

**THE USE OF NARRATIVE IN ORDER TO BREAK
THE MASCULINE DOMINATION
OF THE HERO QUEST**



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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, Department of Humanities in fulfilment
of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.**

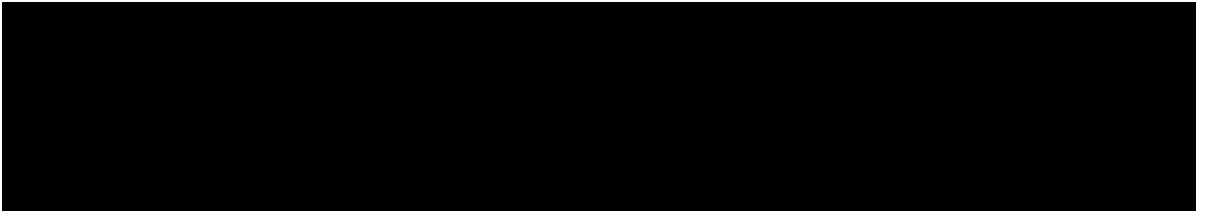
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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis '*The Use of Narrative in Order to Break the Masculine Domination of the Hero Quest*' is my own work, except where otherwise cited, and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other academic award.



Karen Simpson Nikakis

November 1997

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Thank you to Con, Chrysanthé and Andreas,
for going far beyond the call of familial duty,
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ABSTRACT

In 1949, the mythologer Joseph Campbell published his treatise *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he analysed hero myths from disparate times and places in order to construct a universal hero journey - the monomyth. Drawing on the works of Carl Jung, Campbell gave the monomyth a psychological dimension, suggesting that its universality resulted from its function in guiding men and women through major life transitions. The main elements and motifs of the monomyth are replicated in modern narratives, both visually and in writing. However, these modern heroes, like their more ancient counterparts, are predominantly male; their hero quests, those of manhood. In spite of this imbalance, the monomyth can serve the same psychological purposes for the female hero. What is required is the construction of a narrative which allows a re-evaluation of traditional female traits, and by so doing, a redefinition of the meaning of heroism.

The novel *Snowmelt* shows that this is possible, through the creation of a female hero whose feminine strengths of social obligation and connection, enable her to successfully navigate the classic (masculine) hero-quest landscape to adulthood. These strengths also allow the male hero to realise the full breadth of human emotions, necessary to the completion of his quest. The elevation of these traditionally female characteristics does not require the demotion of the male hero traits of courage and aggression, but rather, serves to broaden the range of paths that heroes, of either sex, may follow in their quest for adulthood.

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INTRODUCTION

Odysseus, Hercules, Beowulf, Cuchulain, Roland, Arthur, Siegfried, Bond, Rambo, Skywalker; old names and new, some more fancy than fact, all epitomising the essence of herohood - masculine strength and aggression. These are the heroes of Western culture, yet the heroes of other traditions, whose names and actual deeds might be less familiar, are similarly recognisable. In myth, legend and tale, in television and film, the hero is overwhelmingly stamped male.

The notion of the hero is very old in human history. Many centuries before the birth of Christ, the Mesopotamian god-king Marduk slew the primeval monster Tiamat to create the universe (Richardson 1982, p.87), and in Ancient Egypt, Horus embarked on a long and bloody struggle to avenge the murder of his father Osiris (David 1982, p.106). In Greek mythology, Jason sought the Golden Fleece, Achilles slew Hector, and Odysseus navigated the 'wine dark seas' homeward (Brewer 1974, pp. 473, 520, 774). Still later in 14th and 15th century England, balladeers sang of the deeds of Robin Hood, while the heroes of fairy stories continued on their giant-killing ways.

The reasons for the widespread existence and persistence of such myths and folktales have long been the subject of investigation.. Researchers such as Frazer, Levi-Strauss, Bettelheim and Campbell were particularly interested in identifying patterns of meaning which might account for the importance of certain mythic and folkloric structures over time. In *The Golden Bough* (first published 1922), Frazer draws upon a vast collection of mythic and folkloric tradition in order to, in his own words, 'explain the remarkable rule which regulated the succession to the priesthood of Diana at Aricia' (1963, p.v). In seeking to gain an understanding of a particular mythic story, Frazer examined similar elements within the traditions of many other cultures. This approach was emulated by later researchers such as Levi-Strauss who, in the words of his translators (Jacobson and Schoepf), sought to relate 'the individual to the cultural, the physiological to the psychological, [and] the analysis of institutions to the subjective experience of individuals' (1972, p.xi).

The psychological importance of myth and folklore to the individual has been the focus of both Bettelheim and Campbell. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, (first published in 1975), Bettelheim explores the structure, elements and motifs in a large number of fairy stories, in order to illustrate how these might be used by the child to deal with present anxieties and difficulties, and to aid in the child's future psychological growth. He notes that in fairy tales 'internal processes are externalised and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events' and that 'the unrealistic nature of these tales ... makes obvious that the fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in the individual' (1985, p.25).

Campbell shares Bettelheim's concerns with the psychological needs of the individual and his belief in the potential of myth and folklore to meet these needs. While Campbell has written extensively on the common patterns and purposes of myths, the work most pertinent to this study is his treatise on the hero myth, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949. In this, Campbell draws on the work of van Gennep (1909) to identify and outline a typical hero quest structure, borrowing James Joyce's term 'monomyth' (*Finnegans Wake* 1939, p.581) to describe it (Campbell 1993a, p.30). The structure, which Campbell suggests serves the psychological purpose of a rite of passage (or movement from one life stage to another), consists of three main sections, each containing a number of elements and motifs. The first section he describes as *separation or departure*, the second, *the trials and victories of initiation* and the third, *the return and reintegration with society*. Campbell's delineations reflect those within narratives described by Hodge (1990) as dealing with rites of passage:

First individuals are separated from their former identity and set of relationships, then they are inserted into a ritual domain where their old identity is destroyed and they 'die', to be reborn into their new identity and status, and finally they are incorporated into the community clearly marked by their new identity (p.177).

Campbell sees the monomyth as serving an initiatory or rebirth purpose also, at the individual level, the societal level, or in combination. Its scope may be grandly majestic or limited to the homely and comical.

As he says:

Whether the hero be ridiculous or sublime, Greek or barbarian, gentile or Jew, his journey varies little in essential plan. Popular tales represent the heroic action as physical; the higher religions show the deed to be moral; nevertheless, there will be found astonishingly little variation in the morphology of the adventure, the character roles involved, the victories gained (1993a, p.38).

While the delineation of certain life stages within the individual's life span has occurred in all human societies, its particularities have varied over space and time. As Nanda (1987) comments:

Every system of cultural transmission takes into account these different stages of life, although the definition of stages may vary from culture to culture (p.129).

Modern Western society recognises infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age and old age as sequential stages of life, but this has not always been the case. The present Western notion of life stages developed in medieval Europe, through the popularising of the 'ages of life' or 'ages of man', a treatise originating in the writings of 6th century BC Ionian philosophers (Aries 1962, p.19). Although employing familiar terms (such as childhood, adolescence, youth), its purpose was not to explore the nature of individual experience, but to enhance an understanding of the workings of the world. Thus human biology was seen as being part of the same law which governed the movements of the planets, the vegetative cycle of the seasons, the connections between the elements, the human body and its humours, and the destiny of a man (Aries 1962, p.20). As Aries notes:

A man's 'age' was a scientific category of the same order as weight or speed [sic] for our contemporaries; it formed part of a system of physical description and explanation (p.19).

It was not until later, in the 16th and 17th centuries, that such terms began to acquire their modern sense, and even so, the characteristics of each stage varied considerably from those of today. Research by Laslett (1979) and Stone (1982) paints a vivid picture of family and social structure in England and Europe during this period. Factors such as

the high infant mortality rate were influential in societal perceptions of the early part of life. As Stone (1982) comments:

Nothing better illustrates the resigned acceptance of the expendability of children than the medieval practice of giving the same name to two living siblings in the expectation that only one would survive (p.57).

As a result, there was a 'lack of sense that the child was a unique being' (Stone 1982, p.57), which affected not only the notion of infancy but also of childhood. Economic exigencies meant that children of the poor began work at an early age (Laslett 1979, p.3), and young people were exchanged as servants and apprentices among the houses of both the prosperous and the poor. In terms of status, both servants and apprentices were viewed as children, 'clothed and educated as well as fed, obliged to obedience and forbidden to marry, often unpaid and dependent until after the age of twenty-one' (Laslett 1979, p.3). This lack of power and personal autonomy contrasts sharply with present day notions of adolescence.

The delay in the age at which young adults were permitted or able to marry, coupled with their high mortality rate (Stone 1982, p.44), produced further discrepancies between 16th and 17th century life stages and their modern equivalents. In these earlier times, marriage had to await the ability of the couple to set up a separate residence, and the ensuing union was more commonly concerned with the protection and aggregation of joint wealth. In addition, such marriages were relatively brief, being broken by the death of one or both of the partners (Stone 1982, p.46). As Stone comments: 'it was, statistically speaking, a transient and temporary association' (p.46). In contrast, young adulthood in modern times is characterised by autonomy, both personal and to a large extent, economic. While marriages may still prove to be 'transient', their ending - via divorce - is chosen, rather than imposed through death.

The high mortality of young adults also resulted in the virtual absence of the life stage now dubbed middle age. Laslett (1979) notes that after marriage, a man in the late 17th century could expect to live 27 - 30 years, whereas today his life expectancy is closer to 45 years (p.105). Bearing in mind the delay in marrying, it is little wonder that 'a

"generation" now lasts half as long again as it used to' (Laslett 1979, p.105). Old age too, was a less frequent state. The parish records of Lichfield in England in 1695, show approximately 5% of the population as being over 60, compared with 14% in the USA in the 1970's (Stone 1982, p.48).

The life stages recognised in 16th and 17th century England and Europe provided the foundations from which our modern delineations have developed. Today, as in this earlier era, marriage remains the single most important life stage transition. Though its nature and frequency have varied over time, its basic element of the joining of two individuals to create a new unit, has remained constant. The establishment of such units provides individuals with greatly increased levels of personal autonomy. In addition, the assumption of adult identity and status by these individuals allows the social mores and institutions of the broader group to be perpetuated.

In an earlier study (Master of Education, 1995), I explored the potential of fantastic literature to serve as a catalyst for individual change. In narratives deemed suitable for children and adolescents, fantasy was found to offer readers the means to question their social institutions and mores, order their emotions, stimulate their imaginations and achieve spiritual insights. High fantasy in particular - which draws on mythic motifs and structure (characterised by fully-formed secondary worlds, quests and fundamental questions of right and wrong) - allows adolescent readers an avenue by which psychological change might be achieved, a change necessary for the transition to adulthood. The usefulness of high fantasy narratives, in providing a vehicle for the female hero to successfully negotiate this rite of passage, is central to this project.

The enduring importance of story telling in aiding the individual's movement through the major life stages, is evidenced by the rich and diverse body of myths which continue to characterise human society, and by other genres which draw heavily on mythic structure and motif. As Hodge (1990) points out, such 'ritual texts'

confront the inconvenient social fact that every community and every individual is subject to change which cumulatively threatens the illusion of stability of the social order, and the fiction of the identity. They do

so by taking as raw material the narrative given erratically by biology, and transforming it into a carefully segmented narrative, in which the moments of risk where change is acknowledged to have occurred are organised by specific rituals whose function is to police the anomalies created by maturation and other changes of status, clarifying ambiguities and clearly marking and legitimating transitions (p.177).

The particular importance of the hero myth (as described by Campbell), lies in its ability to serve as a catalyst for psychological change. The hero moves from childhood to adulthood, able to take on the duties and responsibilities of the wider social group. This movement in the monomyth is typically brought about by a journey, a journey into an alien landscape involving tests and trials, each serving in its own way to procure the death of the old identity (in Hodge's terms) or its transformation, so that initiates may be 'reborn into their new identity and status' (Hodge 1990, p.177). The transition is psychological, from perception by self and group as a child (or immature individual), to perception by self and group as an adult.

The use of the monomyth in an initiatory context, its broad geographical dispersal and its longevity all support its importance as medium of psychological change. Yet while both males and females must each undergo a rite of passage, the hero quests that Campbell explores are those undertaken primarily by male rather than female heroes. The use of the term *female hero* in this project, rather than the more usual *heroine*, is quite deliberate. The latter is most often used to delineate a female who aids a male hero or who figures in a male hero's quest, often as part of the riches the hero wins, a point taken up by Biallas (1989). He suggests the word is suspect because 'it often refers to the one who is saved by the hero, rather than to a person of outstanding courage, nobility, and other achievements' (p.185). As this project is concerned with how the masculine dominated hero quest might serve the female in her journey to adulthood, the term 'female hero' has been adopted.

One of the few myths with a female hero that Campbell cites is that of Psyche in her quest for her lost lover Cupid (Eros). In the myth, the two are separated when Psyche disobeys her lover's edict not to look upon him. Her jealous mother-in-law sets her a series of impossible tasks which she manages to achieve with aid from supernatural and

natural sources, finally being reunited with Cupid (1993a, p.98). While such female heroes are rare, heroines are far more common. They play the part of temptresses, jealous mothers-in-law, helpers and as prizes in one form or another. Yet despite this dearth of female heroes, Campbell expressly asserts the relevance of the hero myth for both sexes.

The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women ... therefore it is formulated in the broadest possible terms (1993a, p.121).

There have been a number of criticisms levelled at Campbell's work, most notably by Segal (1984, 1990), Biallas (1989), Dundes (1980, 1984) and Manganaro (1992). Most of these criticisms target the technique of comparativism which Campbell employs. Briefly, the comparativist approach emphasises similarities rather than differences between phenomena, the latter being characteristic of particularists. As Segal (1990) notes: 'Particularists assume that the differences among hero myths out-weigh the similarities, which they dismiss as vague and sketchy. Comparativists assume the reverse' (p.28). In valuing mythic similarity more than difference, Campbell has been accused of damaging the integrity of the particular heroes as they function in their own distinctive narratives (Dundes 1980, p.232), and of selecting and focusing on 'features that are the same in all the variants'. An additional criticism is that he 'randomly skips centuries and cultural provinces to dwell on the myths that fit his overarching pattern well' (Biallas 1989, p.30).

As well as criticisms levelled at his comparativist technique, Campbell has been censured for his hypothesis that mythology is a function of genetics or biology (Biallas 1989, p.30) (rather than of cultural diffusion), for his assertion that the studying of mythic phenomena alone discloses its full meaning (and for neglecting to test and validate these theories of meaning), and for failing to substantiate his claim that 'myth, properly understood, provides an antidote to the turmoil of modern society' or indeed that the present 'turmoil' is in fact unprecedented (Segal 1984, pp.264-265).

It is not within the scope of this project to undertake a detailed exploration of these

criticisms. Whether valid or not, they do not in themselves challenge Campbell's central premise of the existence of three basic elements within hero myths; those of separation, trials/initiation and return. In fact, the placing of Campbell by his critics within the school of comparativism, provides further evidence of such a structure. For instance, Segal (1990) notes that the work of von Hahn, Tylor and Propp (pp. 28-29) identifies similar patterns in both myth and folklore and Biallas (1989), in commenting that 'implicit in the departure, initiation, and return of the monomythic hero is a kind of spiritual death and transformation that is valid for humans as well' (p.29), acknowledges its presence also.

As previously noted, Campbell asserts the usefulness of the monomyth for both male and female heroes in major life transition. In order to test this claim, the motifs characteristic of the hero myth, and the nature of the psychological changes these engender, need to be examined. Firstly, the leitmotif of the hero quest is a journey fraught with physical trials and challenges, ordeals which result in psychological change. Through these, a sense of an adult self is acquired and the acceptance and integration of this new self by the broader society ensues. Campbell (1993b) notes that the most extreme examples of such ordeals are to be found in the tradition of shamanism, where the initiate may endure fasting, isolation and extremes of temperature (pp. 204-5). Historically, women have been less free than men to roam the wild places (where such testing may take place). The physical constraints of child-bearing and nurturing, coupled with prescriptive social roles, may partly account for the scarcity of female heroes in Campbell's accounts. Other factors need to be considered too.

Myths have their birth within an oral tradition, having been transcribed only relatively recently. In any transcription of oral narrative, some selectivity inevitably occurs. This selectivity may be on the part of the keeper of the myth (in what he or she chooses to divulge) and on the part of the transcriber (in what he or she chooses to record). The criteria for selection may be quite deliberate and precise, or unintentional. The transcription of oral folk tales by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, provides clear examples of the former. As Tatar (1987) observes:

Long before Disney transformed Snow White's stepmother into an evil queen, the Grimms had seen to it that Snow White's treacherous biological mother was replaced by a stepmother (p.24).

In addition, the transcriber (and later translator) may only be offered myths deemed 'important' by their keeper. Because social systems have tended to be patriarchal, 'important' is likely to be defined in male terms. Thus myths clearly delineated as 'women's business', will be unlikely to be passed on to the transcriber, as they will not be in the keeping of the powerful (male) members of the group. This bias may be exacerbated if the transcriber (anthropologist, researcher, mythologer) is also male (which historically has more often been the case), as material chosen for collection will again be stamped with the patriarchal viewpoint. As Keesing (1981) notes: 'public and official "culture" is primarily a male creation, it would seem, in society after society' (p.308).

Campbell cites few myths in which the female hero undertakes a journey, those of Psyche and Cupid (1993a, pp.97-98), and of the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who travels through the seven gates of the underworld (1993a, pp.105-108), being the main two. In the light of Campbell's (1993a) claim that the monomyth's 'general pattern' (p.121) is applicable to both men and women, and in the context of the constraints acting on the female quest journey, what then are the possibilities for the female hero within mythic structure? A number of writers have explored this issue, notably Pratt (1982), Paul (1987) and Biallas (1989).

Pratt (1982) maintains the general stages of Campbell's monomyth, adding certain embellishments and altering the focus of interpretation. In a wide ranging survey of fiction written by women, Pratt notes that the 'woman's quest for rebirth' (p.138) (either as a young woman moving toward adulthood, or as an older woman seeking a fuller knowledge of self) contains similar patterns to those outlined by Campbell's 'adventures of the hero' (as well as those identified by Jung - a point I will return to). She asserts however, that women perceive these patterns differently, largely as a result of their 'different experiences in society' (p.138). Pratt's structure consists of five stages, beginning with the female hero's rejection of societal mores, her embarkation on a (usually inner) journey, the appearance of 'green-world' tokens and guides (often ordinary phenomena with extraordinary connotations of an unspoilt, pastoral/animal

world), the presence of a 'green-world lover' (a non-patriarchal entity who leads the hero further into her unconscious), a confrontation with 'figures in the memory, from the past' and finally 'a plunge into the unconscious, where she can achieve rebirth (1982, pp.139 - 142). The 'transformed hero who has survived this layer of her unconscious, is unlikely to be able to reintegrate herself fully into "normal" society' (p.143) though, in the sense of the return of the hero of monomyth, due to the oppressiveness of her former state.

Paul (1987) draws heavily on Pratt's structure in her examination of the portrayal of women within women's writing. In addition, she likens the female experience to that of children, both being similarly disempowered, suggesting that a common thread in both narratives is that of entrapment. Children's stories too, according to Paul, point the way to freedom:

Though they cry (a perfectly normal response) about their fates at first, they manage to free themselves ... with a little help from their friends, and with a little trickery and subversion (p.151).

Although the use of deceit in all its forms has not been popular in Western culture for many years, Paul notes that historically trickster figures have been 'valued for their craftiness' (pp.153-154) in many different mythologies and folklores. In terms of the female hero, such qualities are immensely useful, and better suited to the feminine attributes of gentleness and word skill than the male hero's attributes of aggression and warrior skill. In this way the female hero Penelope defeats her would-be suitors not by force of arms, but by guile, weaving her cloth by day and unraveling it at night while awaiting the return of Odysseus (Brewer 1974, p.818).

This 'gentle' way of overcoming has been examined in detail by Biallas (1989), who suggests that although the mythic stories of many women 'follow the quest pattern of crisis, struggle, and return... their task is a journey inward, not outward' (pp.184-185). His approach, echoing Paul's (1987) 'inscapes of women's stories' (p.155), develops the notion of the life journey as 'a more *gentle* quest for human wholeness' and of the 'development of something already within' (p.186), and dispenses with the traditional quest characterised by an outer journey with continuous 'new achievements' (p.186).

These writers, in their examination of the hero quest as a female rite of passage, place a greater emphasis on the inner journey. Although their focus is skewed (when compared to that of the monomyth), it is by no means contradictory. Both the outer physical journey and the inner contemplative journey serve as agents for psychological change and one or both may occur during a single hero quest. Traditionally, the outer journey has been undertaken by the male hero, and the lack of female heroes evident within such myths supports the notion of the importance of the inner journey for the female hero (as enunciated by Pratt, Paul and Biallas). The inner journey though, provides a different vehicle for psychological change (while still conforming to mythic structure) to that of the outer journey, and in so doing raises questions as to the nature of the change it engenders. In fact, the importance of the inner journey suggests that the nature of the change from girlhood to womanhood is different from that of boyhood to manhood.

In describing the psychological aspects of the monomyth, Campbell draws heavily on the works of Carl Jung. Briefly, Jung proposed that certain 'archetypal images' occur in the unconscious of humankind and are manifested in dreams and myths (Jung 1958, par. 88). As Campbell comments: 'dream is the personalised myth, myth the depersonalised dream: both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche' (1993a, p.19). The *form* of these archetypes can vary greatly but still represent the same psychic elements (Jung 1978, p.58). For instance, something which aids the psyche in its movement toward adulthood might be manifested as a wise old man, a crone (wise old woman), an animal or some type of talisman and so on. Within the hero myth (incorporating a physical journey), most of the major elements take on masculine archetypal forms (male hero, male helpers, manly trials requiring warrior skill and aggression), possibly as a result of the constraints on transcription and translation noted earlier.

Jung's works and those of Sigmund Freud, specifically in the area of the female psyche, reflect a similar patriarchal perspective. Jung identified female elements within the male psyche (anima) and male elements within the female psyche (animus), both of which can be manifested in positive and negative ways. But whereas the anima allows a man 'vague

feelings and moods, prophetic hunches, receptiveness to the irrational, capacity for personal love' (von Franz 1978, p.186), the animus may take on the form of a 'hidden "sacred" conviction' which may be 'preached with a loud, insistent, masculine voice or imposed on others by means of brutal emotional scenes' (p.198). Even the negative aspects of the anima (dullness, fear of disease, a devaluing of things, erotic fantasies) (pp.190-191) seem preferable to the 'brutality, recklessness, empty talk, and silent, obstinate, evil ideas' (p.203) of the negative animus.

Paglia (1995) suggests that such a perspective stems from fear. She notes that 'mythology's identification of woman with nature is correct' (p.17), and that disgust is 'reason's proper response to the grossness of pro-creative nature' (p.17). She goes on to argue that Western art is a male creation by which men attempt to protect themselves from the all-encompassing power of woman/Nature, contending that 'the quest romance of male sex is a war between identity and annihilation' (p.40). Paglia's work on the effects of the psychological war between physiology (as represented by woman) and intellect (represented by man), suggests one reason for the subservience of women in male hero quest narratives.

Warner (1995) addresses the status of women from a different perspective, focusing on the feminine presence in and connection to, fairy tales. She notes that the

fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas: women's care for children, the prevailing disregard for both groups, and their presumed identity with the simple folk, the common people, handed them fairy tales as a different kind of nursery, where they might set their own seedlings, and plant their own flowers (p.XIX).

The telling of tales thus became a weapon against social oppression, a voice that, once established, 'writers co-opted as their own, using it as a mask for their own thoughts, their own mocking games and even sedition' (1995, p.XX). If this is the case, why then are not the narratives of fairy stories crowded with female heroes? The answer lies in what Warner describes as the 'prolonged struggle between different social groups to control the storyteller' (p.416). It is a struggle whose outcome was never really in doubt.

In outlining the contemporary result of this struggle, Warner notes that 'figures like the wicked stepmother have grown into archetypes of the human psyche, hallowed, inevitable symbols, while figures like the Beast bridegroom have been granted ever more positive status' (p.417).

Paglia's and Warner's views support the notion of patriarchal dominance in Western thought and art, evident in the theories of both Jung and Freud, and Freud's work in particular has come under mounting criticism from modern feminist writers, notably Chodorow (1978,1989,1994), Benjamin (1986), Gilligan (1982) and Blum (1988). Put simply, Freud's theories on the development of the individual's identity were postulated on a male model which then came to be considered as the 'norm'. This resulted in certain difficulties.

As Gilligan (1982) notes:

After trying to fit women into his masculine conception ... he came instead to acknowledge, in the strength and persistence of women's pre-Oedipal attachments to their mothers, a developmental difference. He considered this difference in women's development to be responsible for what he saw as women's developmental failure (pp.6-7).

While 'difference' is obviously not 'developmental failure', what this difference actually consists of is crucial to the understanding of the female psyche and to the consideration of the hero myth as a means of attaining female adult identity. Drawing on Chodorow's (1978) work, Gilligan (1982) suggests that because children's primary care-givers are overwhelmingly female, girls do not need to separate in order to gain female gendered identity, in the way that boys need to separate in order to achieve masculine gendered identity (pp.7-8). The nature of this separation, Gilligan proposes, results in male individual identity being tied very closely to gender identity (since separation from the mother is necessary for the development of masculinity), but not female individual identity (as she does not need to separate in order to identify as a female) (p.8). Gilligan concludes:

Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by

intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. Thus males tend to have difficulty with relationships, while females tend to have problems with individuation (p.8).

In Gilligan's terms, the task of the female hero is tied less to achieving womanhood in the gendered sense and more to the attainment of a unique adult identity. It also implies that this task can be achieved only through the breaking of the relationship (attachment) to others, at least for a time, and the risking of gender identity. The reliance on others to define self has some obvious dangers, a point taken up by Blum (1988). Drawing on the work of Gilligan (1982), she warns of the necessity of women 'avoiding the trap of self-sacrifice' by 'including self in the network of responsibilities' (p.6). Likewise, men must be aware of 'the importance of sustained connection in human life' (p.6).

It is important to note that both Chodorow and Gilligan focus on heterosexual rather than homosexual identity formation, and that neither questions accepted present day notions of femininity and masculinity. In fact, 'masculine' behaviour and 'feminine' behaviour are not universal essentials, the same throughout time and place, but social constructs, a point taken up by Lovibond (1993):

Western philosophy has devised one scheme of imagery after another to convey, essentially, a single vision - that of *man*, the normal or complete representative of the species, standing out against a background of mere "nature"; and that this background has consistently been symbolised by *woman* or femininity.' (p.394)

However constituted, the linking of gender to individual identity in males suggests a further reason for their predominance in journey quests. The immature male separates (and so becomes gendered as male) by using traditional male traits (strength and aggression) to overcome trials. In addition, these trials act as a catalyst for the psychological change necessary for the acquisition of adulthood. The female, through her attachment/identification with the mother, does not need the trials of the journey quest to be gendered female, in fact, these may threaten her gender identity. She must however, still make the psychological change to adult identity, and this may be accomplished by the inner contemplative journey, a mental separation rather than a physical separation. This is Biallas' (1989) *gentle* hero once more, where the adult quest 'is not a journey

through dangerous realms but rather a slow realisation of what is within' (p.186).

While this is Penelope's quest, for she stays confined, they are not the quests of female heroes such as Psyche and Inanna, or of modern female heroes in the mythic tradition - Princess Leia (Lucas 1977-83, *Star Wars* film trilogy) and Eowyn (Tolkien 1973, *Lord of the Rings*). In acknowledging the usefulness of both the gentle way and of the journey, Biallas (1989) notes that 'there are times in our lives when we have to exert control and other times when we have to go spontaneously with the flow' to 'balance our efforts to get ahead and to win respect with our attempts to nurture creativity and equality in personal relationships' (pp.186-187). This echoes Benjamin's (1986) assertion that 'individuality is properly, ideally, a balance of separation and connectedness, of the capacities for agency and relatedness' (p.82).

When viewed in this broad context, Campbell's assertion of the usefulness of the monomyth for both sexes, is supported. For whether defined as separation/departure, trials/initiation and return (Campbell 1993a, p.30), as separation, liminality and aggregation (Turner 1987, p.94), or as unknowing, understanding and consent (Biallas 1989, p.186), the basic structure remains the same for both the outer physical and inner contemplative journeys. Having acknowledged this though, the fact remains that the vast majority of myths and stories Campbell draws upon, and which exist today in the popular media, depict the hero and the hero quest in masculine terms, regardless of the actual sex of the adventurer. This state of affairs is best illustrated by Alicia Silverstone's (Batgirl in *Batman and Robin* - Warner Bros. 1997) description of her role:

the director, Joel Schumacher, and the writer, Akiva Goldsman, wanted to update the role and bring Batgirl into a modern setting so girls could really identify with her. Her masterful knowledge of computers and unabashed enthusiasm for the dangerous sport of motorcycle racing help bring her up-to-date as a woman of the nineties... it is her skills that become an asset to the boys and she very quickly becomes an integral part of the team. This gives young girls something to look up to and I am proud of that (Batman & Robin Official Souvenir Magazine 1997, p.7).

How then can the hero quest be made to serve the particular needs of the female hero?

The answer to this question lies in the medium that gave birth to the monomyth - the narrative form. Simply defined, narrative is the 'telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events' (Baldick 1991, p.145). In the modern context, narrative can be expressed in many ways; orally or in writing, and also through dance, drama and pictures. As Hardy (1975) comments: 'narrative artists have avoided the common heresy of supposing narrative to be an exclusively literary form' (p.vii). However it is manifested, the need to story, to make meaning, seems to be universal. In Hardy's words: 'nature, not art, makes us all story-tellers' (p.vii).

This project utilises a written narrative (the novel *Snowmelt*) in order to challenge the masculine nature of the hero journey. The structure of the monomyth has also been adopted, so that the testing of the female hero becomes a testing of the prevailing masculine aspect of the monomythic form as well. It is important to remember though, that the narratives Campbell draws upon originated in an oral tradition, and that oral and written narratives are not the same. As Tatar (1987) points out, the two are 'separate in their genesis, intentions and structure' (p.xix). For instance, oral narratives are particularly susceptible to change over the short term, for the story teller does not replicate the exact words, nuances and detail on each retelling, but rather moulds the tale to suit the needs of particular audiences, times and places. As a result, many versions of the same tale are now in existence.

In contrast, transcription involves the setting of the tale into print, which, while not granting immunity to change, does slow the process. It also allows comparison with earlier versions, which, unlike their oral counterparts, are not ephemeral. The exchange of a stepmother for a biological mother in *Snow White* by the Grimm brothers has already been noted, and there are many similar examples (Tatar 1987, p.xix) that can be discerned from print. Still other differences result from the particular conventions employed by oral and written language forms. Oral language tends to be more interactive, embedding meaning more implicitly and having less structure than written language (Derewianka 1990, p.25). Despite these disparities though, the narrative structure of oral and written myths do share many elements. Both have beginnings, middles and ends with a meaningful sequence of events in between. Both might be

inhabited by creatures bestial, human or divine, who play out their story against a background real or imagined, and whose trials and tribulations must be resolved validly and meaningfully. Beyond this basic level, both types of narrative have the potential to transcend everyday mundane realities and provide powerful, mystical insights. As Hardy (1975) notes: 'to look closely at narrative is to recognize its collaboration with other powers of the imagination' (p.x).

In this way, the journey of the monomythic hero becomes the journey through life; the hero's trials, necessary preparation for the successful passage of life's transitional crises; the final ordeal the last test of the hero's worthiness to assume the mantle of the next life stage. It is a journey expressed in ritual, in mythic narrative and in the dreams of those whose societies have dispensed with these mechanisms. As Campbell (1993a) says:

there is something in these initiatory images so necessary to the psyche that if they are not supplied from without, through myth and ritual, they will have to be announced again, through dream, from within (p.12).

The narrative structure Campbell employs in his exposition of the monomyth has been imposed by the myths he draws upon. Within these parameters though, lies enormous potential for variation; in narratological terms, the monomyth provides the *fabula* but the creation of the *sjuzhet* remains. The notions of *fabula* and *sjuzhet* emerged from Russian Formalism, a school of literary theory and analysis, which began in Russia in the early 1900's (Baldick 1991, pp. 195-196). The *fabula* of the monomyth, 'the "raw material" of story events', consists of a series of actions: departure, tests and trials and return; and a number of motifs: hero(es), helpers, particular incidents and contexts. In contrast, the *sjuzhet*, 'the finished arrangement of narrated events', has been generated by the specific purpose of this project. What then are the characteristics of the *sjuzhet* of *Snowmelt*, and how do these particular devices function?

The first five chapters (approximately 8000 words) are dominated by Chant's (Fleet as she then is) view point. It is her world we see, and her reality. From it we gain an image of her strength and sureness, of her connection with the natural world. She functions in

unison with the hunting beast, the nexus formalised through Talabraith. The first indication that this reality is flawed occurs through a change in viewpoint. The reader becomes privy to information that Chant does not, that Scead truly loves Siah (chpt. 3, p.36). It is by this device that Chant's lack is first identified, a lack which must be repaired before adulthood can be gained.

Chant's immaturity is confirmed shortly after by her inability to accept the precepts of the adult Sceadu society (the Naming ceremony), her burning of the scinton pelt in a fit of pique, and her failure to seek help from wiser elders or to make proper leave-taking. Viewpoint is important too in the functioning of the male hero. The Sunnen society perceives Tel to be adult - a belief he does not share - and this conflict must be resolved before he can truly assume an adult persona.

The use of viewpoint both contrasts and unites Chant and Tel. The Sceadu do not share Chant's view that she is ready for marriage (the final tenor of socially sanctioned adulthood), whereas the Sunnen deem Tel to be ripe for marriage, a commitment he greatly fears. Chant is shocked when she first sees Tel, for he is unmarked, carrying no insignia of manhood. Likewise, the strangeness of Chant, her white skin and patterning, allows him to almost convince himself that she is not there. It is as if each (in the other's view), exists outside time. It is this failure to recognise the other part of themselves, the part which must be accepted and integrated before adulthood can be attained, which utilises the device of viewpoint most powerfully. Ashali may well be the other face of Anarkin (a single mountain in the geography of *Snowmelt*), but it is not until Chant and Tel have truly become adult that they find the way between them, and wholeness on a literal and psychological level is achieved.

These dual aspects of the narrative are intrinsic to the purpose of the monomyth. The literal story offers understanding at its simplest level; a resentful girl sets out on a quest to bring water to her people. During the journey she learns to see things differently and as a result finds love. She fulfils her quest and is then free to live with her lover. The narrative must be accessible in this sense if it is to fulfil the primary functions of storying - to entertain and to make meaning. But what it must also offer is a universal message;

that the struggle for adulthood transcends gender and culture and time. And this insight, which is primarily concerned with the abstract notion of psychological change, is well suited to metaphor. *Snowmelt* makes extensive use of metaphor in order to suggest that the dichotomies of landscape, hero and viewpoint are superficial, and while each imposes its own physical or psychological boundaries - Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles' (Keynes 1972, p. 216) - reconciliation is both necessary and possible.

The landscape of *Snowmelt* shapes the characters and also reflects their plight. In the Scedu place, the seasons have faltered and Snowcome grips the land. Chant too is inert, unable to move on from the ending of adolescence (the Creshan Turrel) to adulthood. Her quest to bring water is inextricably linked to her quest for maturity, for water represents renewal to the Scedu, in a literal sense, but also in the sense that the acquisition of adulthood by each new Scedu generation is necessary for the continuation of the Scedu society. Chant's achievement of adulthood is complete when she recognises the bringer of water (her other part - Tel) and is thus released from her own congealed immature state.

The Sunnen landscape serves a similar purpose, though it is in direct contrast to that of the Scedu. The western slopes of the mountains enjoy more sunlight and more rain than their shadowed eastern aspects and the Sunnen shape the natural world (unlike their Scedu neighbours) to their needs. This power over the landscape (and the natural impulses it contains) is epitomised by Tel. He is the instigator of stone streams and traps and thus a valued member of the Sunnen community. And yet, the neat patterns of corral and orchard confine him to a state of immaturity. It is not until he follows his unfettered natural impulses, breaking free of the Sunnen social and physical constricts and following Chant into ungentled lands, that he attains wholeness.

The use of landscape as a metaphor for Chant and Tel's lack, also points the way to the completeness signifying an adult state. The Scedu lands and Sunnen lands are opposite aspects of a single entity, as Chant and Tel are: woman and man; intuition and rationality; unconsciousness and consciousness, but there are other landscapes and peoples which suggest alternatives to this oppositional approach. The Meduin follow the middle way,

gardening and hunting; the Okianos hunt the waters and gather what the land offers; the Vulturis scavenge. Each makes its way in the world as best it can, and even the Vulturis, as Septin says, 'live as they must' (chpt. 58, p.274). While the metaphorical use of landscape does illustrate the effect of environment on lifestyle and world view, its purpose is also to alert the reader to the universality of the life journey. As Campbell (1993a) says: 'we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known' (p.25). The narrative structure of the monomyth provides this map, but it is *Snowmelt* which provides the landscape which must be navigated, and by extension, draws to the attention of the reader, the particularities of his or her own journey.

