. "That is the reason. Would it be possible for Tahr to stay until her term is done?"

"It will be a few months. I need a quiet place. Somewhere I can leave easily when the need takes me," Tahr added quietly.

"Of course!" Max answered instantly. "I'll get the spare room ready."

"Tahr, H'rrasch. . . You are always welcome here, you know that," I said.

They thanked us profusely and unnecessarily. I left the Sathe curled up on the chair together to get more wine and goblets. Perhaps some day we'd have crystal glasses and decanters, but that would be way in the future. We sipped at the rather. . . ah. . . immature table wine whilst our guests recounted the affairs of Mainport and we reciprocated with news of what had been happening in our enclave.

Tahr suddenly broke off and was staring past us, at the staircase where two small faces were peering through the railings. "K'hy, Mas. . . who is that?" she asked.

"Some members of our house you have not yet met. . . Kids, come over here!" I called.

There was a moments hesitation then the two cubs stood and clattered down the stairs. Brother and sister, still with their thick spotted baby-fur, neither of them taller than my hip. They scampered across the room - forgetting their toe claws again - and stopped, suddenly shy, staring at our guests. I held out my arm and they burrowed in against my side, still staring.

"This is our son, Shane, and his sister, Sasha," I smiled. "Adopted of course. Kids, this is the Shirai and her mate, H'rrasch."

"Tahr?" Sasha craned around to look up at me.

"Yes. That's her."

"You told us 'bout her," Sasha solemnly told me, then left my side to walk across to Tahr, staring up at her. "You are pretty," she said, "Like father said you were."

Tahr blinked at me, then looked down at Sasha's upturned face again and slowly reached out to stroke her muzzle, obviously confused. I could see the questions and incredulity stirring; questions that Maxine and I had answered innumerable times before. With a final ruffle of the children's manes I said, "Come on, back to bed with you."

"Aw, father," Shane protested.

"Hey," I cautioned with a gentle tweak of his ears. "It is late and there will be plenty of time to talk to them later on, okay?"

"'Kay," Sasha went willingly, but Shane was a little more truculent.

"I'll take them," Maxine volunteered.

"Shit!" Shane mumbled under his breath as Maxine herded the pair of them back upstairs. Where'd he learned that?!

"K'hy," Tahr was still staring after them with her ears wilted like dying plants, "I do not understand? How is it. . . Who are they?!"

I sighed and leaned forward. "Their parents were both killed - murdered. We found them, looked after them as best we could. Tahr, you know we are unable to have children of our own. . . they are all we have; they are our family."

"But how?!" she demanded. Her fur was starting to bristle. God knew I'd done a lot of things Sathe found new and strange, but this. . . I knew Sathe had been trying for so long. For us to succeed where so many of them had failed, it couldn't help but touch some tender spots.

"To raise another's children as your own. . . ! How did you do it?!"

I shrugged. "I am not entirely sure myself. Perhaps because we are not Sathe."

"Explain."

"You live by your noses," I said. "Your Times, reflexes, and childbirth are ruled by scent. The way you respond has been deeply. . . uh. . . built into your minds. H'rrasch, you know how you feel during Times. You cannot help yourself."

He signed assent.

"Sathe cubs probably learn their mother's scent when they are born, but it is not the absence of that scent that make them refuse to feed, I think that rather it is the presence of another Sathe scent." I looked at my hands then back up at the Sathe. "If the newborn cub scents a mature female who is not its mother - perhaps even mature males - it just will not feed. I do not know why."

"But why did that not happen to you?" H'rrasch asked.

"As I said, because we are not Sathe. Neither Maxine or I make nor respond to Sathe scents. . . You could say that we are neutral," I gave a small grin. "But that is just a theory. I could be completely wrong."

"K'hy - incorrect or not. . ." Tahr stopped speaking and huddled even closer to her mate staring at me with an expression of wonder. "What you have done is just. . . impossible! It is against everything I have ever. . ." again she trailed off and just stared at me.

I sobered and met her eyes before saying, "I could never leave them to die without trying to do something. You know that." The fire had died to a pile of small, glowing coals that scattered into a shower of sparks when I threw a pair of logs in. After a few seconds they caught and were soon blazing away. I closed the door and stood with my back to the stove, my hands clasped behind me, staring at the Sathe as they stared back at me.

"Yes," Tahr finally acknowledged as Maxine came back downstairs, "I know, but what about the cubs? I mean no offence, but does it not. . . uh. . . disturb them to call you 'Father' and 'Mother'?"

"They know we are different from Sathe," Maxine said. "There are enough other Sathe and cubs out there for them to see the difference, but they have grown up with us. To them we are family."

Tahr's head went back but she kept her eyes locked on us. Finally her muzzle wrinkled as she said, "And they are all you have. I think I can only wish you well with them."

Outside, the snowstorm had died away as quickly as it had sprung up. The black lid of the clouds were sliding aside and the stars were casting their aloof light down over the countryside made white; harsh angles softened by drifts.

Inside, the fire burned low while the Sathe ate a small meal, then - warm, full, and extremely tired - collapsed in the spare room we'd prepared. Tahr had caught a glimpse of our human-style bed in our room:

"Alien," she said, shaking her head and grinning in her imitation of a human smile. "Square beds. . . You never told me about that, K'hy. Does it make sex more interesting?"

Max and I left them to laugh themselves to sleep.

Spring was a time of sudden warmth and growing things pushing their way through the retreating crust of snow. Grass grew, foliage returned to trees' canopies, and blooming flowers proliferated.

The mills were turning again and the foundries coughed smoke, steam, and goutts of molten metal. They were small by modern standards, but considered incredibly efficient by the Sathe of the day. With the refinements in glass manufacturing I had introduced - the addition of sodium carbonate and producing sheet glass by congealing it on a bed of molten tin - the demand for the clear, glass vessels and sheets we could provide had taken off. By employing mass-production techniques the profits were quite considerable; enough to build a school and employ Sathe teachers for the growing number of cubs in the community.

That was something else that happened in spring.

Sathe females began disappearing into the virgin forest that surrounded us on all sides. The remaining Sathe treated it as absolutely normal and over the past years I had learned not to worry too much about it.

Until Tahr vanished.

"Do not fret so! She will manage," H'rrasch assured me as we stood on the edge of a meadow at the outskirts of town looking out towards the tree-covered hills, the mountains blue shadows in the distance, snow still heavy on their peaks. He had brought me the news that his mate had gone on her sabbatical. "She will be fine."

I stared at the treeline. The last time I'd seen her she had been uncharacteristically crabby, almost hostile. Her abdomen was swollen, her six breasts had tumefied and turned pink, poking through her fur, sometimes leaking droplets of milk. She'd vanished two days ago. I worried about her.

Damnation, it was dangerous out there and she was unarmed, probably naked as she discarded clothing in her maternal madness, with only her claws and fur for protection.

"It will be enough," H'rrasch insisted. He touched my arm and looked at my face, as if trying to fathom my emotions. "There are very few things out there that would want to tangle with a female near her term."

A few bison - massive, shaggy mountains of stupidity - eyed us dispassionately as we stopped beside the fence around their pasture, then returned to tearing up mouthfuls of grass.

"So, are you looking forward to being a father?" I asked the Sathe.

He started to laugh then stopped and looked puzzled. "I do not really know," he confessed.

"Come on," I said. "Yes or no."

"Really, I do not know." His muzzle wrinkled. "I have watched you playing with Shane and Sasha and I envy you, but I also fear the responsibility. By my Ancestors, I do not know what to do!"

That took me back to the problems we had had raising our Sathe children; those sleepless nights and the headaches. But there were also the fun times, the happiness and pleasure they brought Maxine and I. We may have broken every rule in the Sathe child-raising book, but at least we'd done something,

we had something to show for all our labours.