The changing of viewpoint and the metaphorical use of landscape contribute to a number of themes within the narrative, the most powerful being that of death and renewal. The leitmotif of this and other themes is water, both as a solid and as a liquid. Firstly, the Sceadu social structure of agemates grouped for communal instruction, initially in the Tissan Turrel and then in the Creshan Turrel, emulates the life cycle of streams - the unformed sheet flow of tissans and the exuberant rush and bubble of the creshans. As well as mirroring Sceadu child-rearing practices, the motif signifies inertia. Snow and ice lock the life-giving water away from the Sceadu, and Chant's quest to release it is a quest to release her own vital forces as well. While both tasks are essential to the well-being of the Sceadu, water cannot be both solid and liquid at once; the becoming of one necessitates the death or transmutation of the other. This is the third aspect of the water motif.

Water is used also to chart the progress of Chant's psychological growth. Her experiences suggest that movement towards a new state is aided by acceptance but impeded by refusal. The wounded Fleet is carried unwilling across the Sunwash, and is unable to begin her journey to adulthood until she accepts the gift of life-giving water from Inkala. Her willingness to offer her old self - when she enters the Silverwash to give thanks for the seresnake's gift - clears the way for further understanding to develop. The raging waters of the Terecleft though, extract a heavy toll, for she forces passage through them in flight from Tel, rejecting the new state he represents. However, later

when she gives herself up to him and to the waters of the Sunwash, her psychological journey is shortened. Finally, it is her surrender to the great surging sea which allows her adult rebirth. This rebirth is complete with her recognition of Tel as the water-bearer, and acceptance of him as a mate.

While the theme of death and renewal is central to the narrative, there are other important themes, notably that of order - both physical and psychological. The imposition of man-made patterns on the landscape is reflected in the social curtailments which Tel finds increasingly troubling. His yearning to escape from the confines of the corrals (and the constraints they represent), to 'walk on a land which folded in upon itself' (chpt.8, p.56) is symptomatic of his need to move on psychologically to a new state. And yet he cannot be the responsible leader of the stay, and the carefree wanderer; one requires the death or abandonment - at least for a time - of the other. His powerful psychological impulses, like the natural pulses of the land, eventually overpower the constraining social mechanisms. This triumph of the natural is reflected in the landscape. The gardens on the western side of the Sunwash are over-run by ragwort and thack and the mighty structures of the Old Stead reclaimed by trees and bears.

A third theme concerns the balancing of responsibilities, of what one owes to self with what one owes to others. Tel is critical of the dangers Chant endures on behalf of the Sceadu, however, he risks death in the Marshlands, and later with the Vulturis, in her pursuit. As well, it is the early imposition of adult responsibilities (through the death of his father) which robs Tel of the childhood freedoms Duran and Inkala still enjoy. Chant, even more than Tel, is constrained by her obligations to others. While the need for her to complete her task is real (she cannot become a full adult member of Sceadu society without doing so), it also serves to mask her fears of the life transition before her. What emerges from both Chant and Tel's plights is the notion that the acquisition of adulthood cannot be achieved without risk. It is after all, the putting aside of the old and familiar in pursuit of the new. Yet the risk is necessary. As Septin says, 'to live in absolute safety is no life at all' (chpt.52, p.243).

The final theme, which in many ways underpins those already discussed, is concerned

with the construction of reality. The narrative is dominated by two possible world views: the first, based on the non-rational or intuitive - the Scedu world view; the second, based on rationality - that of the Sunnen. The Scedu world view is a way of seeing which twentieth century Western industrialised societies have largely dispensed with, a world view now mostly confined to so called 'primitive societies', discounted in the West as unscientific, riddled with superstition and naive. The focus of such 'primitive' realities is the notion of the equality of all life forms on the earth, an equality which implies a web of reciprocal actions and responsibilities enclosing both natural and human societies (Knudtson and Suzuki 1994, pp. 13-16). Thus the Scedu hunting ethos of Talabraith, echoes the ethos of hunting societies in general; to hunt only to fulfil needs (not for greed or glory), to use the beast completely (not to waste), and to honour the beast which has sacrificed itself (to treat with respect, to make ceremony).

As well, the Scedu take guidance from shamanic rather than rational or scientific ways of thought, a viewpoint tending to be 'holistic, multisensory, and boundless in scope' (Knudtson and Suzuki 1994, p.10). Within the narrative, shamanic power is centralised in one person, but drawn from the natural world, for Siah conveys what the air sends, she does not construct it. In contrast, the Sunnen world view mirrors that of modern Western societies. Nature is harnessed for the well-being of people and truth identified by its provability via logical or scientific means. Power is distributed on the basis of sex; the Sunnen society, like those of the West, is patriarchal. The similarity of Sunnen society to that of the likely readership is deliberate, and the contrast between Sunnen and Scedu societies, intended to provoke a number of responses in readers.

Firstly, it is designed to alert readers to the fact that their world view is culturally constructed, just one of a number of possible world views. As a result of this, readers are encouraged to question the nature of their society, and their place in it. As part of this process, alternative ways of doing are offered for the readers' consideration and the pros and cons of each argued by the narrative's protagonists. Finally, and most importantly, readers are prompted to a greater awareness of their own views and attitudes, an awareness necessary to the processes of change which are central to the aims of this project.

Fabula and *sjuzhet*; the monomyth and *Snowmelt*; the general pattern and the particular. The potential of the monomyth to act as a guide for both men and women through major life-transitions has already been acknowledged. However, what also has to be recognised is its masculine orientation. It is the trials of Ulysses and his men which fill the pages of the *Odyssey*, not the lonely struggles of Penelope, and it is Leia who awards Luke Skywalker and Han Solo medals and glory, rather than sharing in the public recognition of her comrades in arms (Lucas 1977, *Star Wars*). Is it possible then, for the female hero to come to full realisation of what it is to be female and heroic within the confines of the monomyth? This hypothesis will now be tested through the narrative of *Snowmelt*.

SNOWMELT

Chapter 1

She the Moon

She the Moon

I ask of you

Send me the eyes of the cat

and the silence of snow,

the breath of wind

which does not blow

Give me the beast

Willing in death

and to you I pledge

Talabraith.

The silence was complete, unrippled by purr or print, as unmarked as the snow. Fleet let her eyes sweep over the slope once more. From moonbright to moonshadow she gazed, seeing how the drifts merged above with the darkness of peaks and below with the darkness of trees. Nothing stirred, only the moon drifted on the iced air, only She crouched on the white crust.

Fleet felt her excitement ebb, the dull ache of disappointment begin to chill where the snow had failed to touch. Yet she held herself still. Her heart told her that the scintion had slipped away, had looped back to a lair, perhaps deep within the trees, but her hunter's eyes told that the spoor went westward, deeper into drift, and that the scintion was coursing, and so blind to that which might seek it.

'She the moon, She the moon,' Fleet entreated rapidly, her breath making small

pocks in the air, her eyes darting restlessly over the snow. Somewhere a slow breeze was born, rolling across the whitelands, bringing with it the scattered slightly musky scent. She tilted her head to better taste it and brought her gaze sharply to the edge of the darkness, to where the unclothed trees and the untrammelled slope met. And there, shadowy as a dream, she saw it.

It had come down in the cleft where the creshans sprang at Snowmelt, down to where the band of meltbright lapped the trees. Here, in the place which was sometimes whiteland and sometimes redland, the cloud-clothed branches rendered up their precious moisture, and the freezing deepness of night took it back again, baking it as hard as stone, so that it felt no print, either of hunter or of hunted.

Fleet readied the arrow. Her fingers were awkward with cold, yet the arrow was like a friend, the haft well remembered. *I pledge to you Talabraith*, she muttered thickly and drew the gut taut. The scinton crouched unmoving. Was it Willing? It was well past its tenth Snowcome, was it then Willing? The arrow left her without conscious intent, slicing through the darkness, speeding to where the warm blood pulsed just beneath the silver skin.

She felt the thud in her heart, heard the half snarl spin out across the night, knew it quenched. For a long moment she stayed as she was, as still as the scinton, her eyes sliding over the slope. Her blood ebbed and flowed, strangely untuned with the rise and fall of her chest. She took several slow breaths, forcing the starry air deep within her lungs. Then she laid her palm on the snow, before bringing it to her neck, cooling the flesh. She was on fire yet all around her lay the most intense cold.

The scinton was taken, of this she was sure. But even as it had been for a moment blind to its danger, so too in hunting had she. Another ripple of air moved past her, bringing not just the muskiness of the scinton, but the odour of blood.

Fleet turned away, straining for sound. Below, the wind made music in the trees, and the snow spoke also, but she had never known its words. Instead she brought her eyes to the soft face of the moon, to She who saw all, who knew all. Her light shone over the warm, pulsing earth of the Scedu Place and the chill, crouching mountains alike. It touched Fleet too, the hunter, and touched the one who had been Given, and now Thanks must be made.

Fleet rose and came down the slope, placing her feet deftly, leaving small even

imprints with the soft hide of her boots. There was a heaviness in the flesh of her shoulders though and in the sinews of her legs, for she had spent many days in hunt, many days in these whitelands which sometimes roused like berian in battle and sometimes lay gentled like the milk-fed babe.

She came to the scintion and knelt by its side. The arrow had been true, she noted with pride, catching it just below the jaw, where death was swiftest. Already the dully stained snow was hardening, and the warmth of the beast drifting on the air. Quickly she cut the arrow free, cleansing it with snow before returning it to her quiver.

Again Fleet looked to the moon before turning to the way she would go. Firstly deeper into the meltbright, where the heart and entrails must be Given to those who dwelt among the trees, and then along the spur's mighty back to where the fyr and ashin reached toward the sky and the little melikin clustered at their feet. There, where the redlands lay free of the brittle ice shell, she could rest for a time. Later, she would journey under the kindly leafroof along the way of the berian, until their path joined that of the Sceadu, descending in great sweeps to the heart of the Sceadu Place.

Fleet brought her thoughts back to the chill mountain and to the beast at her feet. Gently catching its pelt, she came down the slope, guiding its slide and drawing it deeply into the trees. The meltbright line was ragged here, for some of the fyr and ashin were now far from their fellows, their feet buried in snow. They stood like hunters who had themselves been snared, their limbs twisting strangely, shaped by the winds which cut down from the peaks above. It was as if they raised their bony fingers to She, imploring aid, and that She saw them not.

Fleet turned swiftly away, but the thought persisted that more and more of the trees were being taken by the whitelands, as if the times of Snowmelt were lesser now than those of Snowcome. She shook her head angrily.

Such things were for the Old Ones and for Siah. She was a hunter, her concern was for the spoor set in snow, the flicker in the trees, the growth of the new, and of their Willingness.

The snow at last yielded to leaves, and Fleet straightened, stepping away from the beast. The meltbright slope behind her was patterned with the prints of both hunter and hunted, and marked with blood. The stench of it clouded the air also, and the breeze which caused the branches about her head to speak would soon bring others of the night.

She must be swift. The injunction brought a smile to her lips. Was that not her name? From Creshan she had raced more quickly and seen more surely than all others of her agemates. Was she not then aptly named?

Her smile softened and her eyes glittered as brightly as the stars, as she stroked the lustrous pelt slowly. Soon now her true name, her airname would be given, then she would be fully a woman and free to choose a husband.

Fire warmed her cheeks and her breathing quickened. About her the air stirred again, bringing with it this time the long slow howl of the whitewolf. The smile vanished and she crouched instinctively, testing the air with nose and eyes. Wolves did not hunt alone, she reminded herself soberly, bending to her task. Her movements were skilled and well-practiced, and soon the bloodied innards lay warm on the forest floor, and the scintion rested slackly over her shoulder. Lengthening her stride, she moved eastward.

Chapter 2

Fleet trudged on through the dying embers of the night. The stars were fading, the east smudged with light. Above her, deep within the leafroof, came the first murmurings of those who slept there.

She was achingly weary, her shoulders stiff from the weight of the beast, her eyes smarting from lack of sleep. It was now the third daygrow from the edge of the meltbright and in that time she had journeyed well, delighting in her solitariness. Even so, as she neared the Great Turrel, her heart was comforted by the familiarity of its curved walls and the curl of woodsmoke drifting from its vent.

She must go there first, to where the Aunts and Uncles, the Little Brothers and Sisters, the Old Ones and Siah were. She must give the scinton so that they may eat. Later perhaps, the lush silver pelts which were hers by right of hunting but not by taking, may be returned, but that was for Siah to decide.

Fleet paused to watch the gold of daygrow seep across the print-hardened ground. It reminded her of the tissans at Snowmelt, when the ice released the precious water, letting it leap away down the mountains. Already she could hear the murmur of those within. It was good to be coming home, coming as a woman and as a hunter, bearing the hunter's burden.

She set down her arrows and knife at the doorway. Here was place of growing, where the young slept and cried and were comforted, and where those who cared for them shared their tasks. It was not a place of weapons, even for those who brought meat. The knowing of hunting, and of Willingness, did not rest here.

Holding the scinton before her, she entered the Turrel. The fire flicked gold about the darkened walls, but she needed no light to go where she had trod many times before. Carefully skirting those who had sought comfort closest to the bright embers, she made her way to the very end.

This was the place apart, where the thick-weaved thatch of the Turrel curved round upon itself, catching the firelight, and the starlight and the dreams which travelled on the air. It was a place of Seeing, and of Naming, and of Telling what was to come.

Fleet dropped her eyes to the smooth woven floor, and came the last of the way bowed low. Then she knelt, placing the scinton before her, and waited. Siah was very

old; from Fleet's earliest memories she had been so, the Patterning rising and falling across the ruins of her face.

Fleet sat quietly, as Willing as the scintion for slaughter. Siah might be sleeping, or she might be watching, her intense black eyes measuring the worth of hunter and beast alike. Fleet did not know. She must sit and wait for the words Siah would choose to speak or not to speak.

Her thoughts drifted to the fineness of the pelt. It would make a handsome marriage cape ... and they would make a handsome match, she and Ashin. She felt the fire steal over her cheeks and wondered if Siah saw it too in the shadows of the Turrel. But then Siah saw all, for she did not need the light or the eyes of the hunter.

'It is a fine beast.'

Fleet started, not just at the suddenness of the speech but at the voice. It was not the hoarse whispering of Siah, not her measured tones. It was another voice, the voice of Flint, agemate and Tissan friend. Fleet held herself still, but her mind raced. How came she here? How came she here at this, the darklight place, the place of Seeing?

'You have hunted well ... Fleet.'

Again came the cold jar of surprise, and with it a slight tingling. All was not well, the fine shift of her skin told her so. Fleet forced her breathing to quieten, but the scent of her fear stained the air.

It came to her abruptly that Flint was enjoying her power, her ability to hold her still, to hold the hunter waiting. After all, in their growing together Fleet had rarely been without movement. From the Tissan time she could cross the creshans without breaking stride, to best her agemates in race, to track the wily scintion through sunbright and moonbright, while Flint had often lain confined, held by sickness and by strange dreams which seemed to steal her strength.

The silence stretched between them, as unbroken as the drifts. Fleet knelt motionless, and in her thoughts she made Flint the beast who must be shadowed, who must be waited on for Willingness.

'You may sit.'

The voice came again, a little tersely, as if Flint had grown tired of the game. Fleet eased her cramping legs under her and cautiously raised her eyes. She had schooled herself to calmness, but even so the shock caught her. Sitting in the place of

Siah, and in the cape of Siah, was Flint, or at least she who had been Flint.

'Siah is dead and Siah is born,' she who had been Flint intoned solemnly. Fleet continued to stare, her ears taking in the oft repeated chant, her mind hearing nothing.

Flint's curiously flecked eyes held a light she had seen before; that of the beast as it springs to freedom. Fleet's mind raced. She had been in hunt nearly six days, in that time Siah must have died and Flint taken her airname. Fleet's eyes came to Siah's face. Next to the old dark Patterning, was the angry flush of the new, that of airname and that of...

Fleet felt the last of her breath drift away, and found that she could not replace it. It did not matter. She had little need of air, in the silent abyss of shock in which she had suddenly plunged. Three Patternings - earthname, airname, marriage. She understood all too well now the gleam in Siah's eye.

She who had lacked the strength to run, whose strange eyes were blind to the scintion in travel - she had taken the greatest prize of all. She was Siah, to whom the hunter must bow and to whom the dreams of Seeing were sent. And she was a woman, having taken a man in marriage, while Fleet was still a girl, her face bereft of all but earthname.

Great was she who was Siah, and any Sceadu man would gladly be chosen. It was little wonder then, that in the joy of her new found power, Siah had married so soon after leaving the Creshan Turrel, so soon after her Naming. Fleet forced her boiling thoughts back to the brightening room as Siah spoke once more.

'The beast is fine. The Sceadu thank the hunter.' There was a long pause. 'I will send soon.' Fleet pulled herself to her knees, her heart hammering in her ears. She was to be sent for, to receive her airname, at Siah's pleasure, and now she was being dismissed! She began to move backwards across the smooth matting, her eyes downcast, seeing nothing. 'I give you the pelt,' Siah added carelessly, almost as an afterthought. Fleet nodded once, before straightening and turning toward the door.

Outside, the sun had climbed over the branches, and the new day lay wet in its birth robes. It seemed many days though since she had first entered the Turrel and her thoughts still roiled like the great torrents of snow which swept down Ashali at Snowmelt.

It was her feet alone which followed the path back to the tur of her mother. Here

Talith had lived after Creshan, had taken Bren and so become a woman, had lived until big with the coming of her first child. It was Fleet's place now, to dwell in the time between Creshan and airname, between airname and marriage and between marriage and birthing. How she had longed to be here, away from the crowded Creshan Turrel, to be with Ashin.

She must seek him, but first she must sleep. Perhaps when she had rested, she would be able to think, and the dark unease which had come to her with the knowing of Siah, lift from her skin.

Chapter 3

In the days which followed, Fleet stayed within the tur, journeying only to bring water and to gather the sweet fruit which clustered thickly on the small sherenbushes. She was tired, for the journey to the whitelands had been long, and she had rested little during her return, fearing the wolves which now hunted far below the meltbright.

It was not only the weariness of her journey though, which kept her confined, but the ebb and flow of her thoughts. She could not settle to any task, but prowled around the small circular floor, or stood at the shuttered windows, staring at the snow glazed peaks cutting off the west. She felt strangely unbalanced, as if in the short time she had been hunting, the Place of the Sceadu had changed forever.

Her thoughts turned to the one who had been Flint, and to their time together. As Little Sisters in the Tissan Turrel they had often been ill, had lain side by side in the dimness with old Siah chanting the songs of healing over them, watching them with her piercing eyes. Often too she would make them speak of their dreams, but Fleet could remember little. It was Flint who would tell of rivers as vast as the Sceadu lands, and of dark places under the earth.

Fleet had grown strong, and after they had passed into the Creshan Turrel their friendship had waned. Fleet had spent her time in the great forests of ashin and fyr, or on the edge of the whitelands with Ket, learning the way of the scinton, of the ariet and of the whitewolf, of the berian den, and of the slow slide of the seresnake, whose poison was swifter than any arrow.

From the Aunts she had learned of what the earth gave and she had learned too of her place among the Sceadu. All these things were given her, and with Snowcome and Snowmelt she had grown, and run like the creshans, thinking little of Flint confined within the dimness of the Turrel, weaving her dreams with Siah.

And now, despite her strength and swiftness, Siah had overtaken her. She had come first to her airname and had taken a mate. Fleet paused in her pacing, and brought her hand to her face. Flint was truly a woman now, while she bore only the Patterning of a child - the earthname.

The frustration boiled within her and she felt half-blinded, as if what she hunted was beyond her ken. What she needed, was the taste of chill air and the crush of earth

beneath her feet. Catching up her cape she strode out into the still air of dusk.

It was cold, despite the nearness to Snowmelt, and her eyes were drawn to the jagged peaks clawing the western sky. Ashali, Sinian, Brinien, Mithri and Tathrin. Their edges burned with a fierce brightness but the sun now warmed their farther slopes, not the Sceadu.

Along their backs, the snow lay pale as a scinton, darkening to purple in the deep creshan clefts. In places it licked as far as the redlands, where the berian trailed along ways older than the Sceadu, and where the small warm beasts burrowed and bred.

Snowcome, Snowmelt, Snowcome, Snowmelt - the rhythm as constant as the chants telling of the Sceadu and of the Sceadu Place. In Snowcome, the leaves fell, the whitelands moved down the mountains and the berian curled in sleep. The tarns lay sleeping also, held by ice, and the tissans flowed not. The creshans lay empty and boulder strewn, sliding back and forth across the valleys as silently as seresnakes. It was a time of coldness, of dryness, of the hunter. For the earth gave little then, and the Sceadu must ask She to aid them, to show the hunter the beast that was Willing.

Ah, but then came Snowmelt. The tarns roused, fracturing the last brittle fingers of ice and sending forth clear-bright tissans. These joined in creshans and raced away, full of foam and fury. At the far edge of the Sceadu Place the land gentled, and the creshans slowed, coming together in great mirians, before moving off as crookedly as the Old Ones, to sink at last into the drylands of the east.

Snowcome ... Snowmelt. It was late, later than the last, and it too had been after its time. Things had faltered, the pattern interrupted, the chant broken. Fleet shrugged savagely. Why were such thoughts crowding her mind? She was a hunter, and the hunter lived by the known - the soft mew of the scinton kitten, the cubs' deep growl, the dart and flick of the chinkabeetles among the ashin cones. A hunter saw, and felt and heard; a hunter did not waste her awareness on waking dreams, on thoughts which followed no spoor! Let the Old Ones hunt after these, for it was their task and Siah's. Fleet smiled bitterly. Let the mighty Siah bring her will and her power to the great mountains; let Siah bring Snowmelt!

The air was heavy with the scent of snow, and over that, now moved another. She stilled, turning her head slowly, testing with her eyes. Some twenty paces before and shadowed by the trees, was the darkling form of a young berian. Broad head bowed, it

was intent on the soft shoots of the targ, growing thickly in the shelter of the trees.

The air moved, soft on her face. The cub raised its head, then bent again in foraging. Fleet stood motionless, amused by the its greedy enjoyment. The wind was too her, the beast untroubled; she was free to watch as long as she wished. She did not recognise this young one and judged it not long from its mother's den. Its eyes glimmered in the newly risen moon and Fleet turned her eyes to that other face.

She the moon, She the moon, Fleet murmured yearningly. Only She knew of the manner and time of her airnaming, the taking of Ashin, of being a woman. The ache within her was as intense as the cold.

Fleet let her gaze drift back to the cub, though her thoughts did not follow. What would be sent on the starry air to Siah? Was she to be the *ariet*, the keen-eyed seeker of the treetops? Or as the mighty berian who travelled at will through redland and whiteland? Fleet knew only that her airname must be of strength, of speed, of the hunter.

The cub came erect, tasting the air and Fleet brought her attention back to it sharply. Then, as she watched, it sprang with its small powerful haunches up the branchless trunk of a large fyr. Fleet flicked her eyes from it, intent now upon the new scent the air carried, on the soft thuds the earth told.

The arrow was in her hand, the gut taut, but she schooled herself to wait. The other who moved out of the darkness into the jagged patterns of moonlight was a man. He moved carelessly, unaware of the beast riding the branches above him, blind to Fleet waiting in the shadows. She watched his easy movement, saw the way he held himself, judged his intent.

Then she lowered the bow. She had not seen this one for many days, had spoken no words with him since leaving the Creshan Turrel. She watched him come towards her, still unseeing. He was not a hunter, Fleet conceded, but it did not matter.

From the time of Tissan Turrel when as sisters and brothers they had played together, to the time of the Creshan Turrel when they had but glimpsed each other at the time of teaching, they had known. When she was airnamed and woman, and he airnamed and man, they would be together.

He carried the pelt of the scinton, Fleet noted as she stepped from the trees. Ashin came to an abrupt halt, straining through the gloom. Cloud had rolled down from the mountains and drowned the moon.

'I greet you,' she said formally. He had stopped some ten paces off. A slight unease brushed her skin, but she turned her thoughts from it. Her eyes moved over the line of his shoulder and chest, and she drank him in, delighting in his presence. She could see little of his face in the darkness though, and stepped forward. He stiffened and again the cat's tongue brushed her skin.

'I greet you, Fleet', he returned, in the way customary for agemates. Fleet smiled and he moved restlessly, turning from her. 'I bring you the skin,' he said awkwardly, making no move to offer it. Fleet watched him carefully, noticing for the first time how he tensed himself against her.

'Ashin ...'

'I am no longer he.' Fleet felt her breath escape and join the darkness of the air. Above the crowns of ashin and fyr, She slid from the clouds, sending the woodland shadows like snakes over the grass. In Her light, his face was now plain. Three patternings - earthname, airname ... marriage.

Somewhere in the west, an *ariet* killed. Fleet heard the strike of talons among the trees, felt the thud of flesh beneath the leafroof.

'I am Scead, husband to Siah, and I bring to you the skin of the scinton, yours by right of hunting.'

Fleet heard herself give voice, as harsh as the Snowcome winds. 'Why?'

He moved restlessly and she felt the fire hot in her own face, but she stayed her ground. 'It is yours by hunting.'

'Why have you married ...' Fleet struggled for a moment to form the name, '*her*, when we were to be together?' The shock which had thickened her throat slid into anger. Scead stepped back from the flash of her eyes, but when he spoke, his voice was gentle.

'We have been apart much from Tissan, Fleet, for you are a hunter and I am not. We have both grown too in that time, grown away from the games of Little Brothers and Sisters.'

'Do you call our love a game?' she demanded, catching his cape and dragging him to her. She heard the soft thud of the scinton pelt rolling away as he brought his hands up abruptly, breaking her grip. His fingers were surprisingly strong as they caught and held her wrists, and she saw the anger hot in his own eyes. At least she had fractured his careful shell of indifference.

'There was no love save that of agetates growing together!' She stared at him in disbelief. Surely he did not really believe that? She strove to calm the boil of her thoughts, to make sense of his words. He was not a hunter, he had said so himself, so what within the Sceadu was left to him? Only those who captured the dreams of the air, whose visions were taken with open eyes, were held more highly than those who let the Sceadu eat. Only those, and the ones they chose in marriage.

Scead felt her quieten, saw the mask of anger twist to one of contempt. He released her then and she stepped away from him, though the intensity of her regard did not lessen. He watched her master herself, and marvelled at her control. As Tissan agetates he had delighted in her strength and sureness, in their journeyings together in redland and whiteland.

Through Creshan, when he had lived with his Brothers and learned the ways of the Uncles, he had often glimpsed her clean and long limbed, returning from hunt with scinton, or hare, or aperion; always with what she had sought. While he ... Scead grimaced. His own hunting skills were somewhat less predictable, his thoughts more often on the plants which might serve to heal the Sceadu, rather than on the beast's Willingness.

And so he had come to Flint, Siah as she now was, he reminded himself. Siah so often ill and alone in the dimness of the Great Turrel, Siah with her strange dreams, Siah with her gentle eyes.

He dragged his thoughts back to the darkness beneath the trees. Fleet still stood, watching him as he had once seen her watch a seresnake. He took up the scinton pelt and offered it to her again. 'I bring you this and message from Siah,' he began evenly. Then taking a deep breath, he intoned, 'The air has spoken and you are called.' He saw the intensity of her gaze increase, her eyes as hard as meltbright under the shifting light of the moon.

'You may still break the marriage.'

Scead sighed; had she heard nothing? 'I do not wish to break the marriage, Fleet,' he said firmly. He saw her puzzlement, and the way her mind sifted the meaning of his words. She looked suddenly vulnerable, her face as clean as the young grown, marked with but one Patterning.

'You have until the next Snowcome,' she continued urgently, 'there is still time.'

Scead felt his patience explode like air locked under tarn ice. 'Can you not see,' he hissed, 'that I have married Siah because I love her, not as you seem to believe, for power over the Sceadu!' He gulped in several lungfuls of the icebright air, cursing himself for such a lapse in temper. The coldness gripped his chest but still the anger burned within him. 'You who are a great hunter, Fleet, you who see so much, can you not see this?'

Fleet smiled bitterly as she watched him fight to regain the composure which came with being a man. It pleased her greatly to see him struggle, for him too to feel the wound. His anger pleased her also for she saw that his feelings for her had not died, though he sought to deny them.

Turning abruptly, she moved swiftly away under the trees, using the moon shadow to blur her spoor. There was still time to bring Scead to realise his mistake, to bring him to her. Her eyes glinted. Scead himself had acknowledged her skill in hunting. Between this Snowcome and the next, she would prove herself most worthy of such praise.

Chapter 4

Fleet lay quietly beneath the gnarled hands of Tirian. The air was tinged with the burn of cone and sweetstick, and beyond the curved thatch, voices rose and fell softly. It seemed strange to be here at last. How often as a Little Sister had she heard the Old Ones in this special Song of Naming? She had listened at the outer thatch, but only once before had she been here, in this place of Seeing, constrained and comforted by an Old One.

Now, at this time of airname Patterning, there was no need for constraint, or for comfort. Yet still Tirian smoothed the hair from her face and crooned a song from the childish days of Tissan, and Fleet was glad of it.

Old Must muttered as he refilled the small toothed blade, and then came the sharp tap, and the short stab of pain. It was he who had put the thin black line of earthname Patterning upon her all those Snowmelts past, and more recently upon Siah and Scead. Fleet moved restlessly at the thought and was greeted by Must's sharp hiss.

'You must be still. To be a woman, you must suffer pain,' he added dryly. Fleet scowled at him but held her silence. It was not the sting of the black-edged blade which burned her, but the knowing of Scead's betrayal. There would be time though, for him to see his error.

The tapping went on, keeping rhythm with the chanting outside. Tapping and chanting and pain. The line was like a slash of fire across her face, the song of Naming like the slow criss-cross of mirians in the east. Fire and water, the pain and the song as one.

The tapping had stopped and Tirian was bringing a cup to her lips. Fleet struggled upright, looking about her dazedly. Must had gone, the chanting had fallen silent. 'This for your face, this to drink,' Tirian gestured carefully, her eyes sharp upon her. Fleet nodded blankly. Water to quench her thirst in the time of waiting. Tirian touched her once, gently on the shoulder, and then was gone.

Fleet sat motionless; her senses as dull as the light within. Had she slept? She did not know. She brought her fingers to her face and flinched; already the blood was crusting. The water was cool on her face and eased the fire there. Fire and water ... a memory stirred, but it was dim and unformed. All she knew was that she must wait for Siah.

Fleet rested and bathed her face and listened to the coming of dusk. The bird call ebbed and the murmur within the Turrel rose, as the Aunts and Uncles returned to eat. Mixing with their low tones were the lighter voices of the Little Sisters and Brothers, and one, louder than the rest, raised in shrill protest.

Fleet smiled, and felt the throb in her face. She knew that Little Sister, knew her bright darting eyes and restless energy, knew her as she knew herself. She was yet to be earthnamed, but in her heart Fleet already called her Ariet, after the small grey owls of the meltbright. Like them she would one day dare the whitelands, or the redlands, or where ever her swift wings would carry her.

Though not yet an Aunt, Fleet had sometimes taken her into the great forests of ashin and fyr. Once they had journeyed as far as the meltbright, to the place of the berian and of the hunter. She remembered how the child had stood, caught between the redlands of the Sceadu and the great sweeping whiteness of the other. She remembered well the strange glitter of her eyes as Ariet had turned her face first one way and then the other. The child had seemed lost, and her bewilderment had cut Fleet to the core. It was as if she was watching herself, a younger self but also the unsure self that she still was.

Fleet shrugged slightly, freeing herself from the memory and the unease which it brought. Outside the chanting started again, quicker than before, tinged with joy. It spoke of the coming of Siah and through her, the airbirth of a Sceadu. Fleet rose to her feet, bracing herself for what was to come.

Round the curve of the thatch, appeared in turn the solemn faces of the Council and then finally, Scead and Siah. Fleet started. She had not expected Scead to be here. The old Siah had always walked alone, and yet, Fleet realised with a shock, she must once have had a husband.

The small procession came to a halt, and Fleet bowed to each in turn before kneeling. There were dull rustlings as the others settled themselves, with only Siah remaining standing. Fleet glanced briefly at those assembled. There was Mirian with her kindly eyes, Must the giver of Patterns, Ket the hunter, Turan the maker of shelter, Sai the singer of songs, Prian the weaver with her crooked smile and old Win, bent from his metalling.

She knew them well from the time of Tissan and Creshan Turrels, and it was right that those who had kept her and comforted her should be here now to witness her

coming a woman. Only Mirian returned her glance, and her eyes held pity. Outside, the soft beat of the little drum joined the chanting, but it was the warning throb of her own blood which Fleet now heard most clearly.

She flicked her eyes along the row of Council members to Sced. His face was closed, his eyes intent on a point beyond her head. Her hand jerked to her hunter's knife, but the place at her belt was empty. She did not know what was to come, but she knew that it was not to the Council's liking. Abruptly the chanting stopped and Siah stepped forward. Raising her arms in a gesture of embrace, she began the Scedu Chant of Naming.

'The tarn has given you, the tissan taken you, the creshan held you, the earth named you. Now in the time of coming woman, now in the time of coming Scedu, the air has spoken. In dreams it sends, in dreams of sleeping and of waking, in dreams of darkness and of light.' Siah paused, moistening her lips, and behind her the Council stirred. 'The air sends the Scedu a singer of songs, a teller of tales, a woman who will weave words for her People. We give back to the earth she who was Fleet, and we take from the air she who is Chant.'

There was complete and utter silence, even the sigh and mutter of those outside had faded. She was to be a singer of songs, not a hunter, not of the wild open places but of the dim confines of the Turrel! Fleet's head spun as wildly as the creshan eddies of Snowmelt and somewhere, far away in the darkness, something gave voice.

'You are mistaken.'

The silence of the Turrel brittle to the sharpness of tarn ice.

'The air tells true.'

'*You* are mistaken.' With a shock Fleet realised that it was she who had spoken, and that she had risen. She was standing, challenging the words of Siah. She was breaking the Naming ceremony, breaching the trust which bound all Scedu to the Siah, which gave each their reason and way of living. The realisation of the violation engulfed her and blood surged in her ears, drowning her sight.

'Would you insult those who let you grow?' It was Ket's voice, slicing the air like an arrow. Ket the hunter, who had taken Fleet on her first journey to the whitelands, who had taught her the ways of the scinton, of the berian, of herself. Fleet dragged her attention away from Siah to Ket's bent form. The old hunter's eyes burned like ice at

Snowmelt, catching and holding her. She wanted to scream, to cry out against what was happening, but she was held Willing by the hunter, held too by what she was. She sank to her knees, her thoughts surging without power or direction in a rising tide of panic.

'It seemed strange to me that one who is skilled in hunting should be so named,' Siah conceded. 'And so I have delayed many days in calling you, searching the air of day and of night for that which knows of you. And the air has spoken many times. And always it is the same, Chant.'

She brought her hands gently down and Fleet flinched under her touch. Siah felt her resistance, and sighed. She had long dreaded this time, knowing well her Tissan friend's strength and purpose in hunting, and the dreams, when they had first come, had shocked her too. But she was Siah, and the old Siah had trained her well. Hers was not to choose, but to take what was sent. The Sceadu place gave life, but it was that which travelled on the air which *shaped* it.

Fleet clenched her teeth and waited for the ending words which would release her from the ceremony. She wanted to be gone from this place, from the pitying eyes of those who would not speak for her, who would not doubt Siah. She needed to breathe the snow-bright air, to stride beneath the swaying fyrs, to hear their voices, not Siah's. She needed time to think.

Siah's voice sounded once more, but there were no words of ending. 'I have taken much counsel with the Old Ones, not because I doubt what has been sent,' she added with a touch of steel, 'but because the dreams speak of more than Naming.' Fleet struggled to bring her seething thoughts back to the confines of the Turrel. 'Sometimes with the Naming comes a task,' Siah continued evenly. 'And when it is so, the task may very great.' Fleet remained bowed, but it was only by hunter skill that she held herself thus. Her skin flashed warning and her blood screamed for her to be gone.

'The time of Snowcome is now very great. The tarn ice does not give the tissan to the creshan and the creshan to the mirian. Without this giving, the Sceadu cannot live, no matter the skill of the hunter.' Fleet jerked her eyes to Siah's, shocked to hear spoken that which had lately troubled her own mind. For the first time, she saw the clench of Siah's hands and the film of sweat on her face. This Naming was not easy for her either, Fleet perceived, and her dread mounted.

'The dreams of the air speak of these things, but also of water, of a great tarn

many daygrows in the far west. At this place of water, lies that which can unlock the Snowcome ice.' Siah paused and her voice gentled. 'It is to this place that you must go, Chant.'