"H'rrasch, you will know what to do. You can bet on that. It is hard work. . . " what was he smirking at. . . ?

Something small, furry, and muscular tackled me around the knees from behind, knocking me over into the grass and another furry something landed on top of me. I rolled aside, roared with mock anger and scooped up the two squealing cubs, one under each arm.

The Shirai's mate was leaning against the nearby fence, hissing his amusement.

"It can also be a lot of fun," I grinned at him as the cubs hung themselves around my neck with furry little arms.

It was seven days later, the dead of night, when Tahr returned.

Maxine heard the noise first, dragging me out of bed by an arm even as she was bolting for the door. I untangled myself from the sheets and stumbled after her.

H'rrasch had beaten us both.

Below us, in the living room, Tahr was a dirty, haggard shape dressed only in scraps of clothing sitting cross-legged on the rug before the glowing remains of embers in the fireplace. She looked up as H'rrasch slowly approached and her muzzle suddenly distorted into a snarl, the bundle she was cradling tucked protectively against her breast.

Slowly, oh so slowly, her mate went to his knees in front of her and for a while they just stared at each other. Then her head lowered and in the dying light from the fire she seemed to make up her mind, reverently passed her precious burden to H'rrasch. He took one of the tiny fists in his hand and bent his head low, his muzzle touching in what seemed an almost human kiss.

I put my arm around Maxine and drew her close, taking in the scent of her hair as together we watched the silent ritual taking place below. It was only when Tahr slowly collapsed into an exhausted heap on the floor that we went down to help ease her off to bed.

She wouldn't sleep soundly until the baby boy was placed in her arms and H'rrasch was curled protectively around them.

Later that night as Maxine and I lay in bed, barely awake and listening to the wind in distant trees, Max touched my leg, "Kelly?"

"Uhn?"

"What do you think about having a child."

"We have kids," I replied, stupid through doziness. Her hand lightly thumped me, "I mean have a child," she berated me. "One of our own. Human."

Human. I didn't know how to answer that. A child. How could we. . . a child, here. What kind of a life would it be? I thought of our adopted offspring asleep down the hall, two children, not human but they were our children. We loved them. A human baby, part of us, raising it into this world.

She caught my hesitation. "I never meant we should. Just asking."

"Oh." It raised awkward feelings. "I don't know."

"Just asking," she murmured, then in Sathe, "Just asking."

Dreams that night: Sathe playing with human children, tall buildings of glass and steel and streets alive with people. Through it all the feeling of my wife as I moved close to her and went back to dreaming of a place I'd once called home.

Introductions first I think. My name is Shane ai Davies.

If you have not heard of me, then you have probably heard tell of my parents: the most. . . unusual in the known world. As for myself, my only claim to fame is that I am also somewhat unique in the world, being the only person who can claim to even approach fluency in the noises and writings that humans call English.

It has not been easy.

This, the translation of the first of my father's journals, has been the real test of my abilities. The years of reading, re-reading, referencing, and trying to understand have - as my parents would say - 'paid off'. You have just read the result.

And I can understand the shock you are probably feeling.

It came as just a great a blow to myself to learn what really happened at the Battle of Weather Rock and I have debated long and hard as whether or not to pass this on, finally deciding to leave this particular manuscript where it will be found. . . eventually, long after my parents are gone.

I only yearn that this revelation will not disrupt the peaceful and productive relationships that have grown between our realms. Many Sathes and two humans have devoted their lives to this cause and I would be loathe to see the successful results rendered and scattered to the wind by an incident far in the past.

And the future is not going to be kind to them. In the eighteen years since they adopted my sister and myself they have hardly changed; perhaps their hides have grown darker and thicker in appearance, but that is all.

I look at the Shirai - the one whom in my irreverent youth I knew as aunt Tahr - and I see how grey her fur has grown, the age catching up to her. She is still strong, still many years left, but I know the day is inevitable.

And I know that with her end, a part of my father will die.

Pain to be added on pain, it will not end there. I know that they will outlive all the Sathes friends they have known since their arrival, and - I am fairly certain - they will most probably outlive myself and Sasha. They will have to suffer the deaths of so many friends.

But what they have done for us. . .

I can look out my window and see how my home has changed; grown. In my memories of a small town with few buildings and Sathes and many open spaces I was a cub, carefree and living for the present. Now, in these memories of the present that I am chronicling, I am an adult, nineteen years and mated with a cub of my own, and I see a city made of dreams.

The roads of New Home are broad and clean, never flooding. Buildings of stone, wood and amounts of glass and metal unthinkable ten years ago flank the tree-lined thoroughfares, their positioning, shape, and materials such that they remain cool in the heat of summer and warm in winter. As darkness falls, the streets and buildings glow with lights that burn steadily in wind and rain. A strange and wondrous place, but indisputably beautiful.

And the population has grown incredibly. With the trained healers and improved sanitation there has been a drastic drop in the mortality rate due to illness and accident. Sathes are healthy and happy and well-fed, with well-groomed coats wherever one looks.

It would seem that once the wheel of progress has started rolling, it is self-perpetuating; indeed, it actually gathers momentum. Cubs, adolescents, and no few adults are trained at the new crafts and skills available. Their invaluable labours open time to such as myself, artisans and thinkers whose work does not directly contribute to the survival of the community. That work can produce more ideas to produce still more leisure time for thinking.

Distant clans and the great Clans of other Realms are willing to pay great amounts to have their craftsmen - even their cubs! - sent the distances to be educated here. To the surprise of and consternation many in Mainport my

father wholeheartedly endorses this, steadfastly refusing to ban the other Realms from Home. If it was not for his relationship with the Shirai and the prosperity he was bringing the Realm there would have been an outcry demanding a trial on the basis of treason against the Realm.

You really have to know him to understand that what he does he is doing for the good of all Sathé, not just the Eastern Realm. He freely shares his knowledge and ideas, but he makes a point of encouraging students to think of new ways to utilise and improve the tools. I suspect that several times he has deliberately designed inefficient devices to see if Sathé could see the ways in which they could be improved.

And he refuses to have anything to do with accepting commissions to produce anything specifically intended for warfare, although as he justly states, a toothpick could be used for murder.

He learned that some students were attempting to emulate the substance he calls 'gunpowder'. On receiving the news he just bobbed his head, as if he had been expecting something like that. I know that that night he went to the university to speak with the students working on those projects. I do not know what he said to them, but from that time there was no further news of their work. It is not as if they stopped what they were doing, just that there was no news of successes, nor of failure. The deans claimed to know nothing of what was transpiring and I tend to believe that. If the students are working under anybody's direction, it is my father's. I think he knows what he is doing.

The maps he and my mother have drawn have led great ships across the seas to discover new lands and civilisations that are only now beginning to be explored. Huge vessels ply the skies between Realms and towns, carrying trade goods and those passengers brave or foolhardy enough. Messages cross the distances between cities with the speed of thought.

Two beings have given us the keys to a new age and with them they have entrusted us with the vast responsibility of using it wisely. Let their faith in us not be in vain.

EPILOGUE

The final page of text on the wall screen faded to whiteness. With ponderous, overly-dramatic slowness, the tome swung shut, its cover gleaming with texture-mapped polished leather and gold trim. An arm reached out to tap a key on the board. The screen snapped off and the only light in the room was the unobtrusive glow from the terminal monitor.

There was a moment of silence in which the hum of the ventilators seemed loud.

"So? What'd you think?" he finally asked, swivelling his chair around to watch her.