Fleet remained motionless, her eyes fixed on Siah. It was as if only the two of them remained. She remembered how they had once played together, and lain together in illness. 'There is no way over the mountains,' she said at last. There was no challenge in her voice, and no anger. What she was saying was as well known to the smallest Sister as it was to the oldest Councillor. She was simply stating fact.

'I have seen you there, on the edge of that great tarn.' Fleet gazed at her in wonder. Was it true, could her seeing be true? Or was she simply sending her to die in the whitelands, far from the one she had taken as husband, the one who Fleet also desired. Her mind whirred. *The far west*; to reach the far west she must cross the mountains. There was no way over the mountains. She glanced to Scead. His eyes were gentle upon her and she saw again the easy grace with which he held himself.

Scead watched Fleet's brows come low and her chin lift, and he groaned inwardly. She would not accept what Siah had said, for she would not accept that he had chosen. His heart went out to the young woman standing in front of him and he yearned to hold her enfolded and protected from what was to come. It was a very great burden to carry the Seeing of the Sceadu.

'There is no way over the mountains, you send me to my death!' The words were spat with barely concealed hatred, the words Scead had dreaded hearing, the very words the Council had spoken earlier that day. He remembered well how Ket had told of Fleet's hunting skill and of the Sceadu's great need of hunters.

Of course, Scead thought dryly, they had not questioned the dream itself, but Siah's knowing of it. For she was very young, and as Mirian had pointed out, the true telling of what the air sent had need of much practice. He watched how Siah strove to steady herself, and again he fought the urge to move to her side. She had known that she would be thus from Creshan, perhaps even before, and he marvelled now at the strength which allowed her to face both the doubt of the Council and the one who had been Fleet.

When she at last spoke though, even he was surprised by her power. Her voice resonated within the Naming Place and the flash of her eyes matched those of the one she had Named. 'Do not speak to *me* of what I do or do not do! While you were still

confined to the redlands I dreamed, before ever you left print in the whitelands, I had journeyed there on dreamquest. I have seen where the crowns of ashin and fyr pierce the sky, where the berian travel in the dark places under the earth. *I* do not wait on that which is Willing, *I* am Willing. I do not hunt, the dream hunts *me*! And I tell you Chant, that you will go to that place in the far west, and you will return. I have seen, and it will be!'

There was a long pause. Both the Council and Fleet remained frozen and Sced himself found difficulty drawing breath. Then Siah spoke with quiet finality, the words of Ending. 'The earth has taken, the air has given, the Scedu give welcome.'

Chapter 5

The intense cold moved down the mountain as silently as a seresnake. It found her face first, turning her breath into firesmoke, and then curled about her, easing her toward a sleep with no waking. Above the ashin boughs, the cloud ebbed and flowed, quiet as a mirian.

Somewhere to her left the pit-pit of a wererat patterned the silence and then the air rippled, giving the ashin voice. Slowly she brought her eyes to the upper branches. She had never seen the crown of an ashin, nor fyr, yet Siah had. She had never even thought of them, being content with the world beneath the leafroof, knowing only those who dwelt there.

Siah. The name echoed like her breath, cooling in the air. Her anger rekindled, and with its fire came a knowing of the mountains' crushing cold. She turned away from the leafroof, feeling the windfall scatter rough on her cheek. She should move, seek warmth, but her limbs were heavy and reluctant.

The earth trembled and a soft musky scent drifted beneath the shadows. Her skin shifted, stirring the darkness of her mind. A she-berian padded quietly through the trees. Now and then she paused, testing the air and waiting for the youngster bounding at her heels.

Fleet felt her heart ease as she watched the older nuzzle the younger. She had no weapons and yet no fear. If the she-berian were to find her and take her, then so be it. But she did not feel it would be so. She watched the pair move past, browsing here and there on the soft shoots of the sherenbushes, following the berian path up toward the meltbright.

Then she pulled herself upright, and chaffing her hands awkwardly, turned down the slope toward Talith's tur. She had no memory of passing it earlier, though she must have, nor of how long she had lain in the redlands above the Scedu Place. All she knew was that she was chilled to the bone and must find warmth.

She stumbled on, her mind filled with the berian. They rarely travelled together, only in the Snowmelts before the cubs grew strong enough to forage. They owned, and were owned by, no one.

Fleet reached the tur and pushed the thick wooden door open; inside it was

darker than a moonless night. There was no welcoming fire, no voice of Creshan agetates. She had been here only in the last days since returning from hunt and once two Snowmelts before, when Talith had died. The place of the fire was at one end, not like the Great Turret, and it was there too that the flints were kept.

She moved numbly across the room, too tired to think or feel. Finally her hand closed over what she sought and it was but a short time later that the first flames curled from the sweetstick twigs. Fleet squatted over it, savouring the warmth which licked her fingers, and it was sometime before she began to think on what she must do. There was little to burn in the tur and she must search for windfall wood outside. There was no need to seek food though, for the Creshan Aunts and Uncles gave to their children the simple things that they would need in their first days alone - food, oil for the small earthen lamps and sleeping rugs.

The coals swallowed the last of the flame and Fleet rose reluctantly. She was achingly weary but she must have fire to sleep near tonight, for here the warmth of her Creshan agetates did not fill the darkness. She felt a sudden yearning pang, remembering well how she had longed to be without their noisy chatter, to be with Ashin.

She brought the back of her hand savagely across her eyes and strode out in the night. Above her, Snowcome crouched over the mountains, holding the creshans silent. She would not go that way! Siah would not win, for she was still the hunter, despite her Naming!

Fleet seized the wood which lay scattered in the melikin and turned back. Something was crouching there, something small and furred. She froze, tasting the air. The breeze was to her but it carried no scent. She strained forward, the sweat starting on her brow and back. Her arrows and knife were within, she remembered abruptly.

Tightening her grip on a sturdy piece of sweetstick she took a cautious step forward, then another. She was almost on it before she knew it. For a long moment she stared at it in silence. She wanted to throw her head back and laugh at her own foolishness, but she was dangerously close to tears.

Taking several steadying breaths she turned back to the tur, piling the wood carefully inside and methodically rebuilding the fire. When she was satisfied, she went out and brought it in. The scinton pelt, hers by right of hunting.

A fine marriage cape. The memory mocked her. How unknowing she had been just a few short days ago, and how lacking. Her limbs ached with weariness. She should drag the blankets over and rest here, near this puddle of warmth and light, but nothing moved.

It was as if she was afflicted by a malady which robbed her of conscious will, but which tossed her thoughts about like stormsnow. An image of the first Snowmelt water came to her mind, of ice slurry curling back upon itself while all the time sliding towards the creshan edge.

At an ending, things were broken and burned. When Talith had died, Fleet had given to the fire her earthen cups and clothes. The one who had gone had no need of such things; those she had given life to, must make their own. They must take the fine clay and fashion it in the way that they had been fashioned, firstly by the Aunts and Uncles, and later by Siah.

Siah! Was there no escaping her, from what she sought to do? Fleet rose slowly, her eyes on the fire. In its glow, the fur shone as brightly as She.

At an ending ... She released the pelt. For a moment it floated in the air, curving like an ariet in flight, before coming to rest on the fire. The woodsmoke billowed sideways and the flames died. A stench of burning fat filled the tur, then the flames flickered, grew in strength and devoured it. Fleet stumbled to her knees. She had wasted the scinton's Gift, had spurned the beast who was Willing. She had broken Talabraith. The import of what she had done reverberated like the mighty drum of Snowmelt. She had broken Talabraith.

And the ariet knew, and the berian and the wererats high in the ashin and fyr. All who touched the hunter and who the hunter touched, all who dwelt in the dark places of the turs, in the strong growing places of the redlands, in the icy stillness of the whitelands, all knew. And so there was nowhere to run to, and nowhere to hide, for she could not hide from herself.

Chapter 6

Ket made her way along the path to the Wash creshan, noting the doings of the night. Here a berian had browsed, tearing the targ shoots raggedly from the stem, and there a wererat had scampered. Aperions too had come, seeking the sweet nectar of the new-grown ashin flowers, their small claws patterning each trunk. Ket saw all these things, delighting in them as she always had. At least her eyes had not failed her, though the awkwardness of her gait had long since halted her hunting.

It had not always been so. She had once journeyed far into the whitelands, had gazed upon the deep brooding ice of the great mountain tarns, had leapt down the creshan valleys making her path from the water-rounded boulders. She had been strong then, and life as glittering as snow under She, full of the pulse of Creshan time.

Ket smiled gently. How well she remembered that time, the yearnings for the unknown, and the fear. Few of the Old Ones seemed to keep such memories, letting them pass like the mirians, to be swallowed up in the drylands of old age. Only Mirian on the Council seemed to recall it, and herself.

The Council; her smile vanished. She did not like to think of that last Naming Ceremony, or the long meeting before it, even though many daygrows had now passed. She did not like to think of Siah, nor of the young man she had taken, nor of the one who had been Fleet. She particularly did not like to think of her own part in that day.

It was chill and she drew the cape of aperion pelt more closely about her. She had come to a halt without realising it, and resolved to moved on, but her feet remained planted in the thick carpet of fyr leaves, and her thoughts insisted on their own way. Resignedly, she settled herself on the broad bole of a broken fyr.

The sun was higher now but the mountains still wore their thick covering of mist. She let her hand fall to the wood on which she sat. It was rough, yet almost warm to touch. Warm, as if living, not like the snow, which had never answered the earth, breath for breath. She was sending the one who had been Fleet, into that icy stillness, perhaps to the stillness of death.

Ah, she had said it, admitting at last that which had troubled her these past nights, which now spoilt her enjoyment of the new day. Yet Siah had taken this dream from the air; the hunter turned singer, the singer returning to chant the way to Snowmelt.

Ket shook her head. Why did she so doubt this dream? Was it because Siah was so new, because she had yet to practice fully and deeply her art, or was it simply the mistrust of the old for the young? She would have felt easier had this dream come to the Old Siah, she conceded, for it seemed so ill-fitting.

Fleet, Ket found herself stumbling over the notion of her as Chant, was a hunter. And in all her Snowmelts as an Aunt in the Creshan Turrel, she had rarely seen one so suited to the task. She was fast when the need was speed, and patient when the need was to be as quiet as tarn ice. And she saw not just with her eyes, but with her ears, and nose and skin, as a hunter must. She sighed.

The sun was warm upon her resting place, but it did not warm her. She was cold, not with coldness of Snowcome, but with the coldness of fear. She turned her feet to the way she must go, her thoughts though, refused to follow. She had been a hunter for many Snowmelts and had learned much in that time. She had learned that what her eyes saw was not always so, that what came to her ears could be torn and twisted by the wind, that even the scent of beasts may be tainted by the whitelands, or laced with the odour of bark and leaf.

Only the skin did not lie, touching both what was without and what was within. Ket felt now the drawing over her neck and shoulders and the tightness of her brows, and she turned her intent to what it might mean.

Fleet was a hunter, always it came back to this. She would follow the beast through redland and whiteland until the chase was ended, either in its taking or in the long solitary trek back burdenless. She would not turn aside until the hunt was ended. It was necessary for the hunter to be thus, to have this channelled intent, for the task demanded it no matter the manner of the quest.

And if the hunt was hopeless? And if the ending was death? Ket knew the answers even before the questions were full formed in her mind. There was no way over the mountains, even the unpatterned Little Sisters and Brothers had this knowing. And yet that was the trail that Siah had marked for her. Over a way which was not there, to do that which could not be done, to unlock the ice and to bring Snowmelt.

And she had been party to this madness! She remembered well during the Naming how Fleet had sought her, how when Fleet had breached the ceremony, she had forced her to bow once more before Siah. The girl had sought her help and she had failed

her!

And yet, she had acted as she must. To have allowed Fleet to break the Naming would be to leave her in a place more desolate than the whitelands, neither of the Creshan Turrel nor woman, and never to be fully Sceadu. No, Fleet must accept what the air gave, for it was in part what formed the Sceadu. And she must accept the task also, willing or not. Through Siah, the earth gave and took back, and the air gave, and at the ending, took back.

Ket stopped and squinted up at Ashali. When she was in Creshan, the Aunts had spoken of a time when the Sceadu had roamed far beyond the bee pastures, when fish were to be found in the creshans even in the deepest part of Snowcome, when others had come over Ashali's cloven crown. There must have been a path then. There must have been a path over the mountains before each Snowcome had embraced the last, locking together into a vast icy wall, shutting out the west. And if there had been paths, then surely they must still be there, in the Sceadu chants, if not in the mountains.

Ket turned abruptly and made her way back over the stony ground. She must seek out Sai, and her knowing of the oldest songs. Fleet might indeed have to seek the path over the mountains, to seek it alone, but she need not, after all, undertake it totally without aid.

Chapter 7

Fleet watched the beast run before her over the snow. It left no print and no scent stained the air. Only now with daygrow could she clearly see it, though she had known it in the darkness of the night, had kept company with it since the tur. In travel under the leafroof it had faded for a time, recoiling from the scatter of sunlight and from the starwings' lilting calls. Here in the whitelands though it seemed to draw strength, to deepen even as the pulse of the woodlands dwindled.

As the beast darkened, the land over which they journeyed grew brighter, until the very snow itself seemed to burn and Fleet was glad to rest her eyes on that which paced before her. She had not come this way before, even on hunt, had not trod the crisp snow of the mountain's great shoulder. Yet she did not pause to look about her, nor rest, though the sweat coursed beneath the fur of her jacket and her breath was as harsh as a scinton's snarl.

She carried food, enough for perhaps another three days, and a small waterskin which she had filled in her last night under the trees. She could almost be on hunt, could almost pretend that the beast which went before her *could* be hunted, that she would take it or not take it, and then turn back to the shelter of the Great Turrel. She could almost believe it, yet there would be no returning, no offering of meat in the Scedu Place, no kindly eyes of the Old, no greeting of agemates, no echo of Little Sisters or Brothers at play along the borders of the bee pastures.

Fleet forced her thoughts back to the beast without pattern or print. She dare not dwell on what was to come, nor allow her intent to falter. She had journeyed thus far only because her heart was caught and held, as quiet as water under tarn ice. To let the thaw of fear come even now, would be to be truly lost.

Lost, lost. The word beat in her mind, keeping rhythm with the crunch of her boots upon the snow, with the ache of her muscles which screamed for her to stop. Fleet trudged on. The sun had moved from behind her to above her and the beast had shrunk to a puddle of dark beneath her feet. Now the snow held no shelter, but burned with a brilliance which was at once white, and purple and crimson.

Wincing, she raised her eyes. Ahead, the way narrowed, sharpening to a crest as fine as a scinton's ear. The southern slope held a little shadow, the northern side was

bathed in light. Some way further, the crest came to an abrupt halt and there Ashali rose, huge, white and terrible.

Fleet stumbled and sank to her knees. The sky arced overhead, curving down in an intense sweep of blue, fitting like the halves of a shattered egg along the mountain's vast rim. There was no way over. She crouched in the snow and the eyes of the mountain seemed to turn to her. Fleet bowed her head and gradually the violent hammering of her heart eased. She became aware of an enormous weariness and of a thirst which burned. She must rest and eat a little. Fleet did not really know why she had brought the water, the dry smoky fish, the sweet sherenberries, or the stiff pats of errem. She had no need of the things of the living on this journey. She sat on the hard snow and ate slowly, careful to keep her back to the green, tossing valley below. Her journey was deeper into the whitelands, into the place of no path and of no returning. She was unspeakably weary and the warmth of the food dulled her thoughts. She wanted to lie down and sleep. What matter if she died here or further on? But she forced herself to her feet.

In the high places of the mountain, a small wind woke, whispering across the snow. It spoke of no animal, of nothing which grew or yearned or feared. It stirred the snow, raising soft swirling flurries and sending them this way and that. It was a dance without pattern, without meaning or intent, but Fleet followed the dancers with eager eyes, even as her feet followed the fine curve of the crest.

Some whirls were large and full formed, spinning slowly but with little travel. Others barely took shape at all, before the wind seized them, scattering their substance to the darkening air. Sometimes, rarely, a flurry was born near another, and then the dance took on the intensity and passion of a hunt. There was an advancing and retreating as each came to know the presence of the other, and a joining and a separation as each sought the other, until finally the wind took them both and Fleet was left alone.

She was going to her death alone. The word echoed in her ears. It was rare for Sceadu to die thus. The Old gathered their agemates about them, the newborn child was held close. Sometimes though, at the birth of Snowmelt, the mountains trembled, and great slips of snow engulfed the woodlands, drowning hunter and hunted alike. And sometimes, a child strayed from the Tissan Turrel and was taken by the swirling creshans.

Why was she doing this? Why was she leaving the warmth of the redlands for this

bitter whiteness? The gusts were stronger now, and the snow so thick that the land and sky were one. Why was she doing this! Fleet clawed her way forward, against the clash of snowy squalls. Her face was frozen and she could no longer feel her hands. She dug them into the snow, using them to anchor her body against the wind's relentless pull. The mountain did not want her here, it held itself against her, it sent snow and wind. Why then did she fight them?

Death surely would not be long. She had heard tales of those who had lost their way in the whitelands, had travelled by Ket's side while the old hunter had murmured her warning chants. First came the pain of intense cold, then a lessening of touch, then a warmth and desire to sleep. It was a sleep with no awakening and the hunter who yielded to it became as Willing as the beast in death. Was she Willing?

She fell to her knees. The snow was drifting round her, drawing her into its icy embrace. But she did not want it, she wanted Ket, or Talith who had born her, or any of the Aunts who had held her, and comforted her and let her grow. She wanted their love and their warmth now. Not this aloneness. Why had they abandoned her? Why had Scead?

Siah. Siah had sent her here but Fleet had not come for her. No, she had not come for the flawed Siah, nor for the Sceadu. From the time the flames had consumed the scinton pelt that last night in the tur, her path had been set. She had broken Talabraith, she had wasted the Gift. The hunter must now be hunted, must be Willing, must now make Gift. But was she Willing? There was no peace in her heart, only bitterness. Scead, Siah, Ket. Each had betrayed her. Scead had chosen power, Siah had sent her away, Ket had withdrawn her hunter's hand. Even She had dwindled to a slither as sharp as a scinton's claw in her journey here, and now She hid Herself, giving Fleet to the darkness and to the snow. She was not Willing! Her heart raged against it and she dragged herself upright.

Before her something moved. Fleet strained ahead, her breath caught in her throat. She had now only her hunter's eyes, for her flesh was frozen and the wind had taken her hearing and all that the air might bring. But she was sure. Within the darkness was a greater darkness; the wind was now not all that shaped the stormsnow. What could it be? No scinton came this way, nor aperion, nor sharp-eyed ariet. Nothing journeyed high in the Snowcome mountains, for there was no food and nothing to hunt.

Fleet took a step forward and the thing half turned, as if waiting for her. Another step and another, and still it stood.

It was a berian. Fleet stopped; a great dark she-berian. She stood gaping at it. *Berian did not come deep into the whitelands.* The thought spiralled as sluggishly as the thickets of snow, and for a long moment she struggled to make sense of it. She was perhaps only ten paces distant and could see the berian's intense eyes upon her. Would she strike? Was *she* the hunter sent? Was she waiting now on Fleet's Willingness? The two regarded each other in the deep and utter snow-swept darkness, then abruptly the berian turned and moved off and Fleet stumbled after it. The wind's howl was shriller than a white wolf's but Fleet barely heard it. She was heedless too of the steepness of the slope, of the bitterness of the cold, of the woodenness of her hands and feet.

She staggered on, her gaze fixed upon the berian. The snow eddied and whirled, dividing them, then binding them together. It seemed to Fleet that the beast walked upon the air, so thickly did the snow swirl beneath its feet, and that she too was carried along by it. A feeling of warmth invaded her being, of warmth and delicious languor. She wanted to sleep, to lay her head in the gentle arms of the wind and sleep. She swayed and fell and the shock of the ice striking her face roused her. Jerking convulsively, she screwed her head around in the shifting darkness. The berian had gone.

She was alone in the vast icy blackness. A cry rose to her lips, a cry of bitter resentment but the surging wind seized it and carried it aloft, far beyond the mountains and redlands of the Scedu Place below. Gathering the last of her strength, Fleet struggled to her feet. She was not Willing! She took one step and another, and then the snow collapsed around her, the night collapsed in upon itself and she was plunged into oblivion.

Chapter 8

Deep within the valley, the scattered houses lay cradled in darkness. All was quiet, even the cocks still slumbered, secure within their rounded coops. It would be some time before the great mountains in the east released the first rays of the new sun and the Sunnen Stead sound with the doings of those who dwelt there. Within his stay, on the very edge of the Stead, Tel finally gave up the struggle for sleep. Throwing on a heavy fleece cape, he stepped out into the corral. No lamps burnt within the windows of his mother's stay, and within his own, Duran still slept. Tel grimaced. Why was it that the darkness which gave them a peaceful sleep, no longer granted it to him?

How often had the same uneasy images come to him as he slumbered, bringing him abruptly, wrenchingly awake? He moved restlessly, wiping away the sweat which still clung to his brow. There was an increasing urgency to these dreams, to the forms which crowded his mind. But what in the name of Anarkin did they mean?

Tel rubbed his hand over his face and then brought his gaze sharply to his stay. It would not do for his brother to see the great Tel, as bumbling and bewildered as an old Sunnen woman. Scowling, he made his way out of the corral, taking the path which led up toward the Sunwash. It was the second path, and not well used, though Tel followed it often.

As he walked, the night cleansed him of the dream, and the world took on the shapes which were familiar to him. He went steadily, not altering his stride as the path steepened and turned back upon itself. The trees were thick, hiding any view, but further on, he would be able to see beyond even the Sunnen Stead itself. He flicked back the cape as his muscles warmed, and drank in the fragrant air. The first blossoms already clothed the honeyapples and he judged that within the next moon the whole orchard would be one vast sweep of cream, and pink and yellow. He liked Beetime best, for then the valley hummed with the wings of the honey-makers and the skies were bright with the flash of birds.

A little way ahead the steady chime of the Sunwash sounded, but he turned from the path before it brought him to its steep, rocky bank. He must make his own trail now, for where he wished to go was not travelled by the Sunnen. He fought his way through the rank foliage, regretting that he had come without his knife. It was a hunter's knife, or

so he had been told, for he did not know how Barin's father had come by it. Whatever its origin, it was useful for hacking back the leathery brachen and silverwort which now blocked his way. At last he broke through into the open, to the small rocky clearing hanging high above the valley. Behind him, a long ripple of pink moved quietly over the sky, sending the dark shadow of Anarkin before it. In the faint blush of dawn he could just see the neat outlines of the orchards, of the berrem and whiteroot in the gardens, of the Sunnen corrals.

The surrounding valley walls were swathed in mist, but beneath its mantle lay the higher gardens and stone streams which fed them. It was for these that he came here so often, sitting in the gentle solitude to look upon the pattern of his work. Well, not wholly *his* work, he corrected himself, although he had been the first to think of such things; stone streams to bring the water to where the need was greatest. Thus the gardens had risen higher and higher up the valley walls, giving harvest even in times when rain was scarce and the meltwater dwindled.

The stone streams had brought him great praise from the Elders and his advice was now sought on many things, not just on the making of gardens. How proud his mother was, and how admiringly Duran looked upon him and chaffed to be a man, as he was. Yet increasingly, he felt the heaviness of the burden.

His thoughts turned to the morning several days earlier when Insalan had come to his stay. She had wanted to speak to him of the marriage of her daughter Nasala. Should she choose a husband from within the Stead or seek one from their kin in the far west, in the flat valleys near the sea? Tel had received her courteously but alone, for his mother and Tanalan were in the gardens, and Duran had taken Inkala with him to net fish.

Tel had visited with his western kin and so knew the land. He spoke of the difficulties of the journey and of the provisioning she would need to make. Insalan had listened attentively and had thanked him when he had finished, but there was something about the interview that he had found intensely unsettling. While she had regarded him steadily as he spoke, occasionally she would drop her eyes and then flick them up again quickly, in shrewd appraisal. He had mentioned Insalan's visit later that night, to his mother and sister.

'She will not seek a husband for Nasala in the west,' Tanalan had announced smugly.

Tel had felt his irritation with his sister rise, but had kept his voice steady. 'Why do you say so?'

Tanalan was regarding him in a manner not unlike Insalan's. 'Do you not see why she had visited our stay to ask your advice?' Merala had hissed her disapproval at this point and Tanalan had fallen silent, though she had kept her gaze upon him, enjoying his discomfit. Tel felt his face warm again at the memory. He was not ready to marry, if indeed he ever would be. Three females in his household were more than enough! Yet he had an uneasy feeling that Tanalan's summation of the meeting had been correct. For, as he moved about the Stead, he felt the same appraising eyes of the older women upon him.

Tel shrugged off the thought and turned his gaze to the mountain behind. The sky was lightening to the intense pink of a sweetfruit flower. Soon the sun would swell above Anarkin's cleft like a ripe honeyapple, drowning the perfect silver rind of moon. Tel felt the joy of the new day pulse within him. How often had he watched the gold of day replace the brooding stillness of night? It had always brought him an intense pleasure, though lately it had roused something else also. A restlessness, a sense of dissatisfaction, a questing after ... what? Sighing in frustration, he brought his eyes to the orderliness of the Stead. The honeycomb of corrals, the gardens, the orchards, the stone streams. He had helped place these methodical patterns and yet on occasions he had a deep wish never to see them again.

At such times a desire came over him to turn the other way, to fight his way through brachen and silverwort, cone grove and brindle wood, up to the bright snow. To bathe in its absolute coldness, to breath air that carried no scent of flower, or fruit, of green or growing; to walk on land which folded in upon itself. Yet he could not go to Anarkin. The paths failed a little way above the Sunwash and the thick grown land took no garden. There was another barrier too, as deadly as the frozen peaks.

In the last few Gatheringtimes, bears had crossed the Sunwash and entered the Stead. They had torn up the gardens, trampled through berrem, broken the fruiting trees. And so, the Elders had come to him and again he had not failed them. Barin's father had travelled far and had seen many things. Of these he had spoken to Barin, and he to Tel. The traps were made from metal, heavy, toothed and chained. They were set above the Sunwash, along the bear trails and in the dark, tangled growth to either side. Even Tel,

who had helped lay them, had no clear memory of where each now was.

He pulled the cape around himself and moved off along the path he had earlier made. He yearned to go eastward, but the traps prevented it. He felt resentful, even though it was he who had thought of them and directed their setting. Perhaps it was time for him to journey again. As head of his stay, it behove him to visit his kin. He smiled. If he could not travel eastward then he would go west, to the flat valleys near the sea.

Chapter 9

Fleet plummeted through the icy blackness, glanced off a wind-scoured wall and plunged into a towering cone of dry powder snow. The drift rose in huge billowing clouds, rolling her down its steep side and depositing her onto the chill stone floor. She lay as she had come to rest, flung on her back, gulping in great lungfuls of air.

After a time, when she could breath again without effort, and when her heart had slowed its frantic pumping, she turned her face into the warm shelter of her arms and cried. Then, when the last shuddering sobs had passed away, she wiped her face on her sleeve, and sat up. The only light came from the cleft through which she had fallen, and there was little of that. In the faint sheen she watched the flurries of snow spiral down, rapidly rebuilding the cone of snow her fall had disrupted. It was this wondrous mountain within a mountain which had saved her. The cleft was high above her head, without the cone, she would now be dead.

She stood up, testing her legs gingerly. They were uninjured, but her arm, which had taken the full brunt of her clash with the wall, throbbed and burned. It was her hunting hand, the hand which pulled the gut taut, which wielded the knife. She glanced up at the cleft once more. Still she had been extraordinarily fortunate, and for the first time since the Naming ceremony, hope stirred. She was a fool to feel so, she cautioned, for death might be as sure in this black pit as in the white one above. And yet ... it was wonderful to be out of the howling wind, out of a world where land and sky were one. But most wondrous of all, was to be in the presence of berian scent. It filled the darkness, bringing with it bright images of berian at wander above the Sceadu Place.

Fleet yawned; she was immensely weary. She pulled her pack awkwardly from her back and bringing the waterskin to her lips, drank deeply, letting the rich earthy water cleanse her throat. Then she ate the fish and some sweet dried sherenberries. She could not remember when she had enjoyed a meal so much. Finally, with the same clumsy movements, she drew the thick aperion jacket round herself, tucked up her legs and laid her head against the sweep of stone. The howl of the wind had softened to a chant of sleeping, sung by the Aunts of Tissan Turrel. Fleet let the chant take her, let darkness come.

She woke slowly, uncurling like a berian cub at the borning of Snowmelt,

squinting against the whiteness of the air. A stream of pure light was pouring from the vent like a creshan waterfall, cascading over the glittering cone of snow. It was so perfect, so unlike the driftsnow, the stormsnow, the meltbright of the world above. All those she knew well, knew their pattern, knew how they kept the print or let it go. But this! It had saved her, but she could not go back that way. If she was to live, she must leave its circle of light.

She turned her eyes reluctantly to the dim rock walls. There were many openings, some broad and airy, others little more than fissures in the stone. For a moment she was blinded, then the scent of berian came to her again. Fleet smiled. Was she not a hunter? If she could not return the way she had come, then she would go the dark way, the way of the beast. She set off along the tunnel, guiding herself with her hand against the wall. Within a few paces, the blackness was absolute. There were no openings like the one she had left, no sunshine or starshine, nor kindly moonshine to light the way. There was nothing but the darkness, the earth and the pattern of berian.

She went quickly, as if on hunt, but the cavern floor was rough in places, and after a time she was forced to slow. She would have liked to pass the time by filling her mind with the images of the Scedu Place or even of the whitelands above, but nothing would come. It was as if her thoughts were closed off, contained by the cave. Instead, she let the stone speak under her hand, let the utter silence of the cavern sing in her ears, let the chill of her skin bring to her the echo of the world within. And all the while, with hunter sense, she followed the fragrant spoor.

Fleet ate when she was hungry and drank when she thirsted, but she did not stop. She did not know if she travelled towards Ashali's heart or away, nor did she question this lack of knowing. Sometimes she passed cool draughts suggesting other ways, but she did not falter. For always the air told the same story - berian had come this way, berian had gone before her into the darkness. When she could walk no more she lay down and slept a heavy dreamless sleep and afterwards, went on in the same manner. Her arm pained her less, though she did not try to use it, for there was nothing to hunt but the berian, and she needed no weapons for that.

Gradually, memories of the world outside began to reform in her mind. She had not sought them and did not welcome them. Sced, Siah, her Naming ... the scinton pelt crowned with flames. Fleet shook her head angrily, feeling the ache of bitterness begin to

grow once more. She did not want this! She did not want to return. The cavern swept on, and her legs carried her forward with increasing speed. Her skin told her that the tunnel was ending, and the fragrance of berian scatter on the shifting air confirmed it. The stone turned sharply, once, twice, and then ... a jag of light slashed across the darkness.

Fleet threw up her hand, and stumbled to her knees. Frantically she searched for her knife and then, with an immense effort, stilled. Her return could not be fought with arrow or blade. Numbly, she struggled to her feet. There was a rent in the stone, scarcely bigger than the fissure she had fallen through. It pained her eyes, but she forced herself to look at it. She must go that way, for this part of the journey was over. Hunching into a ball, she squirmed through into the light.

Chapter 10

The air was as warm as Snowmelt, the ground a vast mosaic of green and white. Stooping, she brushed her hand over the intense green shoots and fragile, clear-edged snow. How came they together - the mantle of Snowcome and the messenger of kindly Snowmelt? She let her gaze sweep further down the slope. The brightness smudged to purple, merging with the shadows of trees. Fyr, she could see, and ashin, or perhaps not; it was far too early for leafshow.

She was thirsty, but the slashes of green and white and the great wash of birdsong held her. Slowly she became aware of a second layer of sound; an intense humming of bees and chinkabeetles, of small glowing things drifting like flakesnow. Around her, the air shimmered with a mix of scent so rich that she could barely choose between them. The sweetness of sherenberry flower was there, but thickened, like cold honey, and others not known to her. It was as if the earth and the air breathed as one, as ripe as a cone flower, full blown. Her head swam, and for a moment she longed for the sharp whiteness of snow, but the sun was warm on her skin and the ease it brought her, delicious. The sun ... her heart faltered. It was very low before her. Her mind reeled and blanked. How came it there?

Once when she had been young, a seresnake had slithered into her resting place while she had slept. She had roused slowly, feeling its skin rough against her own. There had been a horrible moment of confused terror, but she had held herself still, moving only with exquisite care. She moved in the same way now, turning to face that which was sensed, but unseen.

Ashali, Sinian, Brinien, Mithri, Tathrin. The mountains were behind her. For the first time she was seeing the sun slip behind the curve of the world, not being seized and devoured by jagged crests. She had crossed the mountains. Was Siah then right? Her heart rallied against the treacherous thought. Yes she had crossed the mountains, but she could thank the berian, not Siah. The main part of her task was still beyond her grasp, and its purpose remained unchanged - to keep her from Scead.

Fleet turned away angrily. The sun had dipped below the trees and the air was cooling. In the Great Turrel, the fire would now be lit, and errem being shared. Perhaps meat would be roasting, if the hunter had killed, if the beast had been Willing. Fleet

shivered. She should have died in the whitelands, but she had not been Willing. She had crossed the mountains, but for what purpose? If she must be Willing, could it not have been among her own? Death would have been preferable under the leafroof of fyr and ashin, not here where the sun touched the world's edge. She felt tired and resentful, and the journey still stretched ahead.

Pulling the aperiion jacket close, she began searching for a path. The berian scatter was thick about the entrance of the cavern, but there were no trails leading away. Fleet pondered this puzzle as she walked. In the Sceadu Place, the berian paths ran like dry creshans over the land, the very stones creased by their passing. Did the unmarked slope mean that berian did not often travel this way? Yet the scatter at the cave entrance told her they came here. She looked about uneasily as she walked, seeing nothing. After a time, she came to the trees. The pale trunks were ashin after all, and in leaf! On the Sceadu side, leafshow was at least a moon away. She shook her head in bewilderment. Things were like and yet so unlike!

It was dim under the trees, but Fleet travelled steadily, always down slope, always west. She saw no beast - bird, animal or man - but she heard their pattern in the leafroof, and tasted their prints on the air. If her arm had been able, she would have carried her bow with an arrow set ready, for she feared much in this new darkness. She did not know what dwelt here, how or what they hunted. She longed to find a den, to curl up and sleep, but she dare not. She must have water, and be clear of the trees so that she might see what she could not hear.

The trees gave way abruptly and she jerked to a stop. Before her, the slope dipped in a series of large steps, running away steeply from the edge of the treeline. A dull throb came to her ears and after a time she realised that it was water. The sound of its beat puzzled her. It was too slow for a creshan, too insistent for a mirian. Still, it was water, and she had great need of it. Carefully she set off down the slope. Twice she fell and only halted her descent by clutching the woody plants which grew there. They were leathery with strange clinging foliage, but their roots gripped the earth with the same strength as their fronds gripped her, so that she was saved, though badly scratched.

She was hot in the aperiion jacket now, and her injured shoulder throbbed unceasingly, but she struggled on. She could hear the rush of water and smell it. She must taste it too before she rested.

The steep scrubby land gave way to open grassland, running in a smooth sweep down to the very edge of the water. Fleet skidded to a halt, surprised again by the sharp change from scrubland to grassland. She crouched at the side of one of the last of the straggly bushes and peered into the gloom. Places of water brought many beasts, both hunter and hunted. Yet the air told nothing of their scents, carrying only the scurry of smaller feet up the slope behind her. Her throat ached but still she waited. The strangeness of the water troubled her, and its openness.

In the Sceadu lands, the creshans leapt between jagged clefts of whitelands or redlands, and the mirians lay deep within the dryland's parched skin. Here, the land came down on one side in a gentle sward, and on the farther edge, rose in a sheer jutting cliff. Between these opposing borders, the water ran with the speed of a creshan but with the sound of a mirian. Fleet crouched in the shadows. The night was quiet, only She moving. Fleet watched Her climb into the sky, watched Her shadow flicker on the water. Her shape was uncertain, like the hunt, like the breaking of Talabraith.

She must drink. She came out of the scrub and down the slope. She came slowly, her bones aching, her arrow hand hanging limply. She came down to the water and knelt at its edge. Above, the moon hung, young and full of promise. Fleet drank the warm earthy water, filled the skin and washed the grime from her face. Then she made her way back up to the woody plants, found a small hollow among the clinging leaves, crawled in and slept.

Chapter 11

Tel moved steadily along the mossy bank of the Sunwash. The sunlight lapped gently at Anarkin's clefted peak, and would soon begin its slide into the valley. Night still held the land though; the river below was veiled in darkness. He paused, straining back into the gloom. Where was Duran? Curse that boy! Why must Duran let his mind drift, then let his feet follow? He was forever off, seeking the prints of this or that, scurrying about in the undergrowth like a seedrat, looking for clutches and burrows. Tel stamped impatiently, easing his irritation and attempting to warm his feet. The air was chill and he hoped with all his heart that this Beetime would not be marked with frosts. The thought of the new-swelled buds, blighted and blackened filled him with dread.

Duran appeared through the mist, his eyes searching the grasses to either side. Tel felt his annoyance ease as he watched him come. Duran was almost his height now, but had yet to broaden. He moved like a child still, his fancy taken by the creatures of the Stead, unknowing of the complexities of the gardens' setting or the flow of stone streams. There were less than three Gatheringtimes between them and yet the gulf seemed much greater. Perhaps it was because they were so unlike, Tel pondered. It was true that they shared the same dark Sunnen skin and hair, the same nose, his father's nose, or so his mother said. But in other ways?

He was impatient for Duran to grow up, he admitted. He wanted him to work by his side in building the gardens, to leave behind his boyish fascination with the ways of beasts. He wanted the kinship the early death of his father had robbed him of. Duran came up to him at last and they went on in silence. It seemed wrong to disturb the quiet with harsh chatter, for the glory of the new day was enough to fill the space about them. Tel rested his arm round his brother's shoulders as they paused to watch the thick ripple of gold spill over the scrubland and onto the river. It was truly the Sunwash now, its waters as yellow as clotted cream.

For once Tel felt contented. The restless unease which had come with the dawning so many times of late, did not stir. He was at peace, with Duran, beside the softly flowing river.

A bird call pierced the silence, coming as swift as an arrow from beyond Anarkin's steep slope. Duran started forward, his face alight, his eyes searching the skies

to the east. Tel sighed, the pleasure of the moment gone, and moved on towards the crossing place. From there they could pass to the eastern side and up through the tangled bands of ragwort, to the high forests of brindlewood and clearbark. And there, if they were fortunate, they might see bears, or at least, where they had been. He fervently hoped it was the latter and that the traps were empty.

He remembered how, when first they had been laid, he had come to check on them. He had found two bears, one little more than a cub. The larger bear was already dead, its side torn by wolves. But the younger lived, its eyes small and blind, blood crusting its snout. It had taken him three arrows to dispatch it. Afterwards he had been violently ill and had cleaned the sourness from his mouth in the Sunwash. He had told no one of it and he had not travelled here again until this day. He wondered suddenly why he had come now.

Partly it was to salve his conscience, he conceded. In a few days he would leave for the west, and Duran must remain to care for the stay. Duran had pleaded with him to go, but he had refused him. If he, as the man of their stay chose to travel, then Duran as his brother, must take his place. He felt for him though. To be confined by the needs of his mother and sisters was not a happy thing. A picture of Inkala's mischievous face came to his mind, and Tel smiled in spite of himself. She was never still that one, as restless as a jumperbug, and just as noisy. And so she needed care, for the whitesnake came to the gardens seeking the grassrat and fruitmouse, and later, at Barebranch, the wolves came from the mountains.

Tel remembered when he too must always be there, when there was no other man in the stay. It had been a burden he had carried since he was less than Inkala's age, since the time his father had journeyed deep into the snows and had not returned. Now Duran must take his place, as Tel had taken his father's for all those Gatheringtimes. Yet he did not forget how he had chaffed at being confined. So now, in the days before leaving, Tel took Duran to where he had longed to go; to the bears.

'Bears!' Tel muttered aloud, and then recollecting himself, turned sharply. Duran was far behind once more, his attention taken by the bushes to one side. Without the bears there would be no threat to the gardens, no need of the vile traps, no reason to let the land to the east lie waste under its mantle of ragwort. Without the bears he would be able to journey east, to perhaps tread the path his father had taken. Curse the bears! Why

had they come from the mountains? Why were they crossing the Sunwash? Tel grunted impatiently, resisting the urge to call Duran to him. Let the boy enjoy whatever he sought a little longer. He would wait for him ahead, at the crossing place.

The sharp call of the ariet roused Fleet and for a long moment she struggled to know where she was, to understand that she was not at rest under the shelter of broad-leaved sherenbushes. Instead she was in this strange new place where everything was wrong; the things the air sent, the way the water ran, even the sun. She sat up. Her shoulder ached and her stomach growled its hunger. She had just two pats of errem left and her shoulder would not let her hunt. What animal would be Willing in any case? Grimacing, she eased her cramped legs and yawned. The sun was moving its kindly fingers over her and it was not possible to feel the same hopelessness as she had in the whitelands.

Daygrow was upon the earth, and Ashali was green and gold, humming with fragrances at once sweet and spicy, woody and whole. Her shoulder was wounded, but she had crossed the mountains; she was alive! Below, mist clung to the river, and the prints of those who had drunk there in the night patterned its edge. She peered down; never had she seen water like it. The tissans were light, as fragile and transparent as sheet ice, while the creshans sprang down the mountains with reckless speed, shattering against the polished stones. Only the mirians were closed like this, closed but without these deep, swirling eddies.

She was both attracted and repelled by its strange otherness. Above her, the opposite bank towered, flickering with movement. The *sinarette*. She had watched them often at play among the cone flowers. Their familiarity comforted her, and she moved closer to the water. She must cleanse her wound but to do so she must put aside her hunting pack, lay down her arrows and bow, and take off the thick jacket of aperion fur.

She was vulnerable thus, and yet it must be done. Awkwardly she removed the pack, dropping it at her feet, and lay her weapons beside it. Then she eased off the jacket. The blood had crusted to it and pulled away as the sleeve came down. She saw the bleeding start once more and felt the sting. Unlacing her shirt, she slipped her arm out and for the first time, appraised the injury.

The wound was slight, but the bruising deep, colouring her skin with intense blotches of black and blue. Fleet flexed her fingers gently. No broken bones it seemed,

but she must have wrenched the muscles. Her grip felt weak, and she could move her arm neither fully backward nor forward. In time it should heal, she realised thankfully. She dare not think on how she might eat till then. She began to lave the wound, letting her eyes wander idly over the patterns in the water; the sky, the jutting bank, the shimmer of butterflies. The water slipped past but the images remained motionless, robbed of colour and form. She glanced to the bruising of her shoulder and back to the water again. The reflection had changed, a dark shape now joined bank to sky.

Fleet froze, cursing her lack of care. She had not been as a hunter in her time by the water, had not listened nor tasted the air. It was as if the roll and ripple of the strange mirian had scoured away her hunter skill as surely as it washed the blood from her skin. The shape had not moved. Fleet eased her haunches under her and with infinite care, raised her eyes. Less than twenty paces off, on the high jutting edge of the opposite bank, stood a man. A man who was as tall and strong as any Sceadu man but whose face was as plain as Sceadu child's. A man without earthname, airname, marriage. A man bereft of manhood.

Fleet came slowly to her feet, her hand reaching for her knife. He did not move, nor did his eyes waver from hers. A chaotic trail of thoughts began to tumble through her mind. He was on the other side of the river and held no arrow in his hand. She was but partly clad, her heavy coat, pack and weapons scattered about her. She was alone and so was he. He might outrun her, but he must first cross the water ...There was a shout and she saw him jerk toward it. The sound and the movement broke the nexus between them, and before he could look back, she had swept up her things and begun a swift retreat up the slope.

He watched her go, seeing how quickly she gained the first tangled stand of ragwort. She plunged through, the foliage stilled and Tel felt his heart begin to beat once more. He rounded blankly as Duran came up to him.

'I thought I had lost you,' his brother panted, then his eyes narrowed. 'What is it?' Tel shrugged. For a moment he wondered whether he should speak of what he had seen, but what indeed had he seen? No Sunnen crossed the Sunwash, and only Sunnen lived within the valley. The other bank was now empty.

With an enormous effort he smiled and lightened his voice. 'Come,' he said. 'We must be swift if we are to see these bears of yours and be back in the Stead before

nightfall.' Then turning, he led the way down to the crossing place.

Chapter 12

Tel eased himself gently back, feeling the ache of his muscles. He did not travel enough, he chided himself. Ah, but soon he would be walking every day, and eating only what he carried or found along the way. By the time he arrived in the flat valleys of the west he would be well used to journeying, his body hard and strong. The fire was making him drowsy, and the wind outside swirled like the Sunwash. The Sunwash! The memory of the girl came sharply to mind, and he jerked upright.

Inkala had fallen asleep against him, and he shifted her carefully so that her head rested in his lap. The flicker of the fire moved over her perfect features and he felt an intense surge of love and protectiveness. She was so beautiful with her small rounded face and fine dark hair. The girl he had seen had dark hair also, but her skin was as light as clearbark. And her face had been harsh and angular, stained across the cheeks and nose with black markings. Tel frowned, his eyes on the golden face of his sister, his thoughts on the other.

Who was she? She was not Sunnen, her skin told him that much. And she was on the wrong side of the river, on the bear side; the Sunnen did not go there. He did, he reminded himself, but then, he was not like the Sunnen. He quenched the treacherous thought abruptly. He was not like the Sunnen because those he knew seemed content, and he was not. Tel shook his head in annoyance at the insistence of the thought.

'What troubles you?' It was Tanalan, her eyes keen upon him.

'My muscles are sore,' he muttered, not meeting her eyes.

'Ah, well they will soon be cured,' she answered dryly. Tel flicked his gaze toward her. She was sitting a small way apart, intent on the fire. 'Will you be going to the Meduin first?'

'Perhaps,' Tel answered carelessly, his mind moving to the peoples who dwelt on the southern slopes of the Teresas Mountains. 'It is fitting that I take them Sunnen greetings,' he added and then scowled. It seemed he would not be free of obligations after all.

The stay fell silent. His mother had taken herself to her bed, and from her stillness, he guessed that she was already asleep. Inkala slumbered also and Duran had long ago gone to their stay. He glanced back to Tanalan, and was surprised by the

intensity of her gaze. For a moment the eyes of the other girl flashed before him, and he felt again the shock of their encounter.

'Take me with you.'

Tel stared at her in amazement. 'Take you with me?' he repeated incredulously, trying to gather his scattered thoughts.

'Yes.'

'Why?' he demanded, already feeling his annoyance rising. Women remained within the stay, worked the gardens, cared for the children. Tanalan saw his brows draw, but she did not drop her eyes.

'I want to meet with Kanan again.' Tel continued to stare at her and she felt her face flush. 'I want to arrange my marriage.'

Tel gaped at her, shocked by her impudence, and felt his own face warm. 'Your place is here, and this is where you will remain. When the time comes to make a marriage, I will inform you of it,' he responded coldly.

'And when may that be?' she pursued sarcastically.

Tel rarely lost his temper but her challenge to his authority struck the same chord as his present self doubt. He put Inkala from him and stood, his eyes were blazing. Tanalan shrank back. 'It will be when I decide, not when the whim takes you. And it will be spoken of no further!' He towered over her, his tall frame blocking out the fire. For a moment she thought that he might strike her, though he had never done so before. She sat frozen, and after a long moment, he turned and strode from the stay.

Talan smoothed the sweat from her hands on the soft leather of her skirt, and waited for her heart to stop its insistent hammering. She did not understand this change in her brother, nor did she like it. They had always been close but she had feared him at that moment, feared his strength and anger, and it came to her abruptly that her words alone had not prompted it. Tel had been strangely unsettled of late, and she knew that often now he did not sleep.

Talan sighed. She no longer knew him. Perhaps it was simply part of growing up. Maybe the closeness of children, which she still enjoyed with Duran and Inkala, could not be between men and women. She stared into the fire, seeing not the flicker of gold and red, but the face of Kanan, and her resentment grew. It was so unfair! Tel, like other Sunnen men, could do as he wished. He had chosen to journey, so journey he would,

while she must remain confined. She seethed at the injustice of it and her eyes glittered in the fire's dying light. Tel had not won yet though. Without him, Duran would be the man in the stay, and she had no need to do as he said. She had travelled to the Meduin once before, and if necessary could find her way again. Once Tel had gone, doing as men were free to do, then she too would be free. Smiling grimly, she rose, and scooping up the limp form of Inkala, slipped her into bed beside her mother. Then she went to her own bed.

The corral was silent, and it seemed that the others of Sunnen Stead slept also. Tanalan though, did not. She lay quietly, her mind tracing the face of Kanan as she had last seen him, three Gatheringtimes past. She had been a child then, as Duran still was, now she was a woman, and he a man. She *would* have him! Her lips curved and this time the smile was tender. She closed her eyes and let sleep come.

Within his stay, Tel lay listening to the even breaths of his brother. The grass filled mat eased the ache in his back and sent its fragrance into the air as he moved; the blanket was warm and soft upon him. Yet he could not sleep, for though his body found comfort, his thoughts raged like the squalls of Beetime. He thought of Tanalan's words and his anger grew afresh, and he thought of the girl with the marked face, fleeing from him through the ragwort, up toward the traps. She was no concern of his! She was not Sunnen, she was not of his corral. She had in fact, no right to cross Sunnen lands, though passage had always been granted to the traveller whose purpose was fair.

Tel moved restlessly and the mat rustled under him. Those cursed traps! Where exactly had she been when he had seen her? He had stopped to wait for Duran ... he recalled her rising, her wounded shoulder, the darkness of her eyes, but he pushed his memory further, seeing again her swift retreat. Which mountain had lain beyond? Which? He forced it to his mind, the steepness of its slope, the slight indentation of its crest. *Anarkin*, the place of two ways. He let his breath out in a long slow sigh. She was well south of the crossing point, and well clear of the traps. His relief was almost palpable, and he felt the stiffness begin to ease from his shoulders.

Now that his anxiety was less intense, he pursued the puzzle as to who she might be. He had once heard that others had long ago come from the north, following the Sunwash through to the Terecleft and on to the sea. He had doubted the truth of these

stories, had dismissed old Banak's boast of having bested one in battle when he was half Tel's age. But now he reconsidered them. He had seen no strangers on Sunnen land in his time, nor had his mother, or at least she had not spoken of them. Of his father, he did not know. Yet there was sense in it. There must be other peoples to the north, as there were to the south.

She must have come over the Brindleback Mountains as her people once had, and like them, she would be travelling to the sea. Tel did not ponder what her purpose might be, having contented himself with the direction of her travel. For she would follow the Sunwash as those before her had, and as he would in a few days, follow it south till it passed through the Terecleft and over the flat valleys to the sea. She would be in no danger of the traps. Tel felt himself relax completely. Having found a logical reason for her presence near the Sunnen Stead, he now felt faintly ridiculous for having allowed her to disturb him so.

He pulled the blanket high over his shoulder and turned his face to the door of the stay. He liked to feel the air clean on his face, even if it still held the chill of Barebranch. In a few days he would be sleeping out in it, perhaps under a biraq if the weather cooled, otherwise with the stars as his only roof. He sighed wearily, feeling sleep steal upon him at last. In the morning he would begin his preparations and perhaps the next day he would be gone. He was looking forward to the journey very much.

Chapter 13

Fleet crouched in the dense scrubby bushes, searching the air for sounds of pursuit. She did not stir, even to ready her bow. A beast which moved, was a beast seen. The air told of the river, but it carried no scent of man. Man ... was it really a man she had seen? He had been full grown, and yet his face had been unmarked. Fleet shivered slightly at the memory. How could such a thing be? Had he no people, no connection to earth or air? How was he named? How could he know himself? Perhaps he had been cast out for some great wrong-doing, for breaking the lore of his place ... for breaking Talabraith? She brought her hands unsteadily to her face. She had not been cast out! She was Sceadu, earthnamed and ... Her eyes burned and the tears coursed down her cheeks. She jammed her fists into her mouth. She must be silent, like the hunted beast.

After a time, the frantic beating of her heart eased and she dragged the jacket back on. Ah, the comfort of warmth! She curled up, pulling it closer. The sun rose higher and the drone of flying things deepened. Fleet felt her lids grow heavy and she closed her eyes and slept.

It was the deep gnawing ache of hunger which woke her. The light was fading, taking the warmth with it. She clambered to her feet and peered about. The water lay dark below, while above the short scrubby bushes gave way to trees. She turned her steps that way. The trees would shelter her from watching eyes and from the cold of night, but best of all she would be among the familiar boles of ashin and fyr. It was quiet under the leafroof but the leaf-bound air did not bring the comfort she had expected. Her head felt light and her legs ached. She must have food. There were only two pats of errem left, and she ate them slowly, considering the way ahead. The strange surging waters of the river shut off the west, but there must be a place further upstream, where it would narrow to a creshan. She must go that way if she was to continue her journey.

It was close to daygrow before she paused to drink. The darkness was fading and on the other side of the mountain the Great Turrel would already be bathed in light. Fleet shook her head in wonder; how strange this world was. Even the river was different to those of the Sceadu lands. Its voice floated on the air, as noisy as a creshan. She frowned; surely

she had not travelled far enough? Yet there was no mistaking the insistent throb. Fleet paused, reluctant to leave the shelter of the trees. Even as she hesitated, the sun broached the peaks at her back, sending the ashin shadows leaping down the scrubby slope before her. She caught her breath sharply. Under the tangled woody stems, the land dipped and curved. There *was* a path.

She studied its travel with intense care, seeing how it looped up toward a small stand of targ before dipping down toward the water. She was certain it was a berian-path. She smiled with relief. She had seen no berian since leaving the cavern; it would be good to be near them once more. She stepped out into the brightening sunshine, following the path down the slope. She went carefully, scanning to either side. Scatter lay along the track, only a few days old. Her heart quickened with excitement. Berian had been here, and not long ago.

Fleet was about half-way down the slope when the air shifted. She came to an abrupt halt, and reached for her bow. For some time, nothing stirred but the skin on her back, and then a long, low growl washed up the slope, and then another, cut short. Fleet crouched, silent and intent. A harsh panting came to her, and the breaking of a branch. She pulled the gut taut and a jagged pain woke. The panting was now mixed with a wetness, like the bubbling of water. Beneath her jacket a slow sweat began to ooze. She forced her way through the tangle of bushes while all around her, the air thickened with blood.

She came to the clearing suddenly, a rough circular area of beaten and broken shrubs. At its centre, laying with mighty paws outstretched, was a great she-berian. She had been mauled by wolves. Fleet could see how in her struggle, her bulk had flattened the scrubby plants nearby, but her gut was torn, her entrails strewn upon the ground. Yet still she lived. Fleet lowered the bow. She had seen berian taken by wolves before, but always the weak or the old. This one was perhaps ten Snowmelts, well-fleshed and strong. Such beasts were not beaten by wolves. Bewildered, she moved closer. It lay still, too near death to rouse.

Fleet could see where its front paws had gouged the ground in its struggle to escape and her eyes followed the line of its back. Its rear leg was broken, the paw twisted away from the body. She froze. Something held it, something dark and jagged like the maw of an immense cat. Once she had seen the bones of scinton, scoured clean

by the winds. It had been a large beast, larger than any she had hunted. The ribs had been scattered but the skull was intact. The mouth was open, its curved teeth each as perfect as a crescent moon. What she saw now though, belonged to no beast. Its teeth were larger, stronger and metal. It was the work of man, not of She. The air hissed between her teeth. To kill a beast, to waste the Gift, to break Talabraith! Fleet swayed slightly, sickened by her thoughts and the berian's blood-drenched breath.

She stared at the metal teeth, forcing herself to know them. They were held with heavy chains so that the berian must fall prey to wolves, or to hunger, or to thirst. Anger seared her veins. What man would do this? What hunter? Surely none who felt the pulse of the earth, who hunted in the old light of She; no hunter who asked the beast for Willingness. Fleet grimaced, stung by the memory of her own wasting. She had broken Talabraith, but now she made amends. Was that not why she journeyed west?

She had nothing to offer the berian but the Gift of Saviour. Raising the bow, she pulled the gut taunt. Her shoulder screamed protest but she forced the arm back. What was her pain compared to the one who lay before her? She would make Gift; a swift death for a slow one. The arrow was fast and true and for once she did not retrieve it.

Chapter 14

Tel came abruptly, sickeningly awake. He was off the bed before his mind had formed any intent and halfway across the corral before the blackness had lifted from his eyes. He burst into his mother's stay, searching the gloom for those who slept there. Tanalan roused, pulling herself up on one elbow.

'What is it Tel?'

He stared at her without speaking, the thudding of his heart so intense that he felt he might well be ill. 'Did you hear nothing?' Tanalan shook her head. Tel remained motionless, his thoughts raging. The scream had been close, if not within his own stay, then surely within the corral. His eyes told him all was well, yet so insistent was the scream's echo that he remained fixed, desperately groping for its source. Tanalan was watching him with an expression of mild amusement, but for once he did not care. The cry held him, insisting on action. He came out into the corral. The sun had crested the mountains, but the soft light did nothing to diminish the sense of urgency which gripped him. He took several distracted steps across the corral and stopped. Had he dreamed it? He did not know. His sleep had been troubled of late, but this was different; like a knife in the darkness, sharp and true.

Tel swore savagely; it made no sense. Tanalan had heard nothing, his mother and Inkala still slept. Surely if there had been something, others would have woken. He must have dreamed it. The realisation brought him no comfort. Why in The Mountain's name was he plagued by such dreams? Perhaps he should seek the advice of Old Sekwana. He smiled dourly, dismissing the thought. He had no need of a foreteller! Let the old women with daughters to marry, and those with aches in their bones listen to his mumblings. He had more important ways to spend his time! He turned back to his stay and Duran woke as he entered.

'Are you leaving now?'

Tel stood considering him. All thoughts of his journey had been scoured from his mind and he had trouble reclaiming them. 'Tomorrow,' he heard his voice say.

'Can we seek the bears again?'

Tel's muscles still ached from their last foray and he had much to prepare if he were to leave at the next dawning. 'If you wish.' Why in The Mountain was he saying

this? 'Pack some berrem, we go now,' he added tersely, pulling on his boots with a vicious tug, and pushing the knife into his belt. He strode back into the corral, kicking at the fingergrass angrily.

The sun was well clear of the peaks now, and Anarkin's shadow had released the Stead. Tel peered up at the mighty wall, trying to calm his seething thoughts. Trithian hard against the Brindlebacks, then Mendethian, sharp-edged Stilin, the blunter Amaran, and Anarkin with its cloven crest. To the south, where Anarkin faded into the haze, the Teresas Mountains jutted, shutting out the Meduin on their southern slopes. He knew the south well, and the west, while the Brindlebacks had never drawn him. But the snow-walled east! He sighed and took several swift paces across the corral. What was keeping Duran? He doubted suddenly his wisdom in having his brother with him. He did not want witness to the peculiar unsteadiness which gripped his mind, to the insistent dragging of his blood and sinews which over-rode all conscious intent.

Duran emerged from his mother's stay, pushing several discs of berrem into his pack. His face shone with enthusiasm though his dishevelled hair and clothing still bore the signs of sleep. Tel grimaced. How uncomplicated *his* life was!

Tel set off briskly, partly to appease the insistence of his heart, partly to warm himself. He had come without his cape or his waterskin, he noted in irritation. He was usually so careful, his life as ordered as the network of stone streams. He stomped along, not bothering to check how closely Duran followed, or whether he followed at all. The power of the dream seemed to grow in his mind as he went, and he reluctantly gave himself up to it. He remembered no images; no shapes of bear, or ocean wave, or dark underground hollow; none of the things which had come to him so often in other dreams. Only the cry. Was it of man or beast? He did not know. He knew only that it consumed his mind so that he must now do as it chose.

And so he went north, back toward the crossing place, to where the land was scrubby and ungently by the gardener's hand, back to the place of bears. The sun rose higher and he became aware of the wetness of his shirt. He paused and Duran came up beside him, his face was flushed with exertion. He stood surveying Tel from under lowered brows, saying nothing. He would not be the one to ask for rest!

Tel squinted up at the mountains. They were nearing the crossing place, though the Sunwash was yet to give sign of it. It moved swiftly below them, dark and silent. 'We

shall eat here.' Duran slipped the pack from his back and threw himself down on the springy muzzweed of the bank. Tel lowered himself beside him and together they munched on the berrem. Tel's mouth was dry and again he regretted not having brought the skin. The bank of the Sunwash was steep here, and it was not worth the struggle to quench his thirst. He would have to wait for the more kindly slope of the crossing place. 'Did you bring your waterskin?' he asked suddenly.

Duran shook his head. 'I did not think of it,' he admitted reluctantly.

Tel smiled. 'Nor did I, and I am as thirsty as a newborn saman.'

Duran grinned and scrambled to his feet. 'I know of something which might help,' he said cheerfully. Tel watched him move away into the coppices of thatch and garron, before bringing his eyes back to the water. Its flow pleased him, for it boded well for the gardens. After a time he heard the thump of Duran's return and abruptly a harvest of wildfruit was deposited into his lap. He stared at them in amazement. 'Surely it is too early?' Duran merely smiled. Tel bit tentatively into the first and his mouth was filled with sweet liquid. 'Where did you find them?'

Duran's smile broadened. 'You do not know all things,' he replied lightly. Tel considered him sardonically, letting him enjoy his moment of triumph. He popped another into his mouth. They were very good. He finished the last one and clambered to his feet.

'Is it much further?' Duran queried.

Tel contemplated him dryly. 'Ah, now that is something I *do* know,' he replied.

Chapter 15

Fleet lay face down on the earth. She had ceased her struggling, ceased the dry retching which had come with the first savage pain, ceased to batter her hands against the thing which held her. The jaw was shut, its metal teeth pinioned through the thick hide of her boot, through the flesh of her ankle, perhaps through the bone itself. It would not release her. She floated on a sea of pain, at one moment doused in sweat, the next so chilled that she shivered. The sun was now high, looking down with a blank yellow eye, sending an intense thirst. There was nothing to drink though, for she had used the last of the water to quench the fire of the wound.

Her skin flicked and she roused slightly. The berian ... her entrails strewn about her ... the soft pad of whitewolves. She groaned. In time they would come for her ... when the light was no longer there to hold them at bay ... perhaps before. She dragged her head from the dust and the pain rose like a wave and engulfed her. She cried out, struggling frantically, but it drew her down into its utter swirling blackness.

Tel came the last of the way to the crossing place at a run. He knelt at the water's edge, bringing handfuls of its cool wetness to his mouth. By Anarkin he was thirsty. Beside him, Duran dunked his face under the water, shaking himself like a seedrat.

The path which ran up the opposite bank disappeared quickly into the tangle of ragwort covering the slope. Its grey-green foliage extended to the darker green of cone and clearbark, while beyond, the silvered mountains loomed; Anarkin, Amaran and Stilin, almost hidden by the trees. A flicker of black caught his eye, a speck swinging in lazy circles against the whiteness. A carnon, seeker of dead flesh. He grimaced. He had seen them feeding on young saman kids, sometimes while the beast still lived.

Duran was watching their circlings also. 'Something dies in the ragwort,' he said firmly. 'Or perhaps more than one,' he added, seeing other black forms joining the first. Noticing Tel's stare, he went on a little shyly, 'When food is scarce, only the parent bird comes.'

If Duran was right, the traps held at least one bear. Tel scowled, remembering the last time he had stumbled on one. He did not want to repeat the experience, especially with Duran by his side. 'There is most likely a bear in one of the traps,' he said after a

moment. 'A dying or dead bear is not like the sight of one roaming at will. Would you rather we turned back?'

'I would like to see a bear, living or dead.'

Tel took a deep breath and going to the washwood at the river's side, selected a long stick. 'Stay close behind me then. I do not remember exactly where the traps are.' They went forward slowly, Tel probing the ragwort before him. Duran followed at his heels, puzzled by the tension he sensed in his brother, but fascinated by the circling carnon. A slight breeze woke, bringing with it the odour of rotting meat, and the wall of ragwort before them was suddenly broken by a pale flash. Duran gripped Tel's arm in excitement.

'A wolf?'

Tel nodded, turning his steps further to the left. He kept the stick before him, but the stench of putrefying flesh now marked a clear trail. They came to a halt on the edge of the flattened foliage. The scavengers had been busy. The bear's empty eye socket glared back at him, and the rib cage showed stark against the black of hair and hide. He glanced at Duran. His brother's face showed a mixture of pity and disgust. The traps were necessary to protect the Sunnen, Tel reminded himself bitterly, and it was perhaps time that Duran understood that too. He scanned the ragwort around them, loath to move closer. Duran seemed to hold no such reservations, he noted in irritation.

'Look at this.' Duran was crouched near the bear's broad head, his brow creased in bewilderment and Tel joined him reluctantly, trying not to draw the fetid air too deeply into his lungs. Protruding from the bear's neck was the shaft of an arrow. He stared at it blankly. 'It is not a Sunnen arrow,' Duran murmured.

'You are right,' he said, but he could think of nothing to add. He straightened. 'We must be getting back.'

Duran looked up sharply. 'Shouldn't we find out what else draws the carnon? If there is another bear, it should not be left to a slow death.' Tel nodded, hiding his anger. Duran was right, but he had not thought of how it might be killed, or by whom. He jabbed at the ragwort savagely, jerking his gaze to the hovering carnons. Curse those stinking birds, curse everything! Duran's hand on his arm brought him up short and they stood for a moment listening. Below, the Sunwash muttered, while above the carnon gave voice to their discordant song. But there was another sound also. A harsh panting,

like a saman dog, and then unmistakably, a soft, shuddering groan. Tel shut his eyes, filled with cold dread. He knew with horrible certainty what it was. Duran remained motionless, but Tel brushed passed him, barely remembering to test the scrub before him. He did not want to go on, but he could no longer go back.

Fleet felt the slight vibration of the earth, far away, through a thicket of pain. It was not the pattern of the whitewolf, nor of the black birds which wheeled above. But it was of a hunting beast, drawn by the smell of blood. She forced herself from the floor of the pit, clawing her way up towards a light which was muted and far away. The ground roused beneath her face once more, and the darkness ebbed. She became aware of sunlight on her skin. It was hard to hold though, this awareness, much harder than the dissolution of the pit, yet hold it she must. It was all that kept her from the prowling beast, all that kept her from being Willing. The anger stirred. She was not Willing! The blackness surged higher, threatening to reclaim her, but she beat it back, forcing to mind how she might protect herself. She had no memory of her arrows, but her knife was at her belt, crushed beneath her. With excruciating slowness she clawed towards it, until her fingers closed over the coldness of the haft. Then tightening her grip, she waited.

It was close now, she could smell it even above the stench of her own fear. The leaves broke under its weight and the earth told of its heaviness. Then it was upon her, forcing her over, testing her Willingness to die. Uncurling her arm, she plunged the knife upward.

Duran saw the girl tense, even as Tel turned her gently, but his shout of warning was drowned by her harsh cry. He saw the flash of the knife, saw Tel's instinctive leap to one side, saw its tip catch the arm of his shirt, slow as it hit flesh and then appear slicked with blood from a rent at the shoulder. He sucked in his breath, half expecting to see his brother collapse backwards. Instead he sprang forward, catching the girl's wrists in a vicious grip and slamming them into the ground. The knife spun away and Tel crouched above her, panting with pain. 'Get the cursed knife, and her arrows,' he grunted, his eyes wild. Duran felt the movement return to his limbs and he darted forward, dragging the quiver and bow from her, searching the ragwort for the knife. He found it at last, sticky with blood and dust. He stowed them quickly in his pack, noticing without surprise that his own hands were shaking. Tel's shirt was drenched in blood but he still crouched over the girl, holding her pinioned, his face close to hers.

For a moment outside time, each regarded the other. Fleet saw the beast's strange light eyes surrounded by a tightening net of darkness. They stared at her, unblinkingly and then the net drew closed and their light was extinguished. Tel watched the black eyes regard him intensely, then shift and blur. Her lids closed and she was limp under him. He did not move nor loosen his grip, wondering if her abrupt surrender was some form of trickery. After a time he became aware of the throb of his arm and he turned his eyes that way. The blood was dripping from his sleeve, mixing with the blood already there on the girl's hide jacket. He watched the trickle with horrible fascination.

'Tel!' He dragged his gaze from it, becoming aware of Duran kneeling beside him, his eyes also on his sleeve. 'She has fainted. Come, I must bind the wound. You are losing blood.'

'I need to free the trap.'

'Arm first. Come!' Duran's voice was insistent and reluctantly he loosed his grip and hauled himself away from her. He felt clumsy and slow, and the heat of the sun failed to lift the iciness from his skin. Duran watched him settle on the grass, saw the sudden paleness of face and the slight film of sweat. He remembered how in the last Barebranch, he had been on hunt with Sarin, when his friend had fallen, gashing his head. At first he had made light of it, and then had come a loss of strength, and a strange dazed disorientation. He watched his brother now carefully, seeing the same unfocused shift of his eyes as he had with Sarin.

Tel sat with his head sagging between his knees while Duran tore the rest of his sleeve from his shirt. He let his eyes close for it was easier thus. The pain in his arm burned, but that was not all that dragged at his mind. He clamped his teeth viciously over his lower lip and groaned inwardly. He could not remember how to release the traps.

Chapter 16

The moon rose slowly, as white as the peaks above them, and almost as large. Tel watched it wearily, the pain of his arm robbing him of any enjoyment. Under its glare, the girl lay wakeful but motionless. She had been so since Duran had stumbled away to fill her waterskin at the Sunwash. Tel had tried to offer words of comfort, but she had not stirred. Her dark eyes had come to him though, making his discomfit all the greater. He wondered what language she spoke and if she understood what he had said. He wondered too at her control. The clench of her hands told him that she suffered, and the sight of the steel teeth was almost more than he could bear. Yet he forced himself to look at it, searching his memory for the method of its release.

Fleet sensed the pulse of light and turned her eyes skyward. The air was cold, the light ice-edged. Yet she burned. Fire and ice. A memory stirred, lost on the dark rim of her mind. For a moment she struggled to recall it, then abandoned the pursuit. What did any of it matter now; the anger which had driven her forward, the hope which had held her Unwilling. 'She the moon, She the moon.' Her voice was as soft as a Beetime breeze. Slowly she uncurled her hands, opened the flesh of her body, gave herself up to She above, Willing at last.

Tel started, seeing her movements, knowing them for what they were. 'Do not die, do not die!' he enjoined harshly. The girl was straining upwards, her face a mix of joy and despair, and the shock of it thrust Tel into action. He sprang forward, bringing his hands to the cold metal of the trap. The moon's light gilded each tooth, the dark coil of the spring, the flat tilting plate. He had not handled one for many Gatheringtimes, but his skin remembered what his mind did not. He tilted the plate and forced it down. Abruptly the teeth sprang apart, dragging themselves from the boot and flesh of the girl. There was a shrill cry and she clawed her way upright even as Duran reappeared. 'Get her clear,' Tel grunted, using all his strength to keep the teeth open. Duran leapt forward and pulled the struggling girl free. And then, with a harsh clang, the trap sprang shut.

For a long moment no one moved. The pain in Tel's arm beat savagely and he could feel the new wetness under his shirt. Somewhere, deep in the night, a wolf howled. Both Duran and the girl jerked round. The sound died away and then another joined it. Duran brought his eyes back to Tel.

'We cannot remain here.'

'No.' Tel grimaced. Even had he not been wounded, the journey back would have been difficult. Now they would have to carry the girl, for as Duran had pointed out, they could not remain here. He struggled to his feet and offered her the waterskin. She did not turn to him. Gently he touched her arm and she flinched away. It occurred to him for the first time that she might fight their attempts to aid her. They might well have to leave her to the wolves, or stay and themselves risk attack. They would take her willing or not, even if he had to bind her! Bracing himself, he slipped the pack from her stiffly held shoulders and handed it to Duran. 'You take this, and her arrows, and the waterskin. I'll carry first, then we will rest, and then you carry.' Then he knelt beside her, addressing her directly. 'We go back to our Place now. We will take you as best we can and care for you there. You will not be hurt.' She made no response and gritting his teeth, Tel reached forward. He half expected her to turn on him with teeth and claws, but she did not, allowing him to hoist her over his shoulder.

They made their way cautiously down the slope, Duran going before, probing the ragwort with the stick. After a time they came to the crossing place. He was about to step onto the first of the stones when the girl roused and gripped his arm.

'No!'

He came to a stop. 'We must cross here,' he told her carefully. Her hand remained clenched on his arm, her body was rigid. 'It is quite safe,' he added slowly.

She moved restlessly. 'I cannot cross the *mirian*.' Tel looked at Duran in bewilderment. Such was his weariness that he had felt no surprise that he could understand her words, though she spoke strangely. His shoulder throbbed and burned with increasing intensity.

'We must go this way,' he repeated tersely. She said no more but the rise and dip of her breathing became ragged. At last he stepped onto dry land and began making his way up the bank.

Duran came along side. 'She is crying,' he muttered. Tel set his jaw and said nothing. He had no time and no strength for other than their most urgent need. He forced himself on, thinking only of the way they must go. The moon climbed higher, drawing into a hard, bright ball, tossing their shadows back at them. Tel toiled on until the slope flattened then halted, lowering her gently to the ground before slumping down himself.

She lay as he had placed her, her eyes closed.