She was highlighted in the muted glow from the screen, a subtle aurora that changed her, bringing her features out in sharp contrasts: highlights and shadows, sharp bone and smoother curves. The chair's leather creaked and rustled mutedly as she settled back into it, one hand coming up to stroke her angular cheek. "Strange. . . I guess. An outsiders view of us. Those are really his words?"

"It probably lost something in the translation. And he makes references to things nobody but nobody understands; like that 'god', whatever or whoever that is."

Mas nodded vaguely, still staring at the wall. He blinked, then leaned forward to touch her arm lightly. "You all right?" he ventured.

"Huh? Yes, fine. Just thinking." She abruptly glared at his intruding fingers and he reluctantly pulled his hand back. Her fur, a deep blue-grey, had a softness that belied its almost metallic lustre. Actually, he reflected, he wouldn't mind touching her in a more tender manner, perhaps she.

. .

"Don't even think about it!" she snapped, ears back.

"I can wait until your Time," he said with a grin, then ducked back to avoid a clawed hand that hissed through the space his face had been occupying a heartbeat before. "Just kidding!" he yelped, casting oil on dangerous seas. "I'm sorry!"

She rumbled a growl deep in her throat; mollified, but barely.

There it was again, he reflected, that damnable wall she built around herself whenever anybody tried to approach her. He couldn't believe that anyone with her looks could be a virgin, but there were tales about her, that she actually took suppressives when her Time came around. He doubted that, but what did it take to reach her? What kind of upbringing could possibly do this to someone?

The growl faded but those eyes still smouldered.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "Back to business. Alright? Any questions?"

Mas hissed and drew a deep breath. "Does anyone have any real idea of what happened to them?"

"Nothing you could build a house on," he replied. "Let's see. . . It was a hundred and fifty years ago, fourteen years after Shane's translation. Tahr had acquiesced her titles, her only son winning the challenges and becoming the new Shirai. She lived to see her grandchildren born, then Tahr ai Shirai died in her sleep. Peacefully. Fifty-three years old.

"The K'hy and your namesake left a few months later. Nobody knows where they went. One night they took an airship and headed west and vanished into history. The other h'mans couldn't or wouldn't say where they were going. People are still saying they've seen them; like that sighting last week."

"That would make them about a hundred and eighty years old."

"About that," he chuckled.

"No other traces?"

He scratched himself. "Nothing. But, it's a big continent. Maybe one day we'll find something."

"Or perhaps they went home," she wondered aloud.

"That's one theory. Home; or perhaps somewhere else." He waved a hand toward the screen. "As K'hy said, who knows how many other realities there are."

Mas reached out for the keyboard and hesitated, a claw clicking against plastic as it described small, indecisive circles on the console. She was drifting again. Thinking. Had that narrative actually touched her in some way? Now she leaned forward and began pulling more pictures from the disk, displaying them on the wall screen. He settled back in his chair and watched, just an observer.

Images.

Light and colour: monochrome and truecolor.

Oils and watercolours, charcoal sketches, portraits, anatomical details, ancient photographs that - despite their poor definition - were made all the more forceful by the knowledge that the subject before the lens was REALITY, not an elaborate costume. They flowed past in a mesmerising collage of high resolution images that imprinted themselves upon the retina and in the memory.

The student glanced sideways at his companion. Her profile illuminated with flickering reflections, glowing eyes locked on the screen. Then her hand twitched, freezing the display. When his eyes returned to the monitor, he understood why she'd stopped.

"That one," he nodded at the screen, "is hanging in the Hall of Memoirs. Very nice."

It was a portrait. Two portraits actually. A strikingly beautiful middle-aged female gazed coolly outward, levelly meeting the eyes of any observer. The other figure stood at her left side, hairless fingertips lightly resting on the fur of her shoulder, gazing past her with the eyes that had captivated so many.

"He looks so. . . terrified," Mas said. "The white around his eyes."

He knew it was normal for humans, that forsaken gaze, but it certainly appealed to the females. For some reason it drew them in like flotsam into a whirlpool. It fascinated him too; the look of a lost cub.