Duran touched her forehead gently. 'She is burning,' he said in alarm. Tel scrambled nearer, his muscles screaming protest. Her skin was hot and dry to his touch. What if she were to die even as he carried her? Her face already looked more bone than flesh, the skin white in the moonlight, slashed with the strange black marks. He forced himself to his feet once more, taking the packs, while Duran hoisted the girl onto his shoulders. They set off, Tel watching his brother through narrowed eyes. Duran might well match him in height, but he had yet to gain his strength. After a little Tel reluctantly called a halt, sliding the girl to his own shoulders once more. His flesh felt bruised but her weight had become familiar to him. They went on, resting when they could travel no more, and then walking again. The moon drifted across the sky and the mountains began to brighten. It was with sun shadow not moon shadow that they at last came to the corral.

Tel saw the curl of smoke from his mother's stay and Tanalan emerge, weaving her long hair into a plait. She looked up and faltered, staring at them open-mouthed. Duran brushed past her into the stay and he followed, trudging on with the same measured gait which had brought him from the crossing place. With infinite care he lowered the girl onto his mother's bed and then turned to Tanalan. He wanted to be calm, to show his control, to issue short and precise instructions, but the night air had robbed him of his voice and the room had begun to move strangely. He watched in irritation as the floor rose and abruptly Duran was at his side. 'Send for Sekwana,' he muttered thickly, and that was the last thing he remembered.

The voice rose and fell, as drowsy as the drone of bees. It was old, failing on the higher notes, singing a song as ancient as the arcing sun. Whose was it? Tel dragged his eyes open. The stay was dark and the fire had been lit. It had been dawn when he had returned, how was it now dark? The air was sweet, dulling his thoughts. After a little he gave up the struggle and let his eyes close. The singing had come to a stop and a cool wetness touched his face. He opened his eyes. This time the effort was less. Tanalan was sitting to one side and Sekwana to the other. It was Tanalan who soothed him with water, and Sekwana who stitched his shoulder.

The needle passed through his flesh, and the thread grew taut. Tel winced and

turned to the wizened face of Sekwana. He wanted to ask about the girl, but he was afraid.

'You should not tangle with bears,' the old man observed dryly. Tel stared at him dumbly, his weakness keeping him silent. He had never really liked the Wiseman, distrusting the power he exercised over the more gullible Sunnen. Still, he was a good healer and Tel was grateful for his aid. Sekwana worked for a time without speaking, and Tanalan continued to cleanse his face with a wet cloth. The pain in his shoulder intensified, so that it seemed to Tel that the needle was plunging into the very heart of the wound. He remained mute, but the effort not to cry out cost him greatly. The old man paused in his work and moved the dish of smouldering tinqua closer to his face. Tel turned away from its heavy fumes.

'There can be no aid unless you allow it,' Sekwana observed sardonically. He worked for a while in silence before speaking again. 'Tinqa is a strange plant. Fresh, it stings worse than a wasp bite, but burned, it draws pain away. It may even bring dreams which tell of things to come, or take away those which are unwelcome.' He smiled humourlessly, his lips drawing back from an erratic row of discoloured teeth.

Tel flushed uncomfortably. He wanted to be done with this riddling old man; he wanted sleep. Vaguely he was aware of him salving the wound and gathering his tools together. There was a time of darkness then and he was unsure whether Sekwana had actually spoken, or whether the voice had come to him in a dream. The words were quite clear though, however they came. 'The girl will live ... if she chooses.'

Talanan slumped wearily to a stool and Merala handed her a cup of warmed milk.

'What does Sekwana say?'

Talanan did not answer, but stared past her to where the girl lay. She was quiet now, but Tanalan shuddered at the memory of how they had held her while Sekwana had struggled to mend the torn flesh of her ankle. 'Has she taken water?' she whispered.

'No.' Tanalan felt her dread build. What if she were to die during the night?

'Did Sekwana speak of Tel?' Merala prompted gently.

'He said that the wound was clean, but that Tel was weak from loss of blood ...' her voice trailed off, and she frowned. 'He said other things I did not understand.'

'What things?'

'Oh, about tinqa being dangerous but helpful. I did not listen closely. The wound is so deep!' She glared resentfully at the sleeping girl. 'How could she have done that to him?'

'Duran says there were wolves there and carnon. He thinks she mistook Tel for one of those.' Tanalan continued to scowl and Merala sighed wearily. It had been a long and dreadful day, perhaps the worst since Barin had gone into the mountains and had not returned.

'He said something else too,' Tanalan muttered. Merala started, forcing her thoughts back to the room. 'I am not sure whether he meant the words for Tel or for myself. Tel was sleeping, though it may have just been the tinqa.' Merala stared at her expectantly and Tanalan turned her gaze from the fire. 'He said that she would live, if she chose to.' She looked to her mother, deeply troubled. 'What did he mean?'

Merala remained staring at her, careful to keep her face bland. The words of the Wiseman were only too clear. 'He meant that she might not want to live.' Merala saw the shock on her daughter's face.

'How could that be?'

'She may lose the foot.' Tanalan's bewilderment changed to horror. 'And she is far from her home, far from the kin who love her and who might help her. Perhaps that is why Sekwana spoke so.' Tanalan remained silent and Merala could see her exhaustion. 'Sleep,' she said softly.

Talan brought her eyes to the dark timber of her father's bed. 'What if she rouses during the night?'

'Then we will hear her,' Merala answered firmly. She watched Tanalan make her way slowly to her bed, but she did not follow. Instead she sat long into the night, her thoughts on the man she had not seen for many Gatheringtimes, on the son who now lay injured, and on the stranger with the marks of the Scedu upon her face.

Chapter 17

There was pain, an immense searing pain. Fleet groaned and a shape moved in the darkness, bringing water to her lips. A voice sounded, the words oddly spoken. Fleet came fully awake. She was not in Talith's tur, but in the place of the stranger. The one who had sung the songs of healing and had bound her foot was gone, the other, who had held her, remained. Fleet turned her face away. Why had She not taken her on the mountain? Why not in the trap? Fleet had been Willing then, Willing at last. But the beasts had come, carrying her across the swirling water which was neither creshan nor mirian, but an alien mix. She was burning. Was the way of death to be of fire, not of ice? The old one still watched, her face deeply troubled.

'Why will you not drink?' The woman's face was kind, though unmarked. Fleet took several deep breaths, fighting the swirl of sickness. Merala watched the girl struggle to speak. Her eyes were so dark that she could not see where the pupil ended. She had not seen such eyes before, nor endured such penetrating regard.

'I must be Willing,' the girl muttered thickly. Merala strained forward, trying without success to make sense of the words. *Willing?* Had she said *Willing*? If so, the Sceadu word must differ from the Sunnen. She wanted to question her further, but her eyes had closed. Merala sighed. She was perhaps the same number of Gatheringtimes as Tanalan, but at this moment she looked much older. Her skin was tight over the bones of her face, her cheeks sunken. In the early morning light, the touch of death seemed already on her.

Merala rose wearily and peered out into the dawn. Anarkin, Amaran and Stilin loomed palely in the mist. How could she have come that way? Perhaps she was not Sceadu after all, but from elsewhere. She searched her memory for the things Barin had once spoken of. Barin's father had travelled much, and he had passed his tales onto his son. Barin had told her of a people who dwelt over Anarkin's mighty back, who marked their men and women alike and who left their children nameless for many Gatheringtimes.

The mountains blurred and Merala turned away. Why had Barin gone, leaving her big with Inkala, with Duran and Tanalan trotting at her heels and Tel scarcely as tall as a berrem plant? Left her to go off on his wanderings, left her to deal with it all on her own,

to deal now with this girl and her denial of life? She shook her head in vexation, freeing herself from the thought. She was strong, had birthed without Barin, had grown the children without his aid. Now she would care for this girl, whether she willed it or not! She glanced back to her. The fever was deepening.

Her mind moved to Tel laying injured in his stay. Why had he journeyed so far north? To take Duran to see the bears? She thought not. He had not before made a habit of pandering to his brother's whims. It must have suited his purposes to go that way also. And it had been timely. Soon she would have been taken by carnon or wolves. Or would she, Merala questioned sharply. She thought of the deep wound to Tel's shoulder, and something Barin had once said stirred in her memory. They had been in this stay, with Sekwana she remembered with a jolt, speaking of the plans for the new Sunnen gardens. Sekwana had argued against such expansion, had talked of the need to maintain the older hunting ways.

Barin had laughed derisively. 'Are we to be as the Sceadu, forced to chase each meal across the mountain tops, grubbing up what best we can find, and going hungry when we cannot?' Hunting ... she eyed the girl critically. Beetime was warm and she was clad only in a flaxen shift of Tanalan's. She could see the strength of her arms and shoulders, and she recalled the intensity of her eyes. She was tall too, though not heavy, and lithe. She would be fleet she mused, as a hunter should be.

Her eyes travelled reluctantly to the foot. Sekwana had sewn it as best he could, but the wounds had been many and deep. Then he had laved it with paste and bound it with hael leaves and flax. She was to rebind it each day. She had tended the small hurts of her children many times, but this! The foot was swollen almost twice the size of its companion; the girl would be swift no more ... if she lived. Merala paused. Was this behind her refusal to drink, her seeking of death? She grimaced. So it was with the young! She remembered well how when Barin had gone, she had wanted to follow, to lose herself in the deep whiteness of the mountains and die there with him.

But that way had been closed to her. She owed care to her children, those already born and the one within. She must work the gardens, make the berrem pats, and weave the flax. She must keep the stays and see to their needs, not to her own. And in the end they had brought her great joy, but not freedom. Not freedom to make her own path, as Barin had, and as Tel and Duran some day would. Yet Barin was dead and she endured.

Who then was to say that her path was the lesser? The girl must also be made to see this, to choose to go on, not to turn aside. But how?

Her thoughts kept coming back to Sekwana. The girl had calmed when he had chanted, had not feared him in the way she feared Tel. And what was it that the Wiseman had said? Something about the girl choosing to live. Her heart quickened. Sekwana had seen in the last night what she was only now beginning to understand. Perhaps with his aid, the girl might still be saved.

Chapter 18

Duran lounged against the stay, kicking irritably at a tussock of fingerweed. 'Care for Inkala,' his mother had ordered, as she had hurried past on her way to the gardens. *Care for Inkala!* That was a woman's work. Latan and Sarin had gone up to the southern orchards and he had planned to go with them. There would be wildfruit there and the chance to hunt prin. But Tel lay in a tinqu sleep and Tanalan's time was taken up with the girl from the trap and so he must remain confined. Duran glared at his little sister in annoyance. She was building tiny stone shelters and passing pieces of berrem husk in and out.

For a brief moment, he wished that he too was still a child. Life had been simple then. Even a few days ago he had only to concern himself with the daily taking of fish, and the temporary nuisance of Inkala's company. Once the fish were back in the stay, he had been free to go off seeking prin, or grasshen eggs, or bears. He swooped on a stray berrem husk and hurled it viciously over the corral fence. Before this last trip his knowing of bears had been a mix of old Sunnen tales and a single sighting three Gatheringtimes past. The thrill of it still touched him; a solitary black bear, stark against the clearbark. Now this memory had been smudged by that terrible evening at the traps.

The quietness of the stay drew his attention; Inkala had disappeared. His heart faltered, and he hurried to the corral gate. It was fastened, but it was possible that Inkala had closed it after her. He cursed loudly. Whitesnakes were common near the orchards, feeding off the fruitmice that the honeyapples drew, yet he was loath to call her; loath to let others know of his carelessness.

A light laugh floated on the air, coming from the stay he shared with Tel. He was to it in a stride. Inkala was ensconced on Tel's bed, engaged in a finger game. Judging by her mischievous grin, she was winning. 'I told you to keep away,' he hissed furiously.

'It is well, Duran, she has not woken me,' Tel said gently, a smile still touching his mouth. Duran came fully into the stay, his anger subsiding only slowly. It was strange to see his brother abed, for Tel usually rose at the dawn. Duran had never seen him ill before either, or not in control of himself or those around him. He looked pale and drawn, and for the first time, vulnerable.

Tel saw Duran's uneasiness and his pleasure in the game began to fade. He

wondered what grim news his brother waited to tell him. Sensing his withdrawal, Inkala slipped from his bed and disappeared out the door. Tel forced himself to meet Duran's eyes. 'Does she still live?'

Duran nodded abruptly. There was a long silence. 'She will not drink though,' he blurted out, 'and if she does not soon, she will die.' Duran dropped his eyes, ashamed that Tel had witnessed his fear. There was a slight rustle. Tel had risen and was struggling to pull on his breeches. Wordlessly Duran helped him lace them and then watched him make his way carefully across the corral to Merala's stay. Duran had no wish to join him.

He caught sight of his pack, laying half under his bed where he had thrown it, three days and half a life time ago. He unlaced it slowly, laying the girl's quiver and bow on the bed. The arrows were skilfully formed, with fine metal heads. The bow too was well constructed, a little smaller than his own, but of similar wood. Clearbark, he judged. He put them aside and searched carefully for the knife. It would still wear his brother's blood, he recollected. Bracing himself, he drew it out. It was sticky as he had guessed. He weighed it his hand. The ridged handle gave a perfect grip and the blade was honed to a fine cutting edge. Duran stared at it, and then sucking in his breath, moved swiftly to the wooden chest used to store blankets and clothes. He threw open the lid and there, snug within its leather sheath, lay a knife. It was Tel's most treasured possession, the only thing he had from their father. Duran had learned from an early age to leave it be, yet no such prohibition restrained him now. Drawing it from its sheath, he laid it next to the blood smeared one. They were identical.

How could it be? The shivery thrill that the sight of his first bear had brought, moved down his spine. Should he seek out Tel and speak of it now? No, there would time enough later when his brother returned to sleep.

Tanalan turned at Tel's footsteps. 'You should be resting,' she admonished.

Tel stood staring, ignoring her rebuke. 'What did Sekwana say?'

Tanalan paused in cleansing the girl's face. 'He said little,' she muttered.

'What did he say?' he repeated harshly.

'He said that a hunter takes only his needs and thanks the beast, but that traps take all things, needed or not. He said that traps give no thanks.'

'Is that all?'

'That was all he spoke to *us*.' Tel looked at her sharply.

'There were the things he told *you*,' Tanalan reminded him shortly. Tel frowned. He had no memory of speech with Sekwana. 'He said that she would live if she chose to.' Tel stared at her blankly. 'She will not drink,' Tanalan added angrily, 'she has chosen death.' Tel dropped his eyes to the girl before him. Her skin was as white as the mountains at Barebranch, slashed across with vivid black marks. Gently he laid his fingers against her cheek. She looked as cold as Anarkin and yet she burned. Bracing himself, he allowed his eyes to travel to her foot. Tanalan watched him, half sorry for him, half resentful. She was tired of fretting over the girl, tired of worrying over her neglected garden. If Tel and Duran had not followed their manly whims of wandering, none of this would have happened. 'Merala wants you to seek aid from Sekwana.'

Tel looked up sharply. 'There is no help to be gained there.'

Talanan remained staring at him, and her eyes flashed angrily. 'There is no one else Tel,' she said finally.

Chapter 19

Deep in the Stead, the first cock sounded, followed closely by another. Within the stay though, it had at last fallen silent. Tanalan grimaced and eased her aching shoulders. The girl had kept her wakeful the entire night, calling for those whose names were strange to her. Siah and Talith, and Ashin and Ket, the last over and over again. Tanalan shuddered, remembering the girl's deep distress. She sought help, but those she called were far from her. Tanalan was grateful that her mother had not roused, for she was working doubly hard, weeding Tanalan's garden as well as her own. She thrust the shutters wide and peered out. It would be a fine day and the softness of the air bespoke Beetime. A soft footfall sounded behind and she turned to greet her mother. Merala saw the darkness of her daughter's eyes and the sag of her shoulders.

'A bad night?' Tanalan nodded mutely. 'You should have woken me.'

'You have enough to do,' she replied thickly. 'Besides, there is little point in two of us watching her die.'

'Talanan!'

'This is Tel's fault. He thought of the traps, and he set them, and now he will not lower his pride to save her,' she spat savagely.

Merala's gaze hardened. 'The traps have saved us all from the bears. They have allowed *you* to live in safety and the unravaged gardens to fill *your* belly!' Tanalan dropped her eyes and Merala's heart softened. Taking her into her arms, she held her close until the storm of tears had passed. Then she smoothed the damp hair from her face and kissed her wet cheeks. Ah, how she loved her, and how she wished she could save her from all hurt. She had seen death many times, but Tanalan had not. 'The fault is not Tel's,' she repeated gently, 'but it is true that we can do no more for her. If she is to live, help must come from elsewhere.'

Tel came the last of the way up the rise to Sekwana's stay. It had no corral and the land was choked with silverwort and thatch. He stared at it grimly, Merala's words echoing in his mind. She rarely commanded him to do anything, and she had not this morning. But she might as well have, he concluded resentfully. She had come to his stay before leaving for the gardens. 'The girl is dying,' she had said. 'I can offer her no more aid. Only

Sekwana can save her now. As the man of this stay, I ask you to seek his help.' Tel paused, looking about him uneasily. Two brown hens pecked at the dirt by his feet, and near the door lay several pats of fresh baked berrem. An offering left by Sunnen Sekwana had cured, Tel concluded sardonically. He glanced down at the package he held in his own hands. The best dried honeyapples and a hank of fine spun flax. He must honour the foreteller, whether he came willingly or not.

The wizened face of the old Sunnen materialised at the door and Tel started. For a moment they regarded each other then Sekwana beckoned him in. Tel followed, trying to still the rapid beating of his heart. The healer came only a little past his waist, but his ability to appear from nowhere had long unnerved Tel. Tel seated himself on the mat and offered the gift. Sekwana placed it to one side and waited. Tel cleared his throat. He had had much time to practise his words on the journey. 'I come to seek aid,' he began. 'My mother asks ...' he paused, it sounded as though he was a small boy on his mother's errand. 'We ask,' he began again, 'that you come to our stay and aid the girl who is there.'

'I have already given aid.'

Tel felt himself flush. He found the old man's intense regard extremely off-putting. 'It is as you say, and I thank you for it, and for the aid you have given myself,' he added swiftly. He could feel the sweat on his brow though the stay was not warm. Sekwana continued to stare at him and Tel felt his irritation grow. The old man was enjoying his discomfit but Tel resolved to put an end to the game. 'The girl has much fever but takes no water. If she does not drink soon, she will die. My mother can heal, but she cannot cure this girl's wish for death.'

'It is as you say.' Tel felt his tension ease but he kept his expression bland. Sekwana moved slightly and for a moment he was released from the trap of his eyes. 'I can offer no aid,' he said finally. Tel stared at him in disbelief, and opened his mouth to speak, but Sekwana forestalled him. 'There are many paths to travel,' he began. 'To open the heart to love or to close it, to answer our dreams or to turn away, to tread the way alone or to follow the many. I cannot choose for her, or for you. Each of us must carry the burden of our own decisions.'

Tel scrambled to his feet, keeping his anger in check. 'I thank you for your words,' he said curtly.

Sekwana watched him move back through the doorway into the white light of

day. 'Yes,' he muttered, 'but will you choose to understand them?'

Duran hurried through the honeyapple and rednut trees. Ahead he could just see Sarin and Latan, waiting at the edge of the garron as agreed. He had made good time, he noted happily, it was still well before the midpoint of the day. In the gardens thick with young berrem and whiteroot, Merala laboured at her weeding. The ground was rich and moist, the earth already warming under the swelling sun of Beetime. She worked steadily, intent only on her task. In the stay, Tanalan rose wearily from her stool. The girl was quiet at last and Inkala with Duran: she was free to snatch some rest. She moved unsteadily to her bed, and drawing the blanket close, let the bright glow of the stay drift away.

Inkala watched Duran slip through the corral gate, carrying his arrows and a gathering bag. When he was safely away she stepped from behind the corner of the stay. Tel had gone off at the dawning and her mother was in the gardens; Tanalan was taken up with the girl. She smiled broadly. No one to boss her about, no one to chastise her with loud and unpleasant words. At last she was free to do exactly as she pleased.

Chapter 20

Inkala came to the door of her mother's stay and peered cautiously in. Since the girl had come Tel had forbidden her to enter unless Tanalan was near. She did not understand this new prohibition and bitterly resented her curtailment. It was bad enough being confined to the corral, now she was not even allowed to where her strings and pipe were stored. 'Not allowed, not allowed,' she grumbled to herself. She took a wary step forward and then another. Her father's bed had been dragged away from its usual place and the girl lay curled at its centre, her hair strewn across the sleeping mat. It was very long. Inkala had never seen anything like it. Her mother's and Tanalan's were always braided, and her own cropped short. She moved toward it and stopped, Tel's warning echoing in her ears. Sighing she turned away, catching sight of Tanalan asleep on her bed. Inkala smiled delightedly; Tanalan *was* here. She reached out and touched the hair. It was dark, like Sunnen hair, but shone almost blue. She took it in her hands, turning it this way and that. The girl did not stir.

Sometimes Tanalan let her play with her hair, but never for very long. Tanalan was always so busy. Inkala climbed onto the bed. The girl was sleeping, her face turned away. Gently she divided the hair and began to weave it. The way the hair crossed and recrossed reminded her of the river song her mother had taught her last Beetime and she began to sing it softly. She did not really understand the words, though Tanalan had said it spoke of the rivers' birth in the mountains and journey to the sea. But it did not matter. She liked it well. She chanted softly and watched with pleasure her growing handiwork.

Fleet was far away in a place which was sometimes whiteland and sometimes dryland. It puzzled her greatly, this merging of snow and sand and she wandered between the two, asking those she passed how it could be so. The people were as indistinct as the land though. Ashin merged to Siah and Siah to Ket, but no one gave answer. There was music, as light as the ripple of water. It drew her and the darkness softened. It was child's voice, chanting a child's song.

Mendethian's daughter, Stilin's son, speed down the mountains full of fun.

Sunwash takes and Sunwash swells, tinkles like the saman bells.

Under moonlight under sun, see the silver rivers run.

Now through Terecleft they pour, falling with a mighty roar.

And then at last into the seas, they slip as quiet as Sunnen bees.

A song of creshan and mirian, not of whiteland or dryland. There was no water there, no life. She had been sent to seek water, why then did she waste her strength here? The song began again, clear on the higher notes, like the piping voices of the young within the Great Turrel. How she yearned to be home among her own. With an immense effort Fleet dragged open her lids. The singing stopped and large brown eyes swam into view. Ariet! Fleet called the name but no sound came. Her throat was parched, her tongue thick.

Inkala stared at the girl. She had woken and was looking at her. The girl's lips were very dry she noticed, dry and cracked. Once in the last Gatheringtime, she had spent the entire day at the Silverwash and the sun had burned her. She remembered well the pain, and how she had cried, and how Tanalan had put water on her skin to soothe her. Slipping from the bed, Inkala retrieved the small drinking bowl. Then with her fingers, she smoothed the water along the girl's lips. 'This will make you better,' she said solemnly, using the same phrase Tanalan had.

Fleet watched Ariet raise the cup and felt the cool wetness on her lips. Then the child leaned closer, bringing with her the scent of sunlight and flowers. 'Do you want water?'

A whirl of snow and sand rose, threatening to drown the child's face. 'Ariet!' Fleet struggled to sit, but all she could manage was a slight movement of her head. Inkala tilted the bowl carefully and the girl drank deeply. When she had finished Inkala jumped off the bed and refilled it quickly. Once more the girl drank, then sighing, turned her head aside and slept. Inkala sat smiling at her for a long time after. How proud Tanalan and her mother would be when she told them. She had given her two bowls of water and she had not spilled even a single drop.

Tanalan started up when Merala returned to the stay, horrified at the unlit fire and her neglect of the girl. 'I had not meant to sleep so long,' she muttered, swinging her feet to the floor. Merala had her back turned, leaning over the girl. Tanalan saw her stiffen and

dart forward, and her heart jolted sickeningly. 'Is she dead?' Merala did not reply and Tanalan waited, her hands clenched on the edge of the bed.

'I think she is a little better. Has she taken water?'

'No.' Her mother picked up the empty drinking bowl and frowned. Tanalan looked at it bewilderment. 'I left it full,' she said slowly.

'Perhaps Inkala gave her some.'

'Inkala has not been here. She is with Duran.'

'I saw Duran early this morning on the pasture path. He was alone.' Tanalan looked at her in alarm. In a stride she was out of the stay and into the corral. All was quiet. 'I will check the stays, you look to the path,' Merala ordered briskly. Tanalan had just reached the gate when Merala called her back. She was holding a very drowsy Inkala. Tanalan's relief turned to anger.

'It is Duran's task to care for her in the mornings! How dare he go off when he knows how busy we all are!'

'All is well, Tanalan. Let us light the fire and eat. As you say, the last few days have been hard for all of us.'

'Not for Duran,' Tanalan muttered. Just wait till she saw him! The fire was high and the berrem and whiteroot eaten before Merala turned to her youngest daughter.

'Did you give the girl a drink today?' Inkala nodded, reaching for a handful of dried honeyapple and stuffing them into her mouth.

'She took the water?' Tanalan interrupted. Inkala mumbled incomprehensibly, her cheeks bulging. Tanalan waited impatiently until she had swallowed the fruit. 'You gave the girl a bowl of water and she drank it?'

Inkala's face flushed with pride. 'I gave her two bowls and I did not spill any at all.'

It was nearing the midpoint of the night before Tel returned. After leaving Sekwana he had gone to the southern stonestreams to see that all was well, before turning homewards. In truth he had been in no hurry to return empty handed to the dying girl. Tanalan was already asleep with Inkala curled beside her, her face bathed in the fire's flickering glow. Only his mother still sat, stitching a flaxen shirt. She watched him struggle to remove his jacket and settle on a stool.

'Your shoulder pains you?' Tel nodded shortly. 'I will salve it again.' she said. It was mending well she knew, but the wound had been deep and would take time to heal.

'Sekwana sends no aid.'

'What did he say?'

'What does Sekwana ever say?' Tel spat contemptuously. 'A whole lot of half riddles which mean whatever the listener wants!'

Merala smiled and Tel stared at her in bewilderment. 'She is taking water.'

'When?'

'This afternoon from Inkala and tonight she took it from me.'

Tel shut his eyes for a long moment. 'I am glad,' he said at last.

Chapter 21

She was woken by an intense burning thirst. Somewhere there was a cup ... the old woman had used one. But it was dark in the tur, and her weakness great. She dragged herself upright and paused a moment panting, waiting for the room to cease its rocking. Then she swung her legs off the sleeping platform. There was a white-hot flash of pain from her ankle and she gasped. Something else moved in the gloom; a girl. Perhaps the same age as Brial or Sen, but no agemate. She was of those who bore no mark of earth or air. Fleet tightened her grip on the edge of the bed.

Tanalan paused, unsure of what to do next. She had held this girl while Sekwana had stitched her ankle, and had ministered to her since. But it was quite another matter to face the wakeful stare of her eyes.

'I need water.'

Tanalan felt a stab of surprise but she filled the bowl and passed it to her. The girl's intense regard continued, even as she drank. Her eyes held an extreme wariness and only when she had finished drinking was Tanalan released from their glare. 'Do you want more?' Tanalan asked slowly. She was unsure how much of her speech the girl understood.

The girl shook her head, intent now upon her foot. 'Will it heal?'

Tanalan faltered, again surprised at her directness. 'Sekwana has tended it and he is a Wiseman and healer.' The girl continued to stare and Tanalan squirmed under her scrutiny.

'Will it heal?' There was a long pause.

'We do not know.' Tanalan turned as Merala came to her side. Her old eyes met the hard gaze of the girl steadily.

'Sekwana is skilled, as Tanalan has said, but he does not know all things. It may be that it will fester, then you will lose the foot. It may be that it will heal poorly, and that you will be lame. Or it may be that it will heal well, and that all you will bear of this time is the scar.' Tanalan winced at her mother's directness, but the girl showed no emotion at all. Tanalan marvelled at this; she did not think she would be as calm if it concerned herself. Was this girl so hard then, so unfeeling? Merala was helping her to settle back once more and Tanalan flicked her eyes to the unguarded face. It was

angular, the cheeks, jaw and forehead meeting in sharp planes, the skin lighter than any Sunnen she had ever seen, the black lines strident against it. Inkala's laughing golden face came to her and she frowned.

Fleet sensed the other girl's disapproval and turned away. What did she care for any of these people, for their ways or thoughts? As soon as her foot was mended she would be on her way ... if it mended. She must have slept, for when she again came to her senses the tur was warm with sunlight. There was the breathy sound of a pipe close by, and childish laughter. A Little Sister was now with the other girl, and it was she who played the music. Even as Fleet watched, the child looked up and then came swiftly to the bedside.

'Inkala!' The older girl's voice held real alarm.

'But she is awake,' she protested. Tanalan looked at her doubtfully, remembering Tel's warning. The girl was weak though and she had no weapons. Inkala hesitated, suddenly a little unsure. Fleet smiled. She was very pretty this Little Sister, with light golden skin and eyes the colour of dark honey. Inkala came up to the bed. 'Do you want water?' she asked eagerly. Fleet nodded but the question cut her like a knife. It had been this one, this child of strangers who had taken her from the fire, not Ariet. Her skin flicked and she shivered. The Little Sister was holding the cup to her, and she took it, drinking gratefully. The older girl came back then, and the smell of fresh errem filled the tur. Fleet's hunger stirred.

'You must eat, if the foot is to heal,' she said, placing the platter on the bed. Expertly she grasped Fleet's arm and pulled her gently upright, instructing Inkala to fetch a blanket so that she might sit. Fleet settled comfortably and brought the pat to her mouth. Even lifting her hand was an effort and she could take no more than small bites. She ate slowly watching the child drop the remnants of the errem dough, spitting into the fire.

'What is the child's name?' she asked after a time.

'Inkala.'

'Inkala,' Fleet repeated. She did not know the word. 'What does it mean?'

'Mean? It does not mean anything,' Tanalan replied in surprise. 'It was my great grandmother's.'

'It is her earthname?'

'Earthname?'

'The one first given,' Fleet explained patiently.

The girl stood staring at her as if her words made no sense. 'We have but one name,' she answered shortly. Fleet dropped her eyes to the partially eaten errem. She could sense the girl's antagonism though she did not understand it.

'What is your name?' she pursued after a time, her curiosity getting the better of her.

'Tanalan.'

'Tanalan,' Fleet repeated.

'It does not mean anything either,' Tanalan added dourly.

'Will you now tell me yours?' Fleet hesitated, her eyes going to the thick bindings of her ankle. Whether it healed or not, she would no longer be fleet. Was Siah to be proven right? Was she to have Scead after all? 'Can you not remember it?' Tanalan goaded. Fleet's head jerked up, and Tanalan recoiled from the blaze of her eyes.

'My name is Chant,' she muttered defiantly. Tanalan contemplated her in silence. The meaning of *her* name at least was plain - song. It did not suit her at all though; a song was soft and melodic, whereas she was hard and self-contained. The girl had stopped eating and had slumped back with closed eyes. It was warm in the stay, the first really warm day of Beetime, and she was clad only in a flaxen shift. It was open at the neck and Tanalan could see plainly the edges of her bones. It had been five long days since Tel had staggered back, wearing the blood of both, but Tanalan guessed it would be many more before she would have the strength to leave.

Chapter 22

The next morning Tel breakfasted in his mother's stay. It was where meals were usually taken, but the presence of the girl had lately made him seek reasons to be elsewhere. She lay sleeping, with her face turned away, and for that he was grateful. He had no wish to look into the darkness of her eyes once more. He glanced often in her direction though, drawn to the long hair strewn across the pillow. He had never seen anything like it.

'The foot heals,' Tanalan said softly, seeing the direction of his gaze. Tel looked to her questioningly but she was busy removing a berrem pat from the cooking stone. 'We salved it last night. There was no fester but it caused her great pain. That is why she sleeps now.'

Tel took a gulp of his herb tea, burning his mouth. He managed to hide his discomfit though, keeping his voice even. 'Has she spoken?'

Talanan nodded. 'She speaks Sunnen, though strangely.'

'Did she say where she came from?'

'No, though she told me her name.' Tel waited expectantly, and Tanalan paused, smiling slightly at his impatience. 'Chant.' Her smile broadened at the expression on his face.

'It does not seem a good fit,' he observed, flicking his eyes once more to the tangle of blue-black hair.

'No,' Tanalan agreed. She lifted another berrem pat deftly and put it aside. Merala still slept and she had not seen Duran for some time. The thought of him stirred her anger from the previous day. 'You need to speak with Duran.'

'Why?'

'Because he goes wandering off on his own enjoyable business while Merala and I struggle to do all that must be done here!'

'Perhaps he seeks a little peace,' Tel suggested dryly.

Talanan put aside the last of the pats and turned to him. Her brothers' solidarity irked her greatly. 'When he went to seek peace this last time,' she began with studied care, 'he left Inkala untended. I did not know he had gone until dusk. It is fortunate that she did not stray from the corral.' She watched Tel's brows draw into an angry line with some satisfaction. Her brothers might be close, but it was with Inkala that Tel shared the

closest bond. The flap stirred and Duran appeared. His face was tired and his boots liberally coated with mud. Tossing his gathering bag to one side, he drew up a stool. 'The hunter returns,' Tanalan observed sardonically.

Duran ignored her, reaching for the berrem and cramming it into his mouth. He had eaten nothing but wildfruit since the last dawning and he was ravenous. Added to this was the fact that the only prin he had sighted in all that time had been frightened off by Sarin and Latan's blunderings, and the shot he had loosed after it had gone badly awry. He grimaced at the memory of his friends' amusement as he floundered about in the mosslands retrieving it.

Tel poured another bowl of herb tea and handed it to him, his eyes taking in the state of his boots and the twig of thatch clinging to his hair. 'And are we to dine on roast prin tonight?'

'You might if you choose to take up Sal's invitation,' Duran replied shortly.

Tel's eyes narrowed. 'What invitation is this?' Duran took a large gulp of his tea, holding the liquid long in his mouth, savouring its flavour. His brother's gaze beat upon him but he kept his attention on the soft green liquid. 'Speak!'

Duran relinquished his moment of power reluctantly. 'I came upon Sal high above the southern gardens, and very glad to see me he was too. Said I had been most helpful in saving him a day's journey.' Duran glanced at Tanalan but she returned his look coldly. He swallowed several times before going on more formally. 'He wishes to extend the stone streams to his northern lands this Gatheringtime and begs your advice. He has called his kin and so has the hands to help him, and he invites you to share his stay, if you will, during the time of building.'

Sal's stay was on the outer edge of the Stead, and it made sense to live there rather than journey back and forth, Tel mused. And it would suit him well to be free of his concerns here. In fact, the thought of planning out a new network of streams excited him greatly, and it seemed long since he had felt so.

Talanan watched Tel closely. Surely he would not go now, not after she had told him of their great need of help? But she saw the happiness in his face and the relief. He would be grateful, she realised abruptly, to be away from the handiwork his traps had caused. 'I am sure Insalan will be pleased,' she said softly. Tel jerked toward her. He had forgotten Sal's wife, and the visit she had made seeking his advice on the marriage of her

daughter. Tanalan saw his sudden doubt and smiled smugly. 'Be careful you do not return a married man.'

'Do not speak of that which you know nothing.'

'I do not!' she retorted angrily. They glared at each other and the mattress which had once been their father's rustled as the girl stirred. All eyes turned to her as she sighed and then settled.

Tel rose from the stool. 'I must make preparations,' he said, 'and I would speak to you,' he said to Duran. Duran nodded, reaching for another berrem pat. 'Now!' Duran's hand faltered and he rose and followed Tel from the stay. Tanalan remained seated, staring moodily at the fire. At least her earlier words seemed to have served some purpose. Perhaps Duran would at last be made to take a greater share of the work. She glanced over at the sleeping girl. She had turned slightly so that the dark outline of her face lay stark against the lightening walls of the stay. She looked like a younger Tel at that moment, though she lacked his softness. Grimacing she turned away.

Tel pulled his pack onto the bed and going to the wooden chest, slipped the knife into his belt and took out his clean clothing. Duran waited silently, his face petulant. Tel's heart hardened. He finished his packing and drew the strings taut before speaking. 'There will be much to be done while I am away, and your responsibility as the man of this stay is to ensure that it is done,' he began crisply. 'Talanan must care for the girl, and so you will take Inkala to the Silverwash with you when you net.' Duran's scowl deepened, but Tel ignored him, going on methodically. 'Afterwards, you will remain in the corral so that Tanalan may work in the gardens. During this time you are to keep Inkala with you also. When you are able, you will help by grinding berrem or preparing the charcoal.'

'Those are women's tasks,' Duran expostulated.

'They are tasks that need to be done,' Tel retorted harshly, 'and until I return and the girl is well, they needs be done by you.' Tel glared at him and Duran dropped his eyes. 'One last thing Duran, but the most important. Take the girl's knife and arrows and stow them where she will never find them.'

Duran stared at him in astonishment. 'Do you think she is dangerous?' Tel smiled sardonically, and Duran flushed, remembering his wounding.

Tel eased on his pack and turned towards the door. 'Keep them well until I

return,' he said shortly, and disappeared through the flap.

Chapter 23

The days passed without shape or pattern. Sometimes when she woke, it was Tanalan who was there to care for her, sometimes it was a young man. *Duran* he called himself, but he said little else, breaking his silence only to warn the Little Sister away from the fire or to inform her tersely when he would be outside the stay for a while. Chant spent her time lying quietly, watching the chase of sunlight and shadow across the floor or Duran grind the errem in the way of the Sceadu. She forced her mind to emptiness, sleeping when weariness overcame her, and waking when hunger and thirst beckoned. The older woman Merala would return each night, and then Tanalan would be there, and the Little Sister, and sometimes Duran too. They would sit about the fire and speak of the day's doings, and Merala would turn and smile to include her as well. Such times reminded Chant keenly of the evenings within the Great Turrel, and the ache of longing grew so great that she was forced to hide her grief by turning her face to the wall. Then the voices would quieten, thinking her asleep, and slowly the fire would dwindle and those others go to their beds also. But Chant lay long awake, the air crowded with images of Siah and Scead, and when sleep finally came, her dreams were filled with dying berians.

One daygrow when Chant awoke, it was Merala not Tanalan or Duran who remained in the tur. The old woman held a long piece of ashin, its end twinning like a crescent moon. 'I think it time the hunter walks again,' she said firmly. She drew the blanket back and began to ease her forward. Chant's mind reeled and blanked and she jerked away. Merala paused, understanding the girl's fear for what it was; not a fear of her or of pain, but of failure. 'Come,' she said gently, 'I would not ask you to do that which you could not.' Chant shut her eyes, images of Ket swirling before her ... Ket leading her deep into the whitelands, Ket insisting she track before, Ket forcing her to abandon all thought and knowing, teaching her to listen to her skin.

She brought her eyes to Merala's. She must learn these things again. She must learn to live on this side of the mountains, where Snowmelt came early and the sun burnt the people to the darkness of sweetstick. She must learn these things if she was to return to the Sceadu, if she was to claim Scead. Merala watched the play of thoughts across the girl's face. She had spoken little in the days since her healing had begun, almost a half

moon now, Merala reminded herself. Yet she did not think it was as Tanalan had said, that the girl was hard, or cold, or secretive. She thought instead that she carried other wounds which lay hidden. She had watched her often at night, had seen the tears when the others had slept, had seen the longing there, and the frustration. At such times she was reminded of Tanalan, for her own daughter shared the same longing and frustration, though she vented hers more freely, on Tel when he was there, and lately on Duran.

Chant felt the smooth wood under the hollow of her shoulder and the warm hands of Merala steadying her. She braced herself, put her uninjured foot to the floor, and came upright. The crutch was too short and she noticed with surprise how small the older woman was. She swayed slightly and Merala's arms tightened. 'Duran must find you a longer stick,' Merala muttered, peering up at her. Chant swayed, struggling to find her balance. She had not felt such weakness for many Snowmelts, not since the times as Little Sisters she and Flint had lain ill together ... they were no longer together, nor even friends. Siah was far away now, with Scead.

Merala waited, again watching the Sceadu's face. How easily she could read her! Anger, regret and bitterness. She was no longer reminded of Tanalan, but of herself, after Barin had left. 'Do you wish to go out?' Chant nodded. She was heartily sick of her long confinement and longed to feel the air on her face. But the crutch was awkward, her ankle pulsing with pain. She hobbled slowly to the door. The air still held the coolness of night though the sun was brightening Ashali's back. Chant stood gaping; she had forgotten what it was to see the sun rise above the mountains. Merala noted the girl's astonishment. 'It must be very different in the Sceadu lands.'

Chant turned to her dazedly. 'You know of the Sceadu?'

'I have heard tell of a people who live on the eastern side of the mountains and who mark their men and women thus,' she replied, her eyes upon Chant's face.

'You have been among us?'

Merala shook her head. 'There is no way over the mountains.' Chant felt the last of her strength ebb and Merala was once more at her side. 'Enough for one day,' she said firmly, helping her back into the stay and easing her onto the bed. Chant did not speak, but as Merala turned to go she caught her arm.

'Tell me how you know of the Sceadu!' The girl's eyes burned upon her but Merala hesitated, suddenly reluctant. Even now she did not like to think of Barin's father,

of his wild tales painting the path of Barin's death. Yet the girl's need was intense. She was alone and far from home, and had great wish to hear of it.

'The father of my husband was a great traveller,' Merala began slowly. 'Always he wanted to know what lay beyond the Sunnen lands. He journeyed over the Brindlebacks and even to the great seas in the west. But it was Anarkin which drew him back time after time.'

'He went *over* it?'

'The snow was not as great then,' Merala murmured, lost in thought. 'The saman could graze far above the cone forests, and gardens could be planted beyond the Sunwash. It is many Gatheringtimes now since we have done these things. Now the saman are fewer, for there is less pastureland.' She looked down at Chant and her eyes gentled. 'He spoke of a people who lived below Anarkin's other slopes, who kept no gardens but who must live by what they found. He spoke of them as owning no houses, as knowing no kin, of staining the faces of their young.'

Chant flushed angrily. 'It is not as he said!'

'I meant you no insult,' Merala returned gently. 'I merely tell you what was told to me. The stranger sees always with a stranger's eyes. When he went to the Sceadu place, he looked upon your people as a Sunnen, even as you now look upon us as a Sceadu.' Chant continued to glare, and Merala rose from the bed. She had much to do; the berrem was unground and the fish Duran had brought in the last day had still to be cleaned. And yet she lingered. 'What do you call that mountain?' she asked suddenly, gesturing toward the open shutters.

Chant turned so that she too could see. 'Ashali.'

'We call it Anarkin. Yet is it not the same mountain?' Chant nodded. 'The essence of a thing is not altered by its name,' Merala finished softly. The girl turned back to her and she was shocked by the distress in her eyes.

'You are wrong,' she said at last. 'A name may change everything.'

Later that day after she had rested, Chant practised walking with the crutch. Her ankle could bear no weight at all, but after a time she found that by stepping with her good foot and then swinging herself forward with the stick, she could move along. It was clumsy and tiring, and infuriatingly slow. Merala watched her through the open door of

the smoke stay. She saw how she struggled to master the crutch, and how she drove herself on, long after exhaustion had claimed her.

Chant came the last of the way to the corral fence and sagged against it. Her heart was pounding, the sweat coursing down her back. Even the smallest Little Sister would outrun her now. She glared angrily over the fence. To one side the ground swept up to the mountains, banded here and there with the darkness of trees; to the other, a dense clump of scrubby wood closed off the view. She wondered what lay beyond. The fence itself was made of narrow trunks of dark wood, driven into the ground and bound together with thick twine. The upper ends had been honed to jagged tips; to repel beasts? She ran her fingers along them speculatively. Perhaps it was to protect against people. Her heart lurched uncomfortably and a memory stirred dimly.

When she was new to the Creshan Turrel, Sai had given her the oldest chants. She could remember little of them though, for she had been impatient to learn the chants of hunting, which came later. Yet there was something ... she shut her eyes and hummed softly, letting the song bring the words. The rhythm ebbed and flowed and with it came a remembering. A dark people, raiding from the west, Sceadu killed and Sceadu taken. *A dark people* ... her eyes jerked open.

Merala laid the last of the fish on the smoking rack and pulled the door shut behind her. Chant was near the corral gate now, her attention caught by the mountains. Even as she watched, the gate swung open and Duran and Inkala appeared. Chant dropped into a crouch and spun round, her hand going to her hip. For a single, brief moment, Merala saw her as she must have been before, then the stick twisted beneath her and she fell heavily. She had sought her hunter's knife, Merala thought briefly as she hastened across the corral. Did she then fear them? Duran was bending over her awkwardly, the crutch in his hand, but the girl had drawn away from him, the sweep of hair hiding her face.

'Take Inkala inside,' Merala ordered briskly. Duran swung Inkala onto his shoulders and she watched them duck through the stay's opening. She stood considering the girl, thinking what best to say. It was nearing dusk, the westering sun painting the snow as pink as sweetfruit blossom. And it was quiet, as it mostly was in the stay, for the thatch and garron separated their corral from the next. This was not usual, for mostly the corral fences joined each other, forming patterns as neat as a spinner's web. Only their

stay, and Sekwana's stood undisturbed. And now this wanderer had come, brought by the son who struggled to quell the restlessness of his own blood. Merala sighed, and gently smoothed the hair from her face. 'Have you hurt yourself?' The girl shook her head. 'It grows late, come, we will eat.' She extended her hand but the girl remained as she was. 'You must eat if you are to grow strong once more.'

'I do not want to.' There it was. Her eyes flashed up angrily, but Merala held her silence. 'I wanted to die on the mountain,' she went on bitterly, 'I wanted the whitelands to take me, but they would not. Nor the trap. The berian were willing, they were taken, but not me. Even from the drylands I was called back!' She stared down at her ankle fiercely. 'I am no longer the hunter, but I will not be as Siah demands. I will not be!' There was much that made no sense to Merala, but much that did. The girl's distress was plain, as was her rejection of the path which had been set for her.

Merala lowered herself onto the ground beside her. 'There was a time when I too wanted to die,' she began quietly. 'When my husband went into the snow and did not return. But my children were small, and one I still carried. I was not free then to do as I wished.' She paused, sighing heavily. 'Some things even now I regret. Yet I have found joy in the way I have followed, though I had no part in choosing it. Perhaps it will be so with you.'

'I have no children.'

'Have you no one who loves you?' Merala saw the colour rise in her face. She nodded shortly. 'And do you not care for yourself?' Chant dropped her eyes. 'It is considered a very evil thing among the Sunnen to seek death,' Merala went on sternly. 'Is it not among the Sceadu?' Chant nodded but her chin came up.

'Yet *you* thought of dying,' she challenged.

'Yes,' Merala agreed, 'but I did not.' There was a long silence. 'Come,' the older woman said gently. She helped her up, holding her steady till the crutch was in place. 'You are very tall, too tall for that stick. I will ask Duran to find you a longer one for the morrow ... though I doubt it will please him.' Chant turned to her questioningly and Merala grinned. 'It will dent his pride to have a woman near who is taller than he is.'

Chapter 24

The stay was full of the warm, rich odours of roasting fish. In the bright glow of the fire, Inkala's face shone with delight as she tricked Duran with the intricacies of a webweave, while nearby, Tanalan prepared the last of the whiteroot. Merala moved resolutely past them into the dimmer confines of the stay, where Chant lay quiet upon her bed. 'Come and eat with us.' Chant looked beyond Merala to the circle of bodies gathered round the fire. They would give her no welcome; did not the old woman know this? But Merala was waiting impassively, as she had done several daygrows past, when she had first insisted she walk.

'I would eat here.'

'With us,' Merala repeated gently. Merala waited and in the end she was forced to struggle from the bed. Chant settled herself between Tanalan and Duran, careful to keep her eyes on the dancing flames, and silence fell. Tanalan moved restlessly, feeling her mother's gaze upon her. She felt no friendship for this girl Tel had burdened her with. It was true that they were of a similar number of Gatheringtimes, but nothing else bound them. This other one's skin was peculiarly pale and she wore her hair loose, not in neat Sunnen braids. And what hair it was. Blue black, like the pelts of the washrats she sometimes glimpsed while bathing. She had their quickness too, despite her wound, and their freedom. Tanalan glowered down at the whiteroot she was holding. The girl *was* their guest, she conceded grudgingly at last, and drew breath to speak, but Inkala was the swifter.

'Look Chanty.'

Chant brought her eyes to the pretty face of the Little Sister and then to the pattern of twine she held. 'Ah, you are clever. You have made a berian nest,' Chant said.

Inkala tilted her head in puzzlement. 'It is a worm's way.'

'A worm's way?' Chant questioned.

'Like in the honeyapples.' Chant looked at her in bewilderment.

'Sometimes a worm eats the honeyapple first, so that when it is cut, the tunnel of the worm may be seen,' Tanalan explained.

'Do you have worms in the honeyapples where you live?' Inkala asked, starting to scramble onto her lap.

'No,' Duran warned quickly, reaching for her.

'I want to sit on Chanty,' Inkala pouted.

'You will hurt her.' Inkala turned imploringly to Chant.

'It is well, sit on this knee,' Chant said quietly, flicking her gaze to Duran. She brought her arms around the child, pulling her up, enjoying her warm softness.

'Do you?' Inkala persisted, taking up her earlier question.

'No, for we have no honeyapples,' Chant replied. Inkala looked at her in dismay. No honeyapples, her favourite fruit. Chant smiled slightly, seeing her horror. 'We have other things,' she added reassuringly.

'What?' Inkala demanded.

Chant's eyes wandered to the flames. Fire was fire, she mused, whether here or in the Great Turret; fire was fire. She roused slightly. The gaze of the Little Sister was still upon her, expectant. 'At Snowmelt,' she began softly, 'the creshans wake and fill with thorn-fin and rinnet. The redlands give snowfruit then and sunstone, and later the greenfood ripens.'

'Do you hunt?' Duran interrupted.

Chant kept her eyes on the fire. 'Some Sceadu hunt,' she said after a time.

'Tell me of what they hunt,' Duran pursued, not noticing her reticence. Chant gently eased Inkala forward. The Little Sister had sunk back against her wrenched shoulder, abruptly reminding her of the injury to her arrow hand.

'At Snowcome, the scinton, aperion and hare may be Willing. With the creshan's first flow, murrows may be taken. Later in Snowmelt, at the birthing-time, beehens are hunted.'

'Do you not hunt the bears?' Chant looked up reluctantly. Duran's face shone with eagerness.

'Berian are not Willing.'

'But surely,' Duran persisted, catching her arm in his excitement, 'they are sometimes killed?' Merala saw her flinch away and the sudden flash of her eyes.

'They are not Willing!'

'I think that tea is well and truly brewed,' Merala interrupted smoothly, reminding Duran of the pan he balanced over the coals. She saw him recollect himself and swiftly withdraw his hand. 'Inkala, fetch the platters. Not those, the larger ones.'

Chant heard the rattle of the plates but she kept her eyes lowered. Her heart was hammering and the ache in her shoulder kept time. Why had Duran angered her so? Was it his lack of hunter knowing, his ignorance of Willingness? These people took berian, leaving them to rot in traps, wasting the Gift. They broke Talabraith over and over again, and yet their creshans ran deep, their mountain slopes were lush with grass; they did not hunger! She too had broken Talabraith, she reminded herself. Had gone from the Sceadu place with a bitter heart and without sweet words of parting. She had gone her own way, into the whitelands expecting death, but death had not come. Instead, a strange inverted world below the one she had known had taken her, and later the berian, and now these.

Chant stared into the flames, seeing nothing. Her mind could find no reason for what was happening, but she sensed pattern. It was indistinct, as fragile as the first leaves of tarn ice, yet always it told of berian. They were old, older even than the Sceadu, their trails imprinting the very flesh of the earth. And they had gone before her through the dry, night-filled creshans also. And then? She remembered well the ravaged body of the berian and how she herself had been caught. They could go no further, and nor could Fleet. It had been Chant, not Fleet who had been brought so unwillingly to this place. Her heart thundered in her ears. But for what purpose?

'Chant?' She jerked up. Tanalan was holding a platter of food toward her and she stared at it dumbly. 'Do you not eat fish?'

'The Sceadu take fish,' she recited automatically, struggling to bring her attention back to the tur. 'I thank you for the Gift.' She ignored Tanalan's ironic stare, for her thoughts were boiling as rapidly as the Sunnen tea. Duran glanced at the girl next to him. She had made no move to eat, holding the platter clenched before her, her gaze fixed on the fire. In its light, her face looked softer, but her eyes no less intense. She was unlike anyone he had ever seen before. Merala had said that she was a hunter but she must be mistaken, for women did not hunt. There *were* the arrows and knife she carried, he recollected abruptly. Still, she could not be a real hunter, probably a taker of seedrats and the like. Duran busied himself pouring the tea. He would find time to speak with her later though, for she had travelled much for a woman, and might know of things which could be useful to him.

Chapter 25

The next day, when Duran returned from the Silverwash, he brought with him not just a bulging sling of fish but a long piece of washwood. He had searched far along the water's edges to find one of sufficient length and strength, and with the wide forks which would serve as crutch. He had not minded though. It had given him excuse to look for washrat holes and to seek for waterspinners among the reeds. It seemed to him long since he had had such freedoms, though in truth Tel had been away less than a moon. He had in fact, almost ceased to chaff under his enforced duties, though the grinding of the berrem and the need to care for Inkala still irked him.

The day was warm, the snowy caps of old Anarkin and Amarin stark against the intense blue of the sky. The girl's foot healed well and Tel must surely return, for it would soon be Wait. Then all Sunnen, whether old or young, near or beyond the Terecleft, would come together at the gardens, and orchards and by the Silverwash, to hear old Sekwana chant his song of thanks. It was not the old man's mutterings which interested him though, or he suspected, most of the Sunnen, although they would listen as respectfully as he would. No, what he most looked forward to were the three dawns of feasting, and the meeting of kin who would make the journey east. There were many tasks to be done before then, though. He must clean the fish and grind the berrem, and stay with Inkala and the girl, so that Tanalan might go to the gardens.

He found them at the back of the stay, between the shelter of the corral fence and the thick earthen wall, where the sunlight lay confined and still. They were intent on the construction of an elaborate webweave and there was much giggling from his sister. Even the girl was smiling. She looked up as he appeared and Inkala leapt squealing into his arms. He tossed and tousled her before setting her down, planting a final kiss on her sun-warmed hair. The girl's smile had been replaced with the look of cool appraisal he had long found disconcerting. In the brightness of the corral her eyes were as hard as the polished bones Sekwana wore at Wait. Duran forced himself to meet them, though he felt his irritation rising. 'Where is Tanalan?'

'She has left,' the girl replied.

'Left?' he repeated blankly. For a moment he struggled to force some order to his mind. She could not have travelled far in this time; he could still overtake her ... bring her

back ... Tel need never know. He gulped in several mouthfuls of air. Chant watched the jumble of emotions pass over the boy's face, understanding none of them.

'Your mother was called to aid a sick woman and she left with her,' Chant added. Duran's eyes narrowed and he seemed to have difficulty breathing. He took several steps away before turning violently. Inkala shrank back and Chant's hand closed over her crutch.

'I ordered her to stay here,' he expostulated.

'Why?' The girl's eyes were as insolent as her question.

'Because you are not to be left alone with Inkala!' Chant drew the stick under herself and abruptly, she was level with him, her eyes little more than a hand span from his. He stepped back, disconcerted both by the swiftness of the move and by her proximity. There was a short silence and he became aware of Inkala clinging to Chant's side, her eyes wide upon him. 'Chant..' he began, uncomfortably.

'Do the Sunnen harm their young?' she demanded harshly.

'No.'

'Nor do the Sceadu.'

Duran half shrugged. 'It is because of what you have done,' he said diffidently.

Chant's mind jerked to the breaking of Talabraith. 'Because of what I have done?'

'Because you stabbed Tel.'

'Tel?'

'My brother.' He saw the bewilderment on her face.

'I do not remember,' she said shortly, 'there were so many beasts.' Duran grimaced. He did not think Tel would welcome such a description. 'Did I kill him?' The question was as ill-mannered as her earlier one, but he forced himself to remain calm.

'You did not, though Sekwana spent a considerable time stitching him up after he had finished stitching you. It is Tel who ordered that you not be left with Inkala.' He paused. 'It was before he left, before he had the chance to know you as we now do,' he finished awkwardly.

'And you must do as he says?' Chant pursued.

'He is the eldest.'

Chant heard the resentment in the boy's voice. 'Your mother is older,' she tested.

Duran snorted in exasperation. 'She is a woman!' He saw her puzzlement.

'Women do not rule,' he added.

'Why?'

Duran moved restlessly, tired of having to justify his every utterance. 'They do not, that is all,' he answered brusquely. She remained staring at him, and he dropped his eyes. 'I have much to do,' he muttered, moving swiftly away. Chant watched him disappear around the edge of the stay.

'I do not understand your brother,' she said slowly.

Inkala smiled. 'That is what Tanalan says too.'

'And what else does Tanalan say?' Chant queried.

'Oh, that Tel is bossy, and that it is unfair that he can go where he wishes, and that Duran thinks he is a man, when really he is just a silly boy who cannot even hunt without ruining his best boots in the mosslands ...' Inkala paused to take a breath and noticing Chant's broad smile, grinned.

'I have caused him much extra work though,' she said thoughtfully, as they made their way back to Merala's stay.

Inkala pulled a wry face. 'Talan says it is good that he finds out what a woman must do.' Duran was inside, hunched over the grinding stone, a basket of dried errem at his side. He glanced up briefly at their approach, and then went back to his task. The large grinding stone was the same as that used by the Sceadu, and the manner of grinding also. Chant watched the fine errem flour rise and dance in the shafting sunlight. Her eyes followed the shifting patterns and it seemed that the dance was not here, but in the cooler air of the Great Turret. The patterns blurred and she felt Inkala's small warm hand steal into hers. She looked down into the face of the Little Sister.

'Do not be sad, Chanty,' she whispered. Duran glanced up from his work and paused. In the dimmer light of the stay the girl's face seemed softer, and he saw the look of tenderness that passed between her and Inkala. Tel was wrong, he realised abruptly, wrong to see her as a danger. He wanted to say it to her, but the words failed him. It was she who spoke first.

'You grind the errem in the same way as the Sceadu.'

'Berrem,' he corrected. They stared at each other for a moment then she smiled.

'As I am in your place, I will use your word,' she said formally. Duran inclined his head. 'Whatever you name it, I can help by grinding it for you.' She saw the sudden

lightening of his face, then how he sobered as he dismissed the idea.

'It is heavy work and you have yet to regain your strength.'

'I will build my strength by the grinding,' she replied. Duran eyed her doubtfully then glanced down at the sling of yet to be cleaned fish. He moved aside, and watched her settle and begin. She was well practiced.

'Was this your job among the Sceadu?' he asked tentatively.

'Sometimes, when there was need.' He watched her feed more berrem into the wheel and continue with the rhythmic turning.

'Did you sometimes hunt?' he asked at last.

She nodded. 'And I made cups and cleaned fish,' she finished, looking pointedly at the sling at his feet. Duran sighed and swung it onto his shoulder. He had wanted to ask her of hunting but it would have to wait. And as he made his way to the smoke stay, he hoped for the first time that her foot would keep her with them for many more days.

Chapter 26

The grinding of the errem became Chant's daily task. It was accepted too that she should care for Inkala, for the affection the two shared was plain. It meant that Tanalan could return to her gardens and it freed Duran to spend a little time in hunt. The grinding served Chant well also, for her arm began to recover its strength and she must be strong for what lay ahead.

'Inkala likes to be with her because she allows her to do as she wishes,' Tanalan observed one evening to her mother, as they worked together in the smoke stay. Merala followed her gaze across the corral to where Chant and Inkala were busy making pipes. She watched Chant put the reed to her lips and then gesture to Inkala where the next hole should go. She saw Inkala's clumsy attempts with the skewer, and how Chant steadied it for her.

'I do not think it is as you say,' Merala replied. It seemed to her rather that Chant had great patience with Inkala, and much time. She and Tanalan were so busy now. In the warming weather the berrem and whiteroot grew well, but so too did the stickleggrass and muzzweed, and the hardening soil made weeding difficult. She peered up at the sky; what they needed was rain. It did not come till several days later. The clouds had built steadily from the dawning, so that by evening they billowed as high as Anarkin's slopes, and just as whitely. The heat too had built, and after grinding the berrem, Chant had escaped to the deep shade of the outer thatch.

She sat with her face to the mountains, her eyes upon the boiling air, her skin answering its quiver and pulse. Even so, the first slash and growl of lightening fell like a blow, and she reeled back. It rolled like creshan boulders round the mountain tops, bringing with it at last, the rain. Odd drops at first, patterning the dust like a scatter of stones, then more and more until it roared like a creshan in flood. Chant came upright, her whole intent upon its mighty wash. She had never known rain like it. Its voice was greater than the whitewolf's, its grip more powerful than the ice of deepest Snowcome.

Talanan came to the door and beckoned her in, for it was impossible to speak against the din. Chant ignored her, her whole intent upon the tumult about her. She watched the clouds surge on and on, sweeping up the great snowy slopes, dragging their heavy skirts of water behind. It was all but dark now, but still she stood, straining

towards the mountains. Something strange was happening. Surely it was a trick of the fading light, of the deepening shadows? On the uttermost edge of the Ashali, where earth touched the sky, the clouds faltered. Even as she watched, they spent the last of their fury, spinning out as fine as flax from a spindle. Chant stood like stone, the westering sun staining her face the colour of blood.

'Chant?' 'Chant!' Merala called the girl's name a second time, and at last she turned. Her face was frozen, the thin shift saturated. 'Come,' she said firmly. The girl did not move but the smudge of her eyes darkened.

'It does not rain on the Scedu. Why does it not rain on the Scedu?'

The question was simple, the answer known by the smallest Sunnen child. Yet there was something in the way that Chant had asked it, something in the way that her eyes caught and held the last of the flickering light, which made her hesitate. 'Water is heavy and the mountains high,' Merala said at last. 'The winds bring it from the oceans in the west, but they lack the strength to carry it far beyond the Sunnen Stead.' Merala rubbed her hand wearily over her brow. 'Even the Sunnen lands are drier now.'

Footsteps sounded across the yard and Chant started violently. It was Duran, a small prin slung over his shoulder. Chant's eyes took in the beast and the bow he wore across his back. Noticing the direction of her glance, he straightened. 'I hope the fire is hot,' he said nonchalantly, ducking into the stay.

Tanalan stared glumly into the embers of the dying fire. Merala had gone to her bed, with Inkala, and only she, Duran and Chant remained. She could almost have nodded off if it were not for the fidgeting of the girl next to her. She glanced up in irritation. Chant was rigid, her hands gripping and ungripping her knees, her eyes darting around the stay. Duran as usual, was oblivious.

'What is it?' Tanalan asked at last.

The girl's eyes flashed to her then to Duran. 'Where are my arrows and knife?' Tanalan saw Duran rouse and a look of discomfort cross his face.

'They are quite safe,' he said shortly.

'I want them!' Tanalan rolled her eyes skyward and Chant felt the simmering anger the rain had woken come to the boil. She sprang upright and it was only Duran's swift steadying movement which prevented her falling. She must have her

weapons! How could she hunt the rain if they were withheld? For a moment they confronted each other, and Tanalan's heart quickened. The girl more than matched her brother in height and strength.

'Tel has said you are not to have them,' Tanalan interjected quickly.

'Tel!' Chant spat the name contemptuously. She jerked her arm free of Duran's grasp and reclaiming her crutch, hobbled to the door.

'Wait!' She did not turn at Duran's call but pushed through the flap into the night.

'Let her go, the night air will soon cool her temper,' Tanalan said with an air of indifference she did not really feel. In truth, the flashes of fire the girl sometimes showed frightened her. For much of the time she seemed as docile and unknowing as Inkala, and then ...

Duran hesitated, annoyed by his sister's lack of concern. 'You have never liked her have you?' he challenged. Tanalan ignored him, keeping her eyes fixed on the fire. Duran wished that his mother would wake and he half considered rousing her. Then he sighed. He must at least see that Chant was safe. The rain had cleared and a jagged sliver of moon hung in the sky. He peered into the gloom. 'Chant?' There was no reply. He glanced down at the earth. In the rain-softened ground, her prints were clearly visible. She was crouched against the corral fence, her eyes on the massive shadowed mountains. In the last days he had come to know her a little, had come to look forward to returning from his forays, knowing that both she and Inkala would be willing to listen to the news of his doings. 'I am sorry about your knife and arrows,' he said gently. 'Tel will come back soon and they will be returned to you.'

Chant regarded him in silence. His boyish face reminded her of the simple days of the Tissan Turrel. She and Flint and Ashin. How uncomplicated it had all been. The wood beneath her hand wore a skin of water and the very air she breathed was drenched with its sweet scent. Even She was washed to Her finest silver. The rain! Why did it not cross the mountains? She had crossed the mountains, but had journeyed no further. Instead she had been content to be confined within these walls. She must go west! She must find that which would bring the water. Yet her foot would not allow it, nor would the man who held her hunting tools. 'I must continue my journey,' she said wearily.

Duran peered through the darkness, seeing for the first time the fear which lay hidden in the light. 'Where is it that you go?' It was a question he had long wished to ask.

She looked back to the mountains and the silence was so long that he did not think she would answer. 'I go west to a great water.'

'You mean the sea?' he queried.

Her heart faltered but she forced her voice to calmness. 'I do not know that word.'

'It is like a vast river which goes on and on until it touches the sky,' he explained eagerly.

'You have been there?'

No, but Tel has.'

Chant brought her eyes slowly to the fine curve of She. Somewhere beyond the mountains, deep in the Scedu lands, the berian roamed and the air sent its dreams. There too, the old slept and cared for the young, their faces patterned in the Scedu way. 'That is where I go,' she said finally.

Chapter 27

The next morning, Duran suggested that Chant and Inkala go with him to the Silverwash to fish. Inkala whooped with delight, for there was much to play with along the water's edge but Chant was less sure. While she yearned to escape the confines of the corral, the possible lack of Willingness of those she might seek, troubled her greatly. If she was truly a hunter no more, how was she to eat on the journey west? She had endured the pain of the hunted beast, and had given Gift to the dying berian, and in the end, she had been Willing. But was it enough?

'It is not far from here,' Duran was saying. 'Inkala knows the way well so you may come at your own pace while I go on ahead.' He disappeared through the flap and Inkala began pulling on her sandals.

'Is the path very rough?' Chant questioned. She had worn no shoes in her time with the Sunnen and had no memory of her aperiion boots.

'Sandals must always be worn to the Silverwash,' Inkala intoned obediently. 'Yours are over there,' she added. Chant hobbled over and picked up the sandals which were sitting neatly under her bed. She had not noticed them before.

'Are they Tanalan's?'

'No, mother had them made for you,' Inkala replied. Chant turned them over in her hands, her throat suddenly tight. Merala always seemed to know when she was ready to take the next step. She wanted to repay her kindness but she had no way. If only she had her weapons ... Chant slipped the sandal onto her good foot and sat for a moment contemplating the bandaged other. Merala had last tended it two nights ago. The wound had healed but the new skin was rough and raised, and the foot still swollen. Merala had suggested she leave it free of the bindings, but she was shamed by its ugliness, and by the awkwardness it had bequeathed her.

They made their way out of the corral and along a narrow track banded by dense stands of woody trees. As they went, Chant asked Inkala the names of the trees they passed, but the child knew little, far less than a Little Sister. She sifted the air for familiar scents, but even under the friendly leafroof, could find none. There was a sweetness in the air which seemed to drown all that was Scedu, leaving her half blind. The air spoke, but its words too were strange. She must have her weapons! She had never journeyed

without them before, and Inkala's careless trust as she trotted beside her, increased her unease. No Little Brother or Sister went thus; whether hunter-inclined, or weaver, or worker of words, each moved warily, testing the air for sound and scent. 'What is the largest beast in the Sunnen Lands?' she asked abruptly.

Inkala considered gravely.

'The saman, I think,' Inkala replied.

'Saman?'

'They are in the pasturelands.'

'They are kept by the Sunnen?' Chant questioned.

'Yes. We use them for blankets, and cheese, and milk.'

'What beasts come here?' she pursued.

'Whitesnakes,' Inkala replied promptly. How often had she been warned to take care with whitesnakes? *Come away from the water, Inkala. Do not go into the garron, Inkala. Stay in the corral Inkala.* She sighed heavily.

The soft beat of water floated on the air and with a sudden squeal of delight, she sped off, disappearing into a dense stand of trees. Chant's heart faltered and she forced herself to greater speed. Abruptly the scrubland gave way to a narrow sward of grass and a broad sweep of sand. Beyond, the water slipped away, swift as a seresnake. Chant came to a jarring halt.

Duran looked up from his nets as Inkala reached him; Chant had stopped at the tree-line, and was standing motionless. 'I hope the walk did not tire you,' he said politely, going to her. She shook her head, her eyes fixed on a point behind him. Duran glanced round, wondering if he had missed something. She was staring at the water and the image of her weeping while Tel carried her across the Sunwash, came back to him. 'Come, I will help you,' he said gently, taking her arm and guiding her across the loose sand. He could feel her tense reluctance. 'What is it?' he asked at last.

'Why is there so much water?' It was a strange question, yet he had learned that she only asked what she had most need to know.

'The Silverwash brings the melt water from the Brindlebacks,' he began methodically, 'and the Sunwash takes the water from Trithian, Mendethian, Stilin, Amaran and Anarkin. It takes the Starwash too and further west, even the Silverwash. Then it is mighty indeed.'

'And then?' Chant pursued.

'For a while it flows along the feet of the Teresas Mountains, for it may only cross at the Terecleft. Once through it goes west, to the sea.'

'All this from the sun,' Chant murmured.

'No, most of it is washed down from the mountains by the rains. The sun alone is not enough to melt the snow on the higher slopes.'

'It does not rain on the Sceadu,' she said bitterly.

Duran stared at her. She had not spoken so openly before. 'Is that why you left?'

'There were many reasons,' she muttered turning away. Her long hair swirled about her, hiding her face. He stood awkwardly for a moment, not knowing what to say. If it had been Inkala, he would have swept her up in an intense hug and kissed the smile back onto her face, but he could not do so with Chant.

He caught up his nets. 'The rocks up further are a good place to sit. You can ease your foot in the water. Merala says that the cold sometimes lessens swelling.' Inkala was already clambering onto the stones and as Duran moved off, Chant followed.

Merala's words proved to be true. In the days that followed, Chant accompanied Duran to the Silverwash each morning, sitting on the broad sun-warmed rocks, watching him net and Inkala play, and letting the chill water sweep over her foot. She never ceased to tire of its rush, nor of its dark silence. It was as if creshan and mirian were one, and the one was neither. Inkala too found much to occupy herself. She tunnelled in the soft sand at the water's edge, and searched among the washwood for pieces she could use as saman, or dolls, or throwing sticks.

On this day the weather was warm, the warmest it had been in Chant's time among the Sunnen. Inkala had settled for a rest in the deep shade where the garron over reached the sand, and Duran had stripped off his shirt and breeches. Chant watched him with eyes narrowed against the glare, remembering the first time he had stood before her and undressed. It had been warm then also, and he had simply taken his clothes off. She blushed even now at the memory. In the Tissan Turrel, the newly earth-named Brothers and Sisters lived together without shyness, but there was separation at the time of Creshan. This lasted until the airnaming, when the young Sceadu left the Creshan Turrel and lived in the scattered turs alone. It was a time when friendships grew to something

more, a time of partnering away from the gaze of others. Later, when the first child was near, the couple went to the Great Turrel, to live with those who had already birthed and with the Old Ones.

Duran bent to the nets and she saw the how his skin shone in the sun. She had never seen Scead naked as a man, though as Little Brothers and Sisters they had played together in the shallow bathing pool. She smiled slightly, and then realised with a start that it was the first time she had thought of him without anger. The sun was reddening her arms and she scooped water over herself. It was wonderfully cool, the sun making fiery patterns on its surface. She watched them in fascination. The river moved swiftly but the fire remained still.

A shrill scream slashed the air, and Chant was from the rock and into the water. There was the shock of cold as she floundered for a moment, but her eyes were already seeking what the air had told. Behind her came a dull wash as Duran struggled from the water's dragging grasp, but she was already moving swiftly over the sand, stooping to Duran's bow and arrow as she passed. She ran the way of the cry, tasting the air as she went. It held fear, and the stench of seresnake. Behind her there was a dull thud as Duran reached the sand, but there was no time to wait. There was no time for anything but to drop to her knee and to ready the bow. Inkala stood frozen against the bank, and before her the seresnake reared, poised to strike. Chant pulled the gut taut and released the arrow, even as Duran gave a despairing shout. For he saw what Chant had seen from the very start. The slender form of the snake was directly in front of Inkala; if the arrow went awry, she would be killed.

He kept running, passing Chant and forcing himself to greater speed through the soft sand. Before him though, the scene had slowed curiously. He watched the arrow curve through the air, pass through the neck of the snake with a spurt of dark blood, and carry forward almost to the feet of his little sister. Then he was to her, and she was in his arms, her terrified sobbing wet against his cheek. He turned her face away from the writhing body of the snake, and watched Chant come up. She came slowly, limping heavily, and there was no triumph on her face, only relief, mixed with sadness.