"You can see it there," Mas said.

"What?"

She flicked a hand toward the screen as if trying to snatch the words out of the air: "That rapport between them. It's in the eyes, the way he's touching her. . . Hard to explain exactly what it is." She stared at the picture, her head cocked to one side. "You know, the artist has done an incredible job on him. Far better than the other pictures I've seen. All the others make him look too. . . sathelike."

The student flicked his ears as he answered. "She should have. Sasha ai Davies was quite familiar with the subject."

"His daughter?"

"The same."

Mas slouched back into the chair. "Saaa! I had no idea she was an artist."

"Oath! What planet've you been on? Never mind. She's done scores of portrayals of Sathelike and humans. They're all down in the Hall of Memories and the museum." He studied the picture again. Ah, but Tahr had been beautiful: lean, muscular, ears with a few nicks, her mane plain and unadorned in the old style. Beautiful and. . .

He blinked. Familiar? He glanced at the female sitting beside him, back to the picture. Was it. . .

"What?" Mas was glaring at him.

No. No way.

"Uh, nothing." Coincidence, or a trick of the light. She was still watching him suspiciously and any resemblance was gone. He yawned and stretched - sinews crackling - then glanced at his watch, blinking the glowing numerals into focus. He blinked again and swore, "Chastity! We've got lectures tomorrow. . . today. . . whatever. The other volumes are going to have to wait."

She hissed softly and slapped the arm of the chair. "I guess so. Do you think we'll have time to see them all?"

His ears twitched. "You a fast writer?"

"Yah."

He shrugged. "Then we should be able to fit them in. You coming?"

"Go ahead. I'll catch up."

"All right. Don't forget the disk."

Again Mas was staring at the wall screen, the chromed claw of her index finger idly scratching at the arm of the chair. Almost lazily she reached out and pressed two keypads simultaneously. The printer hummed, spat out a glossy ten by ten. Mas took it and stared at it. Those eyes had round pupils.

Human.

Where are you?

"You ready?" came a voice from the door.

"What? Huh! Yes, coming," she slipped the picture into her bag and took the disk from the drive, still thinking. She'd learned a lot that night, more than even her lessons back at the Manor had taught her: things about the Sathelike past, and also some of her own history. They had told her there was a resemblance, but she herself had never been able to see it.

Still, perhaps someone else had. Thoughtfully she touched her face as she left.

He closed the door behind her, sealed it. "I guess I'll see you in

lectures, a?"

"All right. Oh, and thanks for your help."

"Anytime," he smiled, then took the plunge. "Ah, I was wondering: are you going to be doing anything this coming break day?"

Mas stared at him, waiting as his ears slowly wilted under her scrutiny. "You had something in mind?" she finally asked.

"I . . . I thought maybe a meal? a play or film?"

She stared again, then flashed a smile, "All right."

"I just . . . All right?"

She almost laughed at that befuddled expression. "Why not? Just one condition."

"What?"

"You help me finish this. Work with me."

"Done." That hopeful way his ears perked up again - her own twitched. He was useful: a little naive, but useful. It wouldn't hurt to humour him. Anyway, she found him less objectionable than many of the other males - even some of the tutors - who'd tried to paw her. Not unattractive - and cute; in his own naive sort of way.

She smiled and patted his arm. "Perhaps we should get some rest now."

He fell in beside her as they walked back across the library floor.

"Good idea. Your place or mine?"

"Don't push it, male."

"Just asking. . . "

The voices and padding footsteps of the Sathe faded into the vast silence of the Citadel, the miles of corridors. Overhead, the huge banks of lights snapped off, one by one, leaving the broad foyer permeated with the almost imperceptible glow filtering through the high dome and storm beyond.

Rain drummed against old glass, but there was nobody to hear it. Away in the distance lightning flashed: once, then again and again . . .