'I need your knife.' It took him a moment to realise that he carried it in his hand, for he had no memory of taking it from the shore. He held Inkala close and struggled to quell his own breathing, while Chant knelt by the snake. He saw her bring the knife down

quickly, almost severing the head, then pinning it, she drew out the arrow. After a time, when the snake had stopped moving she lifted it gently, and holding it before her, turned back to the river. Duran had wanted to take it to the Stead, to show it off, to tell the other Sunnen of the great skill of this hunter. For she was truly a hunter, the finest he had seen. But there was something about the way she moved, the reverent way she cradled the snake, that kept him silent. He watched her step into the river and move forward and he found that he was holding his breath, for though they had not spoken of it, she seemed to have great fear of water. When she was almost shoulder deep, she stopped and chanting softly, released the snake. Then she did something even more extraordinary. She stepped deeper into the river and disappeared under its flow.

For a moment Duran was seized with panic almost as intense as earlier, but then she surfaced and began to come slowly back to the side. Duran took several steadying breaths. His heart still beat wildly and his thoughts were just as unruly. He understood that she had saved Inkala, but he understood little else. He went to his clothes and dressed quickly. The shock of what had happened had washed all caution from him. He wanted to know at last who she really was.

'You are a hunter?' he questioned.

'Yes.' The Willingness of the seresnake had affirmed her hunter skills, and her atonement for the breaking of Talabraith. And the water had released her, allowing her to continue her journey. For the first time since that day in the Great Turrel, she could see clearly, without the anger and resentment which had clouded her mind. She was a Sceadu hunter, and she must use these skills not just to hunt the beast which was Willing, but to seek that which might aid the Sceadu.

'Why did you put the whitesnake in the river?' he pursued.

'It is the way of hunting.' Seeing his confusion, she went on. 'The snake was keeping her young safe.' She flicked her gaze back toward the scrubby trees. 'It is a fine place for nestlings and she was a fine mother. I gave her back to the water.' Duran continued to stare. Her notions of hunting suggested a web of connection he had not considered before. He wanted to question her further, but the sun was already past the mid point of the sky. She turned back to the river. 'Your nets have been swept away.'

'I will find them tomorrow,' he said shortly. He reached down and picked up the crutch, but instead of passing it to her, he hurled it deep into the washwood. 'You

ran up the sand. You have no need of it.' Chant stared at him in amazement. Then he bent down and unravelled the sodden bandage from her ankle. 'You have no need of this either,' he said brusquely.

She peered down at the raised purplish scars. 'It is so ugly,' she murmured.

Duran straightened, his eyes holding an expression she had not seen before. 'There is nothing which is ugly about you Chant,' he said softly.

Chapter 28

They made their way back to the stay in silence, Inkala grasping Chant's hand tightly, oblivious to the bright butterflies dancing in the air about her. Chant too was subdued, her mind filled with the dark sweep of the water and with Duran's words. Duran alone seemed at ease. He hummed to himself as he walked, matching his pace to the slower stride of the other two. It was pleasant under the trees, the leaves of garron and thatch sending patterns of sunlight and shade scampering over the ground before him.

Inkala seemed to have taken no harm from her encounter with the whitesnake, though he could see that she was still frightened. Perhaps some good might come of it, serving to make her more careful. As for Chant... She limped heavily, but the water had eased the swelling greatly, and apart from the scarring, the ankle did not immediately draw the eye. Tel would notice a great difference when he returned. When he had left, she had been but skin and bone, recovering from a fever which had all but claimed her life. He flicked his eyes sideways. She had gained weight in these last days, but would probably never have the rounded softness of Tanalan.

Still, she moved with a lithe gracefulness despite her ankle, and this most of all set her apart from the young women he had known, even more than the marks upon her face, or her pale skin, or the deep blue-blackness of her hair. His thoughts turned to how she had killed the snake, and what she had done afterwards. There was so much he did not know about her! They came to the corral and Inkala broke away, hastening across the yard and disappearing into Merala's stay. 'At least today may make her more wary,' he said.

'Do you not teach your young the way of the seresnake?'

'We teach them to keep away,' Duran answered, suddenly aware of the limitations of such advice. He paused. 'I have not yet thanked you for saving her life.'

Chant was gazing towards the mountains as she so often did. 'There is no need for thanks.'

'Would the Sceadu not give thanks for such a deed?' he questioned.

'The Sceadu ...' she began, then faltered. Duran saw the tears start in her eyes, and reaching for her, drew her gently into his arms.

Tel came to the door of his stay and yawned. Sleep still clung to his eyes and his muscles ached with the weariness of the long walk home. He had left Sal's the previous evening and journeyed through the night. His work there was complete, the neat net of stone-streams already bringing the Beetime rains to the new gardens. Insalan had begged him to stay one more night, and Nasala's soft brown eyes had entreated him sweetly, but he had felt a sudden and intense need to return. Now as he watched his brother embrace the girl, he was glad that he had. 'No fish today,' he said dryly, eyeing the empty sling. Both the girl and his brother jerked towards him and he saw Duran's amazement turn to joy.

'Tel!'

He found himself being hugged roughly and the obvious pleasure of Duran at his return somewhat weakened his careful display of indifference. He glanced sardonically at the girl over his brother's shoulder. She was standing quietly, but her eyes were intensely measuring.

Duran released him and smiling happily, turned back to Chant. 'This is my brother Tel. She does not remember you,' Duran added by way of explanation. Duran's words were no longer true, Chant admitted. As she had looked at him, the blood-dimmed memory of the trap, and of him bathed in the stark white light of She, had returned. Chant shuddered slightly as the ripple of that night resonated within her.

Tel held her eyes only with difficulty. He had forgotten the strangeness of her, the white skin and the slash of black lines. In fact, he had almost succeeding in putting her presence in the stay, and his part in it, from his mind. He glanced down at her leg and grimaced. Chant turned away. Duran had made her feel whole again, and his friendship had brought her comfort. But the return of his brother, with his thinly disguised disgust at her patterning and scarring, opened the old wound of her parting from Scead. She moved off towards Merala's stay. She did not want to go there but there was nowhere else. Soon the older woman would return with Tanalan. Chant scowled. How like Tel she was; the same cold, judging eyes.

She took her seat at the errem and set the grindstone in motion. The concentration required to keep it whirring rhythmically served her well. When she worked thus, she could think herself back in the Creshan Turrel and all that had come between that time and this, ceased to be. The wheel was the same, the errem the same, even the patterns the flour made in the air, the same. It was quiet here though and there

it was never quiet. Always chatter, or laughter, or bickering. Ah, how she missed her agemates, missed their closeness, missed being one of their number.

The air brought the stranger's scent and she looked up. He was standing in the doorway, his eyes upon her. She glanced down and fed more errem under the wheel, but she had lost the rhythm, made clumsy by the stranger's regard. She let the grind stone slow to a stop and waited. He came forward until he was standing but a short way from her but still he did not speak. She flicked her eyes up and was surprised by his lack of ease.

'Duran has told me what you have done,' he began haltingly. He saw her stiffen and then abruptly she was on her feet. The gentle expression he had surprised on her face had been replaced with one of incredulous anger. She was staring at his belt. He glanced down, unsure of what had prompted the change.

'You wear my knife!' she exclaimed.

He gaped at her in astonishment. He had come here to thank her for her rescue of Inkala, and instead he was embroiled in conflict with her. For a moment he could think of nothing to say, the fierceness of her contrasting sharply with recent memories of Nasala. Then his mind began to work once more and the implications of her words became plain. 'Do you think I am a thief?'

'It is a Sceadu knife,' Chant pursued.

'It was passed to me from my father's father,' he retorted icily. She did not step back nor lower her eyes and it came to him rather disconcertingly, that she matched him in height. He had never before spoken with a woman who could stare him in the eye, nor one not cowed by his anger.

'Do you think I am fool enough not to recognise what is my own?' she continued.

'Perhaps it is you who believe me the fool,' Tel returned softly.

Her eyes narrowed. 'What do you mean?'

Tel gazed at her calmly, but inside he was furious. The time he had spent in Sal's stay, the respect he had earned through his planning and construction of the stone-streams, the timid affection Nasala had shown him, now seemed a many days past. He had trudged through the night, for what? The stranger who had trespassed over Sunnen lands and stumbled into his traps, had not only tricked his brother into wanting to marry her, but was now openly challenging him! 'My brother is still a boy. He is not well

practiced in the ways of women.' Tel's eyes swept over her. 'He is easily duped into thinking that the first one who weeps in his arms would make a worthy wife.'

Chant stared at him in horrified silence. Her shock was plain and for a moment Tel regretted his words. But his impulse to make amends was quickly quenched. He was the man of this stay, not Duran, and those within it would follow his direction in all things, including marriage.

Chant felt a wave of bleak hopelessness sweep over her, but her voice betrayed nothing. 'You need not worry that I will make Duran a poor wife,' she said quietly, 'for I am already married.' She saw his jaw drop, and allowed herself a small smile of triumph. With her eyes fixed on his, she brought her hand slowly and deliberately to her face. 'It is clear for all to see. This line for naming, this line for marriage.' She looked at him ironically. 'You may take comfort from the fact that Scedu women do not wish for two husbands. In fact, I can assure you that we find one man to be more than enough.' With those words, she swept past him out of the stay.

Chapter 29

Tel stood for several moments contemplating the swinging flap of the stay. Her words had jolted him more than he would admit. Married! Surely she was too young. Perhaps they were merely angry words ... but then she carried marks upon her face, and it would at least provide explanation for them. What man though, would allow his wife to go alone over the mountains? Perhaps she had gone without his knowing; such a course would suit her well! Even so, a man who loved her would surely follow. Perhaps it was not the Scedu way. He knew little of them, and it seemed strange to him now that he had not questioned his mother more fully. After all, it was she who had guessed that Chant was Scedu.

There simply had been no time. The girl had been barely from her fever when Sal's summons had come, and his mother had been taken up with the care of her own and Tanalan's gardens. Tel wandered restlessly across the stay; it had been more than that, he conceded. He had welcomed the opportunity to leave, to be away from what his traps had wrought. In any case, she would soon be gone, for the ankle had healed better than he had dared hope. Then this dark time in his life would be but a distant memory. He yawned, easing his aching shoulders. He did not know why he allowed her to trouble him so. The image of Nasala came to his mind; now she was as a woman should be. Soft and gentle and eager to please, though he had been most careful not to be alone with her. He did not want to give Sal reason to demand marriage of him. Still, if he must one day take a wife, then Nasala would serve as well as any other. Sal had no other children and much land, he recollected.

Duran was sprawled on the bed when Tel entered his stay. In the subdued light, his face seemed suddenly older. 'Have you spoken with her?'

Tel grunted. 'She accused me of stealing her knife.' Duran said nothing, but reaching behind his bed, handed him a small bundle. Tel's heart quickened as he unwound the layers of cloth and for a long time he sat in silence. 'When did you know,' he asked at last.

'Shortly after we brought her here.'

'And you did not think to tell me?' Tel questioned.

'There was not time.' Tel seemed strangely shaken, yet it made perfect sense to

Duran. Their father's father had journeyed much, to the sea in the far west, and probably over the mountains. It was said that in the older days Anarkin sometimes allowed passage. Tel pulled his own knife from its sheath. He knew it so well; the fullness of the handle, the curve of the blade, the cool heaviness of the metal. From an early age he had crept into the garron, to hold and to dream on it. His father had carried this knife, and his father before him. It was the link to all that had gone before, to the man who had been lost before he had grown to know him. And now this girl had come, carrying the same knife. A knife she had used to wound him. He felt the restless longing stir once more but Duran's gaze was upon him and he schooled his face to blandness. 'You realise that she is married,' he said abruptly.

Duran stared at him astonishment. 'She told you this?' Tel nodded, watching his brother's face carefully. It betrayed only surprise.

'Where then is her husband?' Duran demanded.

'Presumably still on the other side of the mountains,' Tel answered dryly.

Duran rose and prowled around the stay before coming to a halt in front of him.

'Where is she now?'

'I do not know,' Tel replied carelessly.

'You have argued with her?'

'She said I was a thief.' Duran strode out of the stay but Tel remained as he was, his brow creased in thought. Duran had not appeared distressed by the news of her marriage, rather angered by her apparent abandonment. Perhaps his concern for her sprang only from friendship; perhaps he had mistaken his feelings.

Chant was well down the smooth dusty path before she came to a stop, and stood for a moment trying to bring her seething thoughts under control. How dare he take her knife and then deny it! She kicked angrily at the path and then noticed that ludicrously, she was wearing only one sandal. She stared at it for a moment and then threw her head back and laughed. It was all so ridiculous. Here she was, running away to nowhere, for she had nowhere to go, dressed in a thin Sunnen shift and wearing one sandal.

Turning from the track, she made her way into the undergrowth, crawling at last into a small sheltered hollow among the trees. It was good to be close to the earth again, to smell the rich fragrance of the grass and to hear the doings of those who lived there.

Above her, the sunlight was beginning to ebb, taking with it the swirl of sweet scents.

Once a girl had fled from the Great Turrel, her face livid with new patterning, up into the forests of fyr and ashin. She had lain under the dark, swaying boughs, waiting for the air's chill breath to claim her. That one had worn the heavy dress and breeches of the Sceadu, this one wore the thin cloth of the Sunnen. That one had been Fleet, now she was Chant. Much had changed, and yet little. The thought of Scead no longer roused anger, but Siah? Chant stared into the depths of the grasses. Many beasts lived there, each within its own small world. Other worlds, other ways of doing, beyond the mountains ... as Siah had told.

She had crossed the mountains and if the Sunnen spoke truly, the far west held a great water. She no longer doubted the dream but nor did she doubt that Siah had used it to separate her from Scead. Scowling, she pulled herself upright. Her ankle was healed; she had no reason to delay. Yet ahead lay a journey into lands unknown. She shivered as the last of the sun dipped below the trees, and rising, made her way back to the track. She feared what was to come, she conceded. Perhaps she could remain among the Sunnen. In time she might learn to endure Tanalan's coldness ... but Tel's? His animosity was plain, and he ruled. No, whether willing or not, she must go. She reached the track just as Duran appeared, his face creased with anxiety.

'I thought you had gone,' he exclaimed in relief.

'I must have my weapons first,' she replied grimly.

Surprisingly, he smiled. 'I have not often seen Tel lost for words, but you have achieved it.' His smile deepened as she stared at him in bewilderment. 'He has not taken your knife, it is safe in the stay. The knife he carries is his own. What he did not realise until this day, is that it too is a Sceadu knife.'

'But how can it be?' Chant questioned.

'Tel's knife was our father's; it is the only thing Tel has from him and he treasures it much. It came to our father from his father, who was a great traveller, even over Anarkin in the days when the snow allowed it.' Chant said nothing but she began to understand Tel's anger. They reached the corral before Duran spoke again.

'Do not leave before Wait, Chant, it is a happy time.'

'Wait?'

'When Sekwana offers thanks for that which has been given to the Sunnen. But it

is also a time of gathering and of feasting and dancing.'

Chant nodded. Sekwana, the Sunnen foreteller. Perhaps if he shared the sight of Siah, he might aid her in her task. She would delay until then, for she had a great need of advice.

Chapter 30

In the days which followed, Tanalan and Merala occupied themselves in the preparation of food and in the reorganisation of the stay. Kin were expected, and so Tanalan's and Chant's beds were shifted to one of the empty stays within the corral. Chant felt uneasy about sharing the small tur with Tanalan, but the other girl was unusually pleasant.

'The Meduin are coming,' Tanalan explained happily, as she folded her clothes into the chest.

Chant looked at her curiously. 'Is the journey long?' she queried.

'Perhaps five days, if the Sunwash is low at Terecleft. Sometimes, if the snow melt is great, the cleft is closed, then no one may pass. It has been so for the past two Gatheringtimes.'

'Is there no other path west?'

'No. The Teresas Mountains close us off,' Tanalan replied.

'What peoples live beyond the Teresas?'

'The Meduin live on their southern slopes, and far away where the sea meets the land, the Okianos live. They are our blood too, but rarely travel this far. Of others, I know not. You should speak with Tel. He has journeyed further than most Sunnen.' Tanalan turned back to the small bundle she was unwrapping, and Chant stared defiantly into space. She would ask Tel nothing! Duran had said that the Sunwash flowed to the sea, all she need do was follow it. Tanalan was holding a necklace of glowing moons against her neck and Chant stared at them in wonder.

'What are they?'

'*Taka*. I will wear them at Wait when I marry Kanan,' Tanalan murmured.

'You are to marry?' Tanalan nodded, fingering the necklace absent-mindedly.

'Kanan and I pledged the last time he came here, but we have had to delay until now. It is two Waits since the cleft was last open.'

'Why has he not come since?' Chant questioned.

'He cannot. His father has died and he must be with the others of his stay. Such journeys are made only at the time of Wait.'

'Then why have you not gone to him?'

Talan's eyes flashed. 'Because Tel has forbidden it!' There was a short silence.

'We have had word that his stay is coming, so now I will wed whether Tel allows it or not!' Tanalan finished. She grinned triumphantly. 'He has no power to stop Kanan taking me as a wife, for he is kin to us and a man full-grown.' She looked at Chant shyly.

'Duran told me you were married,' she said softly. 'Won't you tell me of him?' Chant felt her face warm; it was one thing to lie to Tel in the heat of argument, another to continue it. She felt half inclined to confess the truth, but Tanalan would inform Tel, and she felt no kindness towards *that* man.

'He is called Scead,' she muttered diffidently.

'Scead,' Tanalan repeated. 'You have said that Sceadu names have special meaning. What does his mean?'

'Man of the Sceadu,' Chant answered shortly. It was always the name given to the one Siah took. The Siah was of the insubstantial air, the Siah's mate must then be of the earth.

'What is he like?' Tanalan pursued.

'He is tall ... though not a great hunter...' Chant faltered, struggling to say more. What *was* Scead like? What were his fears, his desires? She did not know. She did not know because they had never been close. There had been no love between them. Her eyes stung and she blinked back the tears.

'You must miss him very much,' Tanalan said gently, mistaking the cause of her grief. Chant nodded dumbly. How blind she had been! She had had to cross the mountains before she could see what had been before her all along.

That evening, many others came to the stay. Inkala's face shone with excitement as she darted among them and Tanalan's time was taken with the exchange of news and the preparation of food. Duran too was nowhere to be found. 'On hunt,' Tanalan had said, rolling her eyes skyward. Of Tel she had seen nothing since their argument over the knife, and for this she was grateful. Duran had given her back her knife and arrows and there were many mouths to feed in the stay now and so for the first time, reason to hunt. She also wanted to repay Merala's kindness.

She left at dusk, going east towards Ashali. A soft breeze came from the mountain, laden with the bright scents of ashin and snow, and she threw back her head, savouring the taste. The path was faint, and after a time, the trees grew more closely.

Chant quickened her steps though, for she had an intense desire to watch the sun slide away beneath the brow of the earth. Another path struck off to the right, and on an impulse, she turned along it. It was very overgrown and she could see where someone had forced passage with a knife. She pushed through the cling of branch and frond, until she was suddenly expelled into a small clearing.

Chant pushed the hair from her eyes and looked around. She could see the entire Sunnen place from this vantage point. The corrals looked like a vast interlocking beecomb, the fences joining in neat regular patterns. She could even see Merala's corral, with the wedge of garron separating it from its neighbour. She scanned up from the valley to the mountain's lower slopes. Strange scars marked the earth's flesh. The gardens and orchards, she realised suddenly. Above these, glinting in the dying rays of the sun, were lines of water. They seemed to lie in the same patterns as the gardens. Chant shook her head, frustrated by the dimming light. She did not understand what she had seen, but then, there was much that she did not understand about these people. Around her the sounds of day gradually gave way to those of night, and the first stars appeared. It was not until the vast golden body of She slowly rose into the sky that she stirred though. Then she straightened, raising her arms, entreating Her silently. For a moment she stood, straining forward, then fitting an arrow to her bow, she moved off into the darkness.

It was past the mid point of the night before Chant returned to the stay. Her back ached and her injured ankle pulsed with exquisite jabs of pain. Yet she felt like singing as joyously as the Sceadu did at Snowmelt. She had hunted well, as skilfully as before the trap had claimed her, and the aperiion had been Willing. It was a fine beast, the largest Chant had ever seen. She slid it from her shoulder and placed it gently on the ground at Merala's stay.

'Where in Anarkin's name have you been?' She jerked upright, the shock slicing through her sense of quiet well-being. Curse Tel! She felt her anger kindle, not only at his intrusion but at her failure to sense it. He was standing but a pace from her, his knife drawn.

Chant surveyed him coldly. 'I have been hunting.'

'I thought you were an intruder,' he muttered, resheathing the knife.

'Perhaps I am.' She saw that her answer had discomfited him and that he

struggled to regain his composure.

'Those of my stay need be within the corral before moonrise.'

'I am not of your stay.'

His eyes flashed in the last of Her soft light, and his voice lost some of its blandness. 'While you are a ... guest here, you will do as we do.' Chant turned away. She was bone weary and had no desire to argue with him.

'You have blood on your shirt,' he said abruptly.

Chant came to a halt. 'It is the blood of the beast.'

Tel was staring at it, half fascinated, half repelled. 'You should wash,' he said curtly.

Chant raised her eyes to his. 'The beast was Willing,' she said softly. 'I am proud to wear its blood.'

Chapter 31

The first day of Wait dawned fine and clear. Duran woke with a sense of joyful expectation, dampened only by his failure at hunt. As he lay in his bed though, he could smell the rich scent of roasted prin drifting through the corral. 'What ...' he began, but as usual, Tel's bed was empty. He dressed hurriedly. Smoke was issuing from his mother's stay and the murmur of many voices filled the air. Within, the beast lay cooking on a bed of glowing coals.

'The stay has a hunter at last,' Tanalan observed. There was no need to ask who had taken the beast. Duran stared at it in wonder. It was the largest prin he had ever seen. Excusing himself politely to those who slept there, he withdrew. He wanted speech with Chant; he wanted to learn of the way of hunting. Her stay was deserted, though her weapons were there. He could not wait for her return as he had yet to work the nets. Scowling with disappointment, he set off along the path to the Silverwash. It was already warm, but the air held a slight edge, hinting at storms to come. He fervently hoped that they would be slow born, breaking only after the last of the feasting.

Chant knew of Duran's coming long before she saw him through the trees. The breeze brought his scent and the ground told of his passing. She had never known such heaviness among a people. Even Inkala, who was young and unformed, seemed to strike the earth with a thump which echoed through both stone and bough. She stepped forward and he started violently. He would never grow used to her ability to appear from nowhere. She had bathed, he saw and her fine hair flicked out in the breeze, flashing blue-black where the sun caught it. And she had changed into the heavier Sceadu dress and breeches. She was preparing to leave, and he realised suddenly, that he did not want her to go. 'I would speak with you of hunting. Will you come to the Silverwash with me?' She nodded, and they went on together. He did not quite know how to start for he was reluctant to admit his weakness. 'Do all Sceadu hunt?' he began.

Chant shook her head. 'At the time of Tissan, children may try their hands at weaving, or metal working, or hunting, or in the making of music, and then later, in the Creshan Turrel, those who are suited to hunting spend their time with the Old Ones who keep that skill.'

'Tell me of your teacher. Was he very great?' Chant smiled ironically. She was well used to the Sunnen's notion of giving tasks only to men, or only to women, with little thought to their ableness. Ket. Her memories of Ket were a mixture of the whitelands and of the Naming ceremony. In the first, Ket had taught her the scent of the beast, its pattern and print, and to trust in her skin. In the second Ket had taught her to know the air, to believe in what it brought. It was this lesson which had been the harder. To accept the dream, to obey Siah, to bow before the will of the Sceadu; she still struggled with it.

'Ket taught well, though I have not always learned well,' she replied cryptically. They went on for a while before Chant spoke again. 'The hunter must see to hunt. You walk blindly.' Duran stared at her in bewilderment. 'What does the air bring you, what do the trees tell, what echoes does the ground give?'

'I have not been taught these things,' he muttered resentfully.

'I know, it is not the Sunnen way.'

'Are you saying that I should not hunt?' he demanded, nettled.

'Sceadu do not direct.'

'And yet they have told you what to do,' he challenged.

'It is not the same.'

'How is it different? They have sent you on a journey of great danger; not all peoples are as hospitable as the Sunnen.' Chant glanced pointedly at her ankle and Duran reddened. 'The traps were not intended for those such as you. We have cared for you well since,' he answered hotly.

'Indeed you have,' Chant said, somewhat chastened. She touched his arm briefly. 'I will miss your friendship when I go.'

'But not Tel's?' he queried with a quick grin. Chant shrugged. 'Do not think to badly of him. He has born the weight of the stay on his shoulders since our father was lost.'

'Have others not helped?' Chant asked.

'Each stay looks to its own, or to their kin. Only in the setting of the gardens, and at Wait do we work and celebrate together. Is it not so among the Sceadu?'

'All is shared.'

Duran stared at her in astonishment. 'Do not the Sceadu possess their own

shelters and land?'

Chant shook her head. 'The Scedu place belongs to each, and each does what they are able.'

'But do not some Scedu work harder than others?' Chant nodded. 'Then surely it is not fair that all share equally?'

'Who can say what is fair? Do the Old Ones go hungry because they can no longer hunt? Should the maker of metal withhold his barbs because the chanter can think of no song? Is the labour of five days in the whitelands greater than that of a Little Sister who grubs up her first murrow? I do not know. Nor is it for me to judge.'

Duran was greatly disturbed. It seemed to him that she had no will of her own, and that because of it, she was in great danger. 'You do not have to leave,' he said gently.

'I do not have that choice.'

'Tel would allow you to live with us, and Tanalan would come to accept you after a time.'

'You forget that I am married,' she muttered.

'I do not understand a man who would let his wife come so far on her own,' he said tersely.

Chant's face burned but she managed to keep her voice steady. 'I have already told you that the Scedu way is different to the Sunnen way.'

'The love between a man and a woman is the same whichever side of the mountain one lives,' he retorted. Chant came to a halt and for a long moment they stared at each other. She should feign anger, should stride away to hide the lie that must be plain upon her face, but she could not bring herself to do either. The truth of what he had said stung her. If Sced had love for her he would not have allowed her to journey into the whitelands alone. She swallowed several times, trying to ease the tightness of her throat. 'Chant...' She gazed at him numbly as he drew her into his arms, and gently brought his mouth to hers. Then she pulled away, and made her way slowly back up the track.

Chapter 32

Chant's feet carried her forward but her thoughts dwelt on all that had gone before. While she was blind to what might come, one thing at least was plain. Whatever Duran wished, she would never be accepted by a people who lived together but alone. She was nearing the corral when Tanalan appeared. She was dressed finely but her face was stained with tears and her mouth set in an angry line. She hesitated, then nodding to Chant briefly, set off swiftly toward the Stead. Chant came into the yard in time to see Tel stride from his mother's stay. His jaw was set and he was scowling heavily. He paused and his gaze moved over her coldly. She was clothed as she had been, on the edge of the Sunwash, more than two moons ago. Why had she chosen to dress as a Scedu again, at this special time? Was it to spite him, to emphasise to the rest of the Sunnen that he harboured a stranger within his stay? The anger Tanalan had roused came to the boil once more. 'At the celebration of Wait, the Sunnen wear their finest clothes.' His eyes swept over her once more. 'I am sure Tanalan would be willing to lend you a dress.'

Chant flushed in spite of herself. 'You look fine enough for both of us,' she retorted. He was to her in a stride, but she was the quicker, the knife in her hand, her feet planted wide. He jerked back. Surely she would not use it? Her eyes were hard upon him, her body poised. She was both intensely attractive to him at that moment, and intensely repellent.

'Is this the manner in which the Scedu settle arguments?' he sneered, though his heart beat high in his throat. Her nostrils flared slightly and he wondered whether she could smell his fear.

The fire in her eyes lessened a little and she stepped back. 'The Scedu do not seek to own others.'

'Ah, that explains why your husband is content to have you so far from him.'

Chant ignored the jibe and resheathing the knife, addressed him formally. 'I leave this night. I thank you for the shelter you have given me at your stay. I wish to leave my coat and boots here until I return, however, if you prefer, I will store them elsewhere.'

'Leave them here,' Tel said, somewhat taken aback. 'I will have some food packed for your journey.'

'There is no need,' she said curtly, moving swiftly away.

Chant steadied herself by folding her clothes into her pack. Her pulse still raced, and the anger she had ill-managed in her confrontation with Tel, threatened to turn to tears. She did not want to go. Despite his antipathy, she was at least safe here. The choice was not hers. She had said as much to Duran but a short while ago. Yet she doubted her strength to go on. There were no berian here, nothing to help her. Only perhaps the Sunnen foreteller. She took a deep shuddering breath. Duran had said that the ceremony would be first in the gardens, then the orchards, and lastly at the river. She would wait at the water.

It was all but dark before he came. Chant had spent her time well, gathering sherenberries for the journey. The Sunnen who came with him were quiet but not intent. It was as if they were held only by habit, and not by the old man's song. She flicked her gaze along the crowd. The sight of so many unmarked faces together was shocking. The song went on, moving with the rhythm of the water, drawing to a close as the last of the sunlight ebbed away.

To the east, the knife edge of She slid from behind Brinian, lighting the mountain's back with a slash of fire. Sekwana gave voice once more, this time with increasing urgency. Chant's heart quickened. The great disk of She was now nearly half born, her light staining the mountain's side like the yolk of a broken egg. For a long moment, there was complete silence and then She finally broke free of the mountain's grasp. Sekwana dropped to his knees, fractured the water's swift flow and scattered it over the land. Once more he cupped his hands, giving the droplets to the air. And finally, he let the river take it back. Then his voice took up the song again, slower than the river now, and infinitely weary. The Sunnen began to drift away, their voices taking up the empty places of the night. Above, She glided on the warm, storm-filled air, while below only Sekwana remained, slumped at the water's edge. He looked very old now, his hands slack at his sides. Chant came to him and he looked up. 'Why do you stay?'

She gave a small smile. 'For the same reason as you. To give Thanks.' He continued to stare at her as she lowered herself to his side. There was no need of further speech between them for they were knit by the same knowing. At last the water caught the fire which came from above, cleaving it into fragments and catching it back again.

Sekwana began to chant, the song following the circle of moving stillness. Then he took three small pieces of bone from the pouch at his neck.

'The earth gives thanks.' Plop, the bone shattered the circle of light and disappeared into the blackness. Chant watched the fragments reform. 'The air gives thanks.' Plop. Again the circle was broken and remade. 'To the water which gives, we give back.' Plop. The last bone was taken, and She made whole. Fire and water, each complete. Sekwana gave a long shuddering sigh, and dragged his gaze from the water. 'You are a foreteller?' Chant shook her head. The old man peered at her intently. Perhaps she was not, though her skin wore the moon's silver. 'What are you called.'

'Chant.'

'Ah.' She might not read the air, but she would later tell it. He saw the slight shift of fear in her eyes.

'I ask your help.'

'You have what you need.'

'I do not have the strength for my task.'

Sekwana stared down at the water. The moon was drawing away, leaving the darkness. For moment it blurred under his gaze. 'You will not do it alone, though you might wish to,' he murmured, raising his eyes to hers. His glance was as sharp and pure as the Old Siah's and the new's. He struggled to stand, and Chant hastened to help him. She was surprised at how small and bent he was. 'Remember the way of the hunted beast,' he added, turning away.

Chant watched his shambling progress until he merged with the shadows. The hunted beast? Had the air told of her death? Her skin spoke and she shuddered. The night was thick with the threat of storm, and full of the voice of the water. She must follow its flow, whatever it brought. She moved off into the darkness.

Chapter 33

The way was smooth, the bank broad and sandy. Chant knew it well from her time with Duran. Here was where she had sat while the sun warmed her shoulders, and the cool water healed her foot. Here she had listened to the happy squeals of Inkala playing in the shadows, seen Duran's quick grin as he had hauled in his catch. Now she was leaving again, as she had left the Sceadu. Then she had trudged away into the whitelands, expecting death, now her heart held hope, but with it had come its companion, fear.

The storm which had long threatened began its slow mutter and Chant quickened her pace. The pain in her ankle woke as she forced it over the loose sand, and she began to wonder how much worse it might become before the journey was over. The drumbeat of thunder quickened and the cloud rolled in, dulling the moon. The wind too was growing, gusting warmly against her face, printed with rain. In the intense darkness, she could see little, but her skin roused and spoke. She paused and readying her bow, went forward as if on hunt. It was at the very water's edge, standing motionless. It had not seen her, but it waited for her. Lightning seared the sky behind it, and the trees bent under the wind's fury. 'Tanalan!' She was dressed for travelling; carrying a pack.

'Kanan has not come for there is illness in his stay. I have waited long enough. Will you take me with you?'

Chant stared at her for a long moment in silence. 'You have no liking for me, I am sure the journey would be more pleasant if you went alone,' she said at last.

Tanalan shifted uneasily though she did not drop her gaze. 'I cannot go alone, not like you. You have travelled much, crossing even the great mountains. You do not fear as I do.'

Chant could see her bitter resentment in having to say these things. 'I will not take you,' she answered softly, and Tanalan's shoulders slumped in despair, 'but we may travel together if you wish.' Tanalan stared at her in confusion, then nodded. Chant brought her gaze to the boiling air. 'We must shelter.'

Tanalan gestured ahead, then moved off, Chant following. At last she saw her slip into a deeper darkness. It was a cave, narrow but deep. 'We may wait here until it passes and then move on,' Tanalan's voice came to her, smudged by the closeness of the walls.

'You would journey through the night?' Chant questioned.

'Yes.'

It was clear to Chant that Tanalan wanted to be far from Tel as quickly as possible. 'When will he discover you have gone?' It was easier to speak of what held both their minds in the utter darkness of the cave.

'He had not returned when I left. If he is with Nasala, he might not come back until dawn. Then if he goes to his own stay, he might not discover I have gone until midday.' Then he would come after her. It did not need to be said. They had perhaps a day's start on him, but they would need to rest, and she to hunt. 'I have brought enough berrem, fish and dried fruit to last us to the Meduin,' Tanalan continued.

'Did you farewell Merala?' Chant asked suddenly.

'No.' Chant sighed, resting her head against the stone, hearing the water playing against its skin. 'It is not a good thing to do.'

'Merala knows my heart. She will understand.' Chant passed her hand wearily over her face; she was glad at that moment that the darkness hid her.

When the beat of the rain had lessened, they went on, not pausing till daygrow. Then they sat by the river, eating the sherenberries Chant had gathered, and the berrem Tanalan had brought. Chant massaged her ankle slowly, trying to ease its burn, while Tanalan peered anxiously downstream.

'It is high,' she muttered.

'Does it matter?' Chant asked.

'We must pass through the Terecleft and if it continues to rain, the river will fill the way, and we must turn back.'

'I will not be turning back.'

'You have not seen the Terecleft,' Tanalan muttered darkly. She picked up her pack. 'We should go.'

'No, we rest for a while.' Tanalan glanced nervously back the way they had come and moved restlessly. She wanted to go on, but was held by her fear.

'I have journeyed much,' Chant explained tersely. 'Sometimes on hunt, I would be gone from the Sceadu place for ten daygrows. To journey a small way, one may forgo rest, but to journey for many days, one must eat and rest often.' Tanalan did not reply and Chant shrugged. 'You must do as you wish,' she said rising, 'but I will sleep for a time in the cover.' Finding a sheltered place among the woody trees, she pulled her cape

from her pack and snuggling under it, shut her eyes.

Tanalan settled beside her resentfully. The Sceadu was already asleep, concerned by neither man nor beast. It would not be so if it was she who Tel pursued! He might even now be passing where they walked the last night, might already have left behind the cave where they had sheltered. She should go on, but she could not without Chant. She glared at the other girl angrily, but she had no choice. She had placed her trust in the Sceadu's travelling skills, and so must now do as she did. Using her pack as a pillow, she settled down to rest.

It seemed but a moment later, that Chant was shaking her awake. Her mind was mussed with sleep and she had trouble thinking where she was. 'We will travel until dusk, then rest and eat,' the Sceadu was saying. She set off and despite her heavy limp, Tanalan struggled to keep up. She had last come this way three Gatheringtimes past, and it had been a pleasant journey then, not like now.

Inkala had been scarcely more than a baby and they had taken turns carrying her on their backs. They had gone slowly, sleeping under biraqs, counting the fire stars till moonrise. Each morning, she and Tel had gathered wildfruit, and Duran had cooked the fish which the night nets had caught. They had been close then, she and Tel, but now she fled before him. She squinted down at the water and the sun glinting from its ripples dazzled her eyes. Would she have the strength to stand against him now? If he came at this moment round that bend, and demanded she return? Would she have the strength? Catching her toe on a root, she cursed roundly and Chant stopped and turned. Tanalan was flushed, her eyes glistening with tears.

'What troubles you?'

'I have bruised my toe,' she muttered, avoiding her eyes. Chant surveyed her for a moment. It was clear that she was frightened of pursuit. What sort of peoples hunted their own?

Some distance ahead, another great band of water appeared from the east. The Sunwash. It was dark and unrippled, unlike the Silverwash which gashed cream and white here, broken by its rocky bed. Even where the two met, there was no true blending; rather, the Sunwash seized and devoured the smaller river. Beyond the waters, the mountains loomed, capped with rows of yellow teeth. After a while, Chant realised

that they were mighty blocks of stone. She gaped at them, and Tanalan smiled grimly. 'The Teresas. You see now why there is but one way through.' Chant nodded. They might well be smaller than Ashali and her kin, but their rocky crests created a wall no less formidable. The sunlight ebbed, taking with it the beasts of the day, and She rose. For a while they went almost as quickly as they had during daylight, but after a time the clouds built and the darkness thickened. Tanalan was very weary, but refused to call a halt. She struggled on, increasingly resentful of the Sceadu's strength and of her own weakness. The night grew old and a soft wind was born, heavy with the scent of water. Chant paused to taste it, and Tanalan came level.

'Rain?' Tanalan nodded, her face grim with worry. 'Is there shelter near?'

'None that I know of.' She peered at the straggly trees to either side. 'When last I came this way, we used biraqs, but I did not think to pack one this time,' she muttered.

'Biraqs?'

'Saman-hide covers. Do not the Sceadu use such things?' Chant nodded. She had carried aperion tarqs on hunt, though she had taken none with her when she had left. The dead had no need of shelter.

'Well, we must use what we do have,' Chant responded, suddenly businesslike. Moving into the scrub she began pulling the small bushes together, weaving into their branches washwood from the river's edge, and weighting their edges with river-stones. The first heavy drops were patterning the earth before they crawled inside. It was surprisingly snug.

'You use these when hunting?'

'Sometimes. They serve well against the early snow, though I have not used them in rain.' Her voice betrayed a sudden sadness and Tanalan peered at her. She could see little though, in the gloom. The wind grew and the shelter bowed and swayed under it. Chant drew out an arrow and fitted it to her bow. Tanalan watched her nervously.

'I do not think there are scinton here but it is wise to be prepared.'

'Scinton?'

'Bigger than a saman dog, sharp toothed and clawed ... they kill well.' An uneasy silence fell, punctuated only by occasional clashes of thunder. Tanalan strained into the darkness, expecting at any moment to see the gleam of animal eyes. She felt very alone.

'What do the lines on your face mean?' she asked suddenly, struggling to take her

mind off what might be near. Chant took so long to reply that Tanalan wondered if she had heard her.

'They are naming lines. The first is given at about five Snowmelts, when the nature of the child becomes known; the second at the ending of Creshan Turrel.'

'So Chant is your second naming.' Tanalan saw her dim outline nod.

'What was your first?' she pursued, wondering if it had been more apt.

'Fleet.' Tanalan's throat tightened and she had to resist the urge to look at Chant's ankle.

'I am sorry,' she said uncomfortably.

'The fault is not yours.'

'It is in part,' Tanalan forced herself to say, 'for it was my brother Tel who set the traps.'

'The fault is not his either. I was blind when I put my foot in that trap, and it was a blindness I had inflicted upon myself.' Tanalan felt her sympathy turn to irritation once more. Always the girl spoke in riddles. She pulled her jacket from her pack, and put it on.

'Wake me when it is my turn to watch,' she said shortly, curling under it.

Chapter 34

The dawning birthed a grey and sullen day. They huddled together under the shelter, breakfasting on dried fish and berrem, not speaking of what was uppermost in their minds; that rain would surely come making the Terecleft impassable. They set off, following the smooth land at the river's edge, not coming to the dense trees of the foothills until the midpoint of the day. They rested there briefly, drinking from their skins, but not eating. There was a sense of urgency about their journey now, which sprang more from the swirling water, than from the one who followed.

The rain began to fall, not like the large drops of the night before, but in a fine mist. The mountains disappeared and the sky crouched on the very trees themselves, staring down at them with bleak malevolence. The river too seemed to draw in upon itself, its bed now deep and narrow, its flow stained with earth. It was no longer possible to walk beside it, so they were forced to clamber along its eastern slopes. Here the land was crossed with great trunks of rotting timber and matted brambles, forming a tangled mesh of traps. They were both liberally scratched when Chant at last came to a halt and plonked herself down on a rain-slicked log. 'Is this the way your kin travel?' she queried, wiping the streaming water from her eyes. Tanalan shrugged helplessly.

'There is a better path than this, I am sure, but I cannot remember how it runs. Perhaps it is further up the slope.' Chant followed her eyes. The growth was so dense that it was impossible to say what lay only one or two paces away. It would be pointless to go crashing about in the scrubby bushes in the hope of finding the path. They might well lose sight of the river and disorient themselves.

'It is better we stay near the water, for we at least know where it goes.' She moved her feet in her soggy sandals. She was absolutely saturated. Tanalan was the same, her hair plastered close to her head, the water dripping from her chin. Even the ground was oozing. She paused, and her skin stirred. She turned sharply, searching the air, but the rain had washed it clean and cloud filled the spaces between. All she could hear was the relentless voice of river. Tanalan had moved off, picking her way carefully through the wet tangle of foliage. Chant stared after the receding shape of the other girl and her sense of peril intensified. 'Talanan, wait!'

'There is a place we can eat up here,' her voice floated back. She did not stop.

Chant started after her. She was moving away from the water, increasing the risk of becoming lost. Was this the warning her skin gave? Ahead, the trees abruptly gave way to a small rocky clearing. They had not left the river after all, Chant noticed in surprise.

It was curled below them, like a seresnake poised to strike. Tanalan had slipped off her pack and was moving toward the edge. Chant felt her skin catch fire. 'No!' she screamed. She lunged forward, even as the slope began to give way. With a sound of tearing flesh and splintering wood, a great slab of mud and bushes plunged into the river below. There was a roar, the water surged higher, and it was gone. Chant hung suspended, one hand gripping Tanalan's wrist, the other anchored round a small tree leaning precariously over the wounded bank.

'My pack! My pack!' Tanalan was straining away from her towards the swirling river. The tree which held them both shuddered and Chant heard the unmistakable sound of breaking wood.

'Leave it!'

'I must have it!' Tanalan shrieked. 'It has the taka!'

Chant felt her grip on Tanalan slip. One heel went from under her and the old wound to her shoulder woke. In a moment they would both be in the torrent, trapped by the sheer stone walls. 'Leave it go or neither of us will live to see the Meduin!' Tanalan stared up at her blindly. 'Leave it go!' she repeated hoarsely. Tanalan's face contorted with grief but she turned back to the bank and began to gouge a path through the yellow sticky mud. Chant still held her though she no longer bore her full weight. She watched her clamber the last of the way to solid ground before releasing her and following her across the slope.

At last she too stood on the dense spongy grass, easing her shoulder and letting her breathing calm. Tanalan sat with her head in her hands, weeping bitterly. They were both coated in the yellow mud of the bank, but the rain was at least serving to wash them clean. 'Kanan will love you with or without the taka,' she said as gently as she could.

Talan's head jerked up. 'What would you know?' she demanded savagely. 'You who have left your husband on the other side of the mountains. Do not instruct me in the ways of love!' Chant flinched. Tanalan was distressed by her loss, perhaps even shocked, but her words stung.

She pushed the hair from her eyes and took several deep breaths before turning

back. 'We must go.' Tanalan rose sullenly, avoiding her eyes. The pack had held most of the food, Chant recollected, and probably Tanalan's finest clothes. She began picking her way over the logs, thinking of the pretty things which had once been Talith's. She had burned the wrist-rings and the ear-rings along with the clothes and drinking cups. She had come to this strange world with nothing and now Tanalan was going to the Meduin in the same way. She just hoped Kanan was worthy of her.

Some way on, a small stone path appeared from among the trees. 'That is the path we should have used earlier,' Tanalan said dully. 'It will take us through to the cleft. It is not far ahead.'

The cloud had lifted a little and the pure shrill calls of birds now echoed among the trees. It was not these which held Chant still though. It was a roaring like a great wind. She peered up; the branches of the trees were still. 'What is that noise?'

'The Terefall.' Chant stared at Tanalan in bewilderment. 'At the end of the cleft, the Sunwash falls to the valley floor,' Tanalan explained.

'Falls?'

'You will see.' The path began to descend so that the wooded slopes now towered above them. They were coming closer to the river. The path ran above it, hewn from the living rock of the river's side - a narrow ledge jutting from the sheer walls of the cleft. Chant strained ahead into the gloom. The path dipped lower and lower until it disappeared under the rush of yellow water. The Terecleft was closed.

She turned to Tanalan. 'How deep?' Tanalan shrugged; her face was stamped with bitter resignation. Their choices were limited. To go on, to go back, to wait. Chant stood considering. The loss of the food in Tanalan's pack meant that waiting was no longer possible. Then there was Tel. He must be close now for they had wasted much time blundering about on the upper slopes. Abruptly she began removing her sandals. 'I will go first,' she instructed calmly. 'If you are swept away, I might have a chance of catching you as you go past.'

'And what of you?' Tanalan challenged.

'I will drown for I cannot swim.'

Talan started and the mask she had worn since losing her pack, slipped away. 'Then we must wait!'

Chant smiled sardonically. 'I would rather face the river at this moment than your

brother.' Taking a deep breath she slid her foot into the water. It was icy. Staying as close as possible to the wall, she began to feel her way along. The water rose to her knees and then to her thighs, swirling about her in strange, disturbing patterns. Its voice held a discordant rhythm too, which was not the pulse of the earth, nor the soft palpitations of the living beast. It was something far older; older perhaps than She. The sweat broke out on her forehead and she came to a halt. The water thrust against her insistently and the bile rose in her throat. She did not want to go on, yet there was no way back. A short way in front, the river disappeared round a sharp curve. Even her eyes were useless now, like her frozen skin, and her ears filled with the roar of the fall. All the air carried was the odour of water; oozing from her skin, weeping from the skies above, dragging at her with muddy hands.

There was no way back; the thought beat in her brain, and she forced herself on. One step, then another, and another. How much further must she go? She edged her way round the curve and saw the pale smudge of path emerge from the water. Reluctantly the river released her and the fragrant grasses welcomed her back. That was all she remembered.

Chapter 35

It was cold, very cold. Chant could feel herself shaking even before she opened her eyes. Beside her, Tanalan was vainly fanning a sullen curl of smoke. She sat up gingerly.

'It will not burn,' Tanalan said helplessly. Her voice seemed to come from a great distance.

Chant peered vaguely about. It was all but dark. 'He cannot be far behind now,' she said thickly.

Talan snorted contemptuously. 'Forget him! You need warmth and shelter, and neither is to be found here.' She peered up at the sky anxiously.

'How far is it to the Meduin?' Chant asked.

'If we start now, we could be there before dawn. This path will take us but it is a difficult journey, even in the light.'

'Let us go then,' Chant said, with a calmness she did not feel.

'Are you well enough?'

'We both know that we cannot remain here. You lead.' The path descended steeply and although clear of briars and logs, the rain had made it as slippery as tarn ice. Her ankle screamed protest at the sharpness of the slope and her icy coldness now mixed with waves of fire. There was a roaring too, and she was unsure whether it was of the air, or in her head. It was dark before they reached the valley floor. The roaring increased and Chant sagged against the bole of a tree. Tanalan though had left the path and was beckoning her forward. She struggled after her, through the sting and slap of foliage, barely questioning why she did so. The roaring was now so intense that it blocked all thought. Tanalan had come to a halt. A dark column of water bellowed from the sky, crashing onto the rocks below before billowing up again in great roiling clouds.

'The Terefall,' Tanalan shouted in her ear. Chant nodded numbly. The throb of water seemed to mix with her blood, and her head spun. Was it Tarchanjan, the place Between, where the Willing beast lingered before birth and after death? For a moment she wondered whether she really had died in the whitelands.

Talan turned back to the track and they set off again. She went more slowly now, her thoughts on the girl behind. Both the Sunnen and the Meduin travelled this way often, had done so for Gatheringtimes beyond remembering, and yet she had heard of no

sickness afflicting them. Chant was neither Sunnen nor Meduin though. Perhaps there was something in the air or water here which differed to the other side of the mountains. Tel had once spoken to her of a shivering fever which affected only peoples nearer the sea. She glanced behind her. Chant followed at the same pace, but she seemed almost wooden in her movements, as if her mind rather than her muscles kept her body moving. At least it had stopped raining and there was some moonlight. She began to calculate how long it might take to reach Kanan's stay and to return with aid.

'Tanalan.' She came to a halt. 'I will stop here.'

She felt a stab of disappointment; it seemed she must wait another day before reaching Kanan. 'We will make a shelter,' she began shortly.

Chant caught her arm. 'I will stop here, you go on to Kanan.'

Her heart quickened, but she quietened it. 'You are ill. I will not leave you alone.'

Chant managed a small smile. 'I will not be alone for long.' Tanalan started. 'He is not far behind.'

'How do you know this?' Tanalan asked, shocked.

'I know.' They contemplated each other for a moment in silence.

'I will go to Kanan and bring others back to collect you,' she said at last.

'Do not. I will come on with Tel.' Tanalan still hesitated, though Chant could see her eagerness to be gone.

'He will be very angry,' she warned.

Chant snorted and for a moment Tanalan glimpsed the old fire. 'No doubt. But it is better that he vents it on me than on the man who is to be his brother.'

'If you have not come by the dawning, I will send,' she said briskly. Chant watched her disappear swiftly into the gloom and then choosing a log close to the path, settled down to wait.

Tel stumbled along the path, cursing the lack of light. At least it had stopped raining. He had never known weather like it, nor had he been wet for so long. He had all but forgotten what it was like to wear dry clothing, to sleep and wake in comfort. The Sunnen gardens needed rain, but why had it chosen these last days to fall on them?

Chant. She was the root and cause of all his problems. Though she had not brought the rain, he grudgingly conceded, it was because of her that Tanalan had at

last acted on her empty threats. He had had no peace since that girl had come to his stay. Firstly Duran had imagined himself a man, capable of love and even of argument with him! And then Tanalan had chosen the middle of Wait to set off on this ridiculous quest. He tripped on the uneven surface and swore roundly. He had travelled quickly, reaching the Terecleft in less time than he had dared think possible. He had been driven by great anger, and this had leant him much speed and strength ... until he had come to the Cleft.

Tel shuddered at the thought of it and the feeling of deep foreboding washed over him once more. He had come along the upper path almost blindly, the cursed clouds hiding all from view. And then, as he was almost at the highest point, the cloud had parted and he had looked down. The bank below had been scarred with a great gaping wound. His heart had faltered and he had left the path and struggled through the wet, clinging foliage. It was recent, the thick yellow earth rent with deep skid marks. He had stood there for much time, his eyes searching the water.

And then he had seen the pack. Even now as he walked, the sweat started again on his brow. A wound where the river had torn out the earth, and a pack, snagged against a partly submerged tree, amid the muddy, swirling waters. He did not know if it was Tanalan's or Chant's; that it belonged to one of them he had no doubt. Had the river taken them both, or just one, or only the pack? The question had haunted him as he had pushed on, but seemed to have been answered by the flooded Pass.

He had paused there, calling their names, and searching about. Tanalan, if she still lived, would not have attempted the crossing. She would have waited and he would have found her. Chant, he thought, would have gone on. No one had come. He was almost certain now that one or both were dead. He trudged on, fear and hopelessness turning sometimes to anger, sometimes to bleak dread. His shoulders ached, his legs ached, and the wetness of his clothes seemed to chafe him no matter how he moved. He peered about. Dawn was not far away; he would soon be at the Meduin.

Ahead, something loomed out of the darkness. He jerked to a stop, his hand going to his knife. Only Meduin lived in these lands and they were kin, still, he braced himself, straining forward into the gloom. It was a person. He saw the breeze disturb the long loose hair. Chant. Chant alone. His heart gave a sickening jolt. Chant watched him resheath the knife and come up to her. His face held no anger, she saw in surprise, but a deep despair. He stopped a little from her, his eyes distractedly searching the trees to

either side. 'Where is she?'

'Gone.'

For a moment he said nothing and then he seized her shoulders and shook her violently. 'You have done this,' he snarled. 'She would not have left if it were not for you.' He released her so suddenly that it was all she could do to stop herself falling. Then he turned away and she saw him bring his hands to his face.

'She has gone to the Meduin.'

Tel spun back incredulously. 'She has not drowned?' Chant shook her head. Intense relief flooded his face and then his eyes narrowed with doubt. 'I saw a pack in the water and a place where the land had been taken.'

'It was Tanalan's,' Chant confirmed. 'But when the bank collapsed, she did not go with it.'

His eyes burned upon her and then he seemed to sigh. At least he believed her. 'Why have you separated?'

'I waited for you.' Tel raised his eyebrows. 'I thought it better we speak first and ...' Chant hesitated, then went on more softly, 'I wanted to give Tanalan time to meet with Kanan alone.'

Tel snorted and she saw his anger rekindle. 'She has not the right to take a husband without my permission.'

'You do not think Kanan is worthy?'

'Whether Kanan is worthy is not important.'

Chant's eyes flashed in spite of herself. 'Do you not care for your sister's happiness?'

Tel shook his head impatiently. 'You do not understand the ways of the Sunnen.'

Chant caught his arm, anger spurring her on despite her dizziness. 'I understand that if two people have love for each other that they should be together.'

Tel smiled ironically, detaching her hand. 'Like you and your husband?' Chant felt as if he had struck her and she stepped back. The trees seemed to sway and then steadied. She wanted to tell him the truth, but the sneer on his face stopped her. She moved off unsteadily along the path. She was hot and yet tremors shook her. After a while, she heard his steps beside her but she did not look up. She did not know how far they had come or how far they must go; only that she must keep her feet moving.

Abruptly his hand was on her arm and his voice sharp in her ear.

'You are ill?' She nodded. It was pointless denying it, for she felt that at any moment she might fall to the ground at his feet. He turned her gently to him so the moon lit her face, and she felt his hand cool on her forehead. Her skin was burning under his touch. Even as he held her, her weight sagged and he lowered her to the grass. 'Why did you not say that you were unwell?' he asked shortly, unplugging his waterskin and offering it. She drank deeply and a little colour came back into her cheeks.

'We did not get to that part of the conversation.'

He settled on the grass beside her. 'Are you hungry?' Chant nodded. Pulling open his pack he passed her berrem.

'Tanalan's pack carried most of the food,' Chant explained, eating quickly.

'Did you not hunt?' he could not resist asking. She did not seem to notice the implied criticism.

'Water washes everything away,' she answered briefly. He watched her brush the crumbs from her breeches, saw the sharp bones of her wrist. 'I thank you for the errem,' she said formally.

'It is berrem on this side of the mountains,' he corrected gently.

Her eyes flashed to his for a moment. 'Forgive me. I had forgotten how the mountains change everything,' she replied, scrambling to her feet. She was still unsteady, though the hardness had returned to her eyes.

'I could carry you,' he offered, 'it is not far now.'

'I am too heavy.'

'I have carried you before,' he pursued, feeling a sudden need to remind her of their first meeting. She turned, looking him full in the face. He had forgotten what it was like to have such eyes level with his.

'Perhaps in the end, it will be I who will carry you,' she said softly.

Chapter 36

A broad ripple of pink was moving over the sky before they finally neared the place of the Meduin. Tel walked with his arm about her and she leaned on him heavily. She felt strange to him, lacking Nasala's familiar softness. He should be with Nasala now, not trudging through the night with this savage, toward a meeting with Kanan he did not want. His muscles groaned and his eyes burned from want of sleep. Chant walked without complaint, though he could hear the harshness of her breathing.

They came to a small rise overlooking the Meduin, just as the sun broke free of Anarkin. Tel stopped and helped her to sit. He wanted a moment to rest and to think on what he must say to Kanan. It was nearly three Gatheringtimes since they had last met, and he had liked him well enough then. Now though, they must come together not as friends, but as men soon to be brothers.

'It is like the Sceadu Place,' Chant muttered softly, staring down at the scattered roofs of thatch.

Tel looked up in surprise. The new sun was gilding her hair and face. 'In what way?' She was gesturing down at the settlement and he reluctantly dragged his eyes away.

'There is a Great Turrel and smaller turs. They have corrals like your Place though,' she added with a frown. 'What are they for?'

Tel looked back at her, at loss to know how to answer. The corrals had simply always been there. 'For privacy I think.'

Chant stared at him uncomprehendingly. 'I do not know that word.'

'So that the Sunnen can be alone.' He busied himself taking the last of the berrem and dried fish from his pack.

'It is not a good thing to be alone.' Tel's heart quickened. He had never sat in speech with her as he did now, and he wanted to prolong the moment.

'You are alone,' he pointed out softly.

'That was not my choice.' Tel stared and she dropped her eyes. There was a short uncomfortable silence. He handed her the berrem and fish and eating his own portion, brought his attention to the Meduin settlement. In many ways they were like the Sunnen; keeping gardens and fruiting trees, but they hunted too. Tel's thoughts turned to Tanalan

and relief filled his heart once more. Kanan was a good man, and there were many Sunnen wives among the Meduin; she at least, would not be alone.

Kanan's stay was the most westerly of the Stead's and it occurred to Tel for the first time that it was the habit of his kin to build on the very edge of their Place, as if bound only tenuously to their communities. They came to the corral and Chant followed Tel through its gate. Inside it was much the same as the Sunnen stay; a broad open space with several stays, a smokestay and a shelter for the small fat birds the Sunnen kept for eggs. They had gone but a short way when several people emerged; a man with quiet dark eyes and strong shoulders; another, perhaps Duran's age, and an old woman bent double, her hair as white as Ashali. There was no sign of Tanalan.

The man came part way across the corral and stopped, the others of his stay remaining behind. Chant stopped also, so that Tel might meet Kanan alone, for Kanan it surely was. Her skin roused and she glanced at the others. There was tension there, and a quiet watchfulness. They ignored her though, their attention on the two young men who now stood together.

'I give you welcome, Tel.'

'I thank you for it Kanan. Tanalan is here?' Kanan nodded. Tel felt the last of his doubt dissolve. 'Then it is well,' he said soberly. Chant could hear no words but she saw Kanan relax slightly.

Tel took a steadying breath. Kanan looked older than he remembered; the death of his father had perhaps caused him to grow more quickly to his manhood. 'This meeting is not of my choosing,' he began. 'And I would have you understand that the manner of Tanalan's departure has caused much anger. She had not the right to leave without my permission, or to risk herself in the journey here.' Tel paused; he was the taller of the two, but he stood in Kanan's stay, confronting not only Kanan, but his kin; kin soon to be his also. He softened his voice. 'My anger is not for the husband Tanalan has chosen, but rather for the manner of her choosing. Is your heart the same as hers in this matter?'

'It is.' There was a long pause.

'Then I welcome you brother.' Kanan's face broke into a broad smile and they embraced and then the others crowded forward, Tanalan among them. Chant watched the happy group. Kanan had his arm about Tanalan and his eyes upon her were gentle.

Chant had seen the same look pass between Scead and Siah at her Naming ceremony. Scead loved Siah as Kanan loved Tanalan.

The revelation shocked her and the corral fence swayed sickeningly. Then Kanan and Tanalan were before her and Kanan was bidding her welcome. She tried to smile but the whole corral was now moving about her. Vaguely she was aware of Kanan taking her arm, or was it Tel, of the warm darkness of a stay, of a cool bed cover. Her wet clothes were stripped away and a drink pressed to her lips, and then she gave herself up to the delicious languor of sleep.

She could hear Tanalan's footsteps and taste her scent upon the air. Stretching luxuriously, she let her eyes drift open. Tanalan was standing a little to one side, in the midst of folding a blanket. When she saw that she was truly awake she came and settled on the edge of the bed. 'You look much improved,' she said, laying her hand across her forehead. Perhaps she had only needed warmth and rest, as Kalia had said.

'I feel so,' Chant replied, stifling a yawn. She let her eyes sweep over the other girl. 'Is it well with Kanan?' she asked cautiously.

Talanan nodded, blushing slightly. 'We are to wed in three days.'

'I am glad for you Tanalan.'

'I have yet to thank you for saving me from the water,' Tanalan went on uncomfortably. 'What I said ... after I lost my pack ... ' she stumbled to a stop and took several deep breaths. 'I was wrong, and I should not have spoken as I did.'

'You were not wrong. I do know nothing of love.'

'Your marriage is unhappy?'

'There is no marriage.'

Talanan's brows drew in a puzzled frown. 'But did you not say to Tel ...'

'It was a lie.'

'Then what do the lines on your face mean?'

'They are as I told you. There is a third for marriage.'

Talanan's face hardened and there was a short silence. 'Is lying thought well of among the Sceadu?'

'No. Which is why I now tell you the truth.'

'Will you say the same to Tel?'

Chant shook her head. 'Your brother sees me as strange and wild, and he despises me as he does all things that he cannot understand.' She shrugged. 'It is not my task to persuade him that I am not as he thinks. My task lays further in the west. And so ...' she continued, lightening her voice with an effort, 'I must be content for him to continue to see me as he does.'

That evening they ate in the stay which was Kanan's, and after, gathered round the cooking place as they had in Merala's stay. There was much that was different, though. The Meduin stay had a floor of wood and the stools on which they sat were richly carved. The drinking bowls too were fine and there was a richness about the fleeces adorning the walls which Chant had not seen before. She sat contemplating all these things while around her the talk rose and fell.

Kanan and Tel sat a little apart from the fire, engrossed in a conversation she could not hear, but Kanan's ancient mother Kalia, with Tanalan and Kanan's young brother Tarish, were near. Chant glanced often at Tarish and Kalia, for though she had grown used to the unmarked faces of the Sunnen, the faces of these new people still held strangeness.

'Tanalan tells me you hunt.' Chant started guiltily realising her gaze had drawn Tarish's attention. She nodded. His eyes were bright upon her, his smile encouraging.

'Do you hunt also?' she ventured, aware that the conversation around her had ebbed and that others were now listening.

'There are many hunters among the Meduin. We plant and harvest like the Sunnen but we seek the beast also.'

'Were you to spend more time in planning your fields, you would have no need to waste your strength in chases through the trees,' Tel broke in.

Kanan smiled good naturedly. 'The Meduin do not seek to emulate the mighty gardens of the Sunnen. We are content instead to cultivate a little and to let the Groves give us the rest.'

'If they will,' Tel noted dryly. There was a short silence, and Chant's annoyance stirred.

'They will if the Gift is not wasted,' she retorted.

Tel's sardonic gaze came to rest on her. 'The Scedu of course, do not cultivate

at all, such is their faith in what the land may offer, or ... not offer.' Chant's head came up, but Tarish broke in, oblivious to the building tension.

'The Scedu live by hunting alone?' Chant nodded. 'They must be very great hunters.' Chant flushed at the implied compliment but her thoughts turned instead to the hunger which now stalked the turs. Hunting skill could not bring the rains to loose the whiteland's grip, turning tarn to tissan, and tissan to creshan. And even the greatest hunter could not prevent the murrow dying entombed within the frozen earth, or the scinton cubs coming early, as cold and lifeless as the snow.

'Great they may be but they are so few, that the Scedu send even their women on hunt.' Tel's final jibe penetrated her reverie and Chant could contain herself no longer.

'It is true that the Scedu are not like the Sunnen,' she began slowly, her eyes fixed upon him. 'We do not believe that a child born girl must be this, and a child born boy, that. We let the child grow, watch the child, see what the child becomes. We do not own it, nor twist it to our purposes, nor make it as we would have it.' She paused, her eyes sweeping over him coldly, so that even Tarish could not miss the animosity between them.

'When it has grown to know the earth, it is given an earthname. And when it has grown to know itself and to know its task within the Scedu, it is given an airname.' She touched the patternings. 'All Scedu carry these lines, for they show what we are. All Scedu carry them, except the girl who has yet to achieve womanhood, and ...' she paused, turning to him fully, so that the Meduin present would take no insult, 'the boy who has yet to become a man.' Tel's eyes kindled and the colour mounted in his face, but it was Kanan who next spoke, breaking in smoothly.

'It is well that you are here then, for we have a great need of hunters at this time. Many are absent at the Sunnen Wait and the wedding feast is yet to be prepared.'

'I hunt this night,' Tarish began eagerly, 'will you come?'

'She has been ill, and should rest,' Tel interrupted harshly.

Chant ignored him, keeping her eyes on Tarish. 'You leave with moonrise?' Tarish nodded. 'I will be ready.'

The gathering broke then, with Chant and Tarish withdrawing to ready their weapons and Tel excusing himself shortly after. Only Kanan, Kalia and Tanalan remained within

the circle of firelight. 'Your brother has no great liking for the Sceadu,' Kanan observed after a time.

Kalia broke in with a dry chuckle and Kanan looked at her in surprise. 'A man like Tel does not waste his time with those he dislikes. But this Sceadu ... he cannot leave alone. He must chip away at her until finally she turns on him, acting in kind. She does not bend before him, as others of his stay must ...' her eyes lighted on Tanalan and gentled, 'and so, she draws him on.'

'Surely you are not saying that he seeks her as a wife?' Kanan gasped. Tanalan stared at Kalia incredulously. Her recent illness had left her frail but her eyes still held the searching intensity Tanalan remembered well. She had lived long and seen much, but in this she was surely mistaken!

Kalia gave a small smile. 'Whatever you believe, I think you will find that when the Sceadu again turns westward, Tel will follow.'

Chapter 37

Chant woke with a start, feeling strangely disorientated. After hunting most of the night she had slept most of the day, she realised ruefully. The light which ebbed around the edges of the shutters was that of evening not of daygrow. She was very hungry but for a moment she lay back, luxuriating in the knowledge of her hunting prowess. The beast had been Willing. She sighed and shut her eyes. Despite her naming she was still the hunter. And now she must hunt ... what? For the first time since the taking of the seresnake she began to consider the nature of her task. To hunt the beast she must know its scent, its spoor and scatter, its needs and desires. What did she know of this other thing she hunted, the thing which would unlock the waters? She knew only what Siah had said. She would find it on the edge of a great tarn in the west, and then she would return. She would return; she had forgotten that final part of the telling and the memory of it now brought her great comfort. Her stomach growled and she made her way to Kalia's stay.

Only Tel sat at the cooking place. 'You must be hungry,' he said equably, seeing her hesitation. 'Sit, and I will get you some food.' She came warily across the floor and settling herself on a stool, watched him ladle a thick soup and pass it to her. She had not eaten since the previous evening, yet she held it for a time, her gaze fixed on him.

Judging his mood, Tel realised, like the beast she hunted. It was not as if she saw him as a threat, he perceived for the first time, it was just that she saw no difference between the human and animal creature. He remembered her earlier words to Duran of her wounding of him. *There were so many beasts.* Tanalan had repeated them to him gleefully as they had argued over her going to Kanan. Now he saw them for what they were; not as insult or jibe, but as part of the way she saw all things. 'It was a fine dybuck you killed.'

'It was Tarish's.'

Tel's eyebrows rose. 'He has been entertaining the stay for much of the day with detailed descriptions of *your* hunting skills.'

Was he goading her again? For once though he seemed genuinely interested. 'The wind stirred just as he loosed the arrow and it took our scent. It was not his fault.' Tel nodded understandingly and she glanced uneasily around the stay.

'Tarish and Kalia are preparing the wedding feast and Tanalan and Kanan are with the Elders. I volunteered to wait for your waking,' he said lightly.

'With the Elders?'

'The Meduin marriage rites follow the Sunnen's. Before a couple pledge themselves, the Elders instruct them in their obligations and duties as man and wife, for once the pledge is taken, it cannot be undone.' Tel considered her for a moment. 'Is it not the same among the Sceadu?'

Chant shook her head. 'Between the first Snowmelts, a couple may part and take another. After that time, if they part, they must remain alone.'

'But who cares for the children born of such a union?'

'All airnamed Sceadu.'

'But that is not the same. The child must know its father.'

'The Sceadu child has many fathers.' Tel stared at her uncomprehendingly.

'My mother and father parted before I was born. It is not important. I have many mothers and many fathers; many who love me.'

'And yet they let you come over the mountains on your own?'

Chant sighed. It always seemed to come back to this. 'That was my choice.'

'Your choice?'

'When I was airnamed I was given a task. I have chosen to carry it out.'

'And if you had not?'

'Then I would have remained with the Sceadu.'

'They would have accepted your decision?'

Chant moved restlessly and Tel saw her discomfort. 'It is not as simple as that.'

'Either they would accept you among them or they would not,' Tel pressed his point.

'To be fully Sceadu, a Sceadu must be airnamed, and if a task is given, it must be carried out. But sometimes the task is difficult, too difficult ...' He glimpsed the pain in her eyes before she looked away.

'So, to be fully Sceadu, to be a Sceadu woman, you have come,' Tel reiterated gently. She nodded. 'Does not your marriage make you so?'

Chant started. She had forgotten the lie which lay between them. 'Marriage may, if no task is given,' she answered cautiously.

'I do not understand how this Siah decides on tasks,' Tel went on irritably.

'Siah takes the dream from the air to give the name and the task,' Chant intoned.

Tel gazed at her incredulously. 'You risked your life for a dream?'

'I have risked nothing!'

'You crossed the freezing mountains alone and had Duran and I not chanced by, you would have died in that bear-trap,' Tel retorted.

Chant glared at him angrily. 'Siah told truly. What she said would come, has come!'

'She warned you of the trap?'

'No, not that ...'

'If she sees so clearly, why would she not have saved you such pain?' Chant drew breath to reply but stopped. His face held a mix of anger and shame and abruptly Tanalan's words came back to her. Tel blamed himself for her injury, and yet it had not been his fault.

'Siah can only tell the dream,' she continued wearily, 'it is for each to find the way to its ending.' She dropped her eyes again, concentrating on the soup. Tel sat contemplating her. Her face was almost as familiar to him now as Tanalan's. He sighed. He would miss Tanalan, and the labour of weeding and harvest would be greater now that it must be shared among fewer hands. His thoughts moved to Nasala but already she was far away.

Chant finished the soup and set the bowl aside. It had been good, like that the Sceadu made at the start of Snowmelt, when the land gentled and the greenfood grew in plenty. It would be that time now, she remembered with a pang. It seemed so long since she had left the Great Turret.

'There is berrem if you still hunger.' Tel's voice broke into her thoughts.

'I thank you, but I must ready my things.' She rose.

'You go hunting again?'

'No, I must continue my journey.'

'You cannot leave until after the ceremony.'

'Cannot?' How prickly she was! With an effort, he gentled his voice. 'It is customary for a woman to have female kin from her own stay about her when she marries.'

'I am hardly that.'

'There is no one else. You would hurt her if you did not wait to see her joined with Kanan.'

Chant nodded reluctantly. 'I must leave straight after though.' She glanced unhappily round the stay and Tel could see her restlessness.

'Is your journey so urgent?'

'Yes.'

'What is it you seek? Perhaps I could help you find it.'

'You cannot help me.' Then seeing that she had hurt him, added more gently, 'I must do this alone.' Tel contemplated her thoughtfully. She was like the beast she hunted, quick and fierce. And then, briefly, he saw a fear, a bewilderment as tender and vulnerable as Inkala's.

'If the task is urgent then it is best we travel together,' he heard his voice saying. She stared at him incredulously. 'I have journeyed that way before and know the quickest route.' What was he doing? He should be turning his steps east once more, back to his duties among the Sunnen, back to the arms of Nasala.

'I do not need your help,' she replied dismissively. 'I need only follow the water.'

Tel kept his face bland, refusing to let his anger show. 'The river moves over the land like a whitesnake. The journey will be long indeed if you let it take you. There are lands too, where you may not travel.'

'Should you not go back to your stay and care for those there?'

Tel flushed. It was a question which had long dogged his own thoughts. 'Duran is almost a man and it is right that he takes on those things Sunnen men must. The rains will ease soon and then the growth of weeds lessen. I must return before mid Gatheringtime though. Besides,' he went on, suddenly cheerful, 'I have long wanted to revisit my kin among the Okianos, and I am part of the way already. It would be foolish to turn back.'

Chant looked at him indecisively. They shared no friendship, but then, nor did she and Tanalan and they had travelled together. Tel was different to Tanalan though. His dislike of her went far beyond silent antagonism. Yet her task was urgent, and he knew the way. 'We will travel together if you wish.'

Tel inclined his head graciously. 'I will make the preparations.'

Chapter 38

Tanalan entered the stay as Chant was pushing the last of her things into her pack. 'You are not leaving before the ceremony?'

'We will wait until after.'

'We?'

'I am travelling with Tel.'

Tanalan stared at her in astonishment. 'Did you suggest it?'

Chant grimaced. 'What do you think?'

Tanalan continued to gape at her; perhaps Kalia was right after all. 'Why would Tel want to journey with you?' she murmured, and then seeing the implications of her words, flushed a deep red. 'I did not mean ...' she began.

'Obviously not for the pleasure of my company,' Chant replied shortly,

'Chant, I ...'

'I do not know why *he* would choose to travel with me, but as he knows the land, *I* am willing to forego an enjoyable journey for a swifter one.'

Tanalan drew a deep breath. 'I am glad that you are not going alone.'

'Why?' Chant demanded, still rankling.

'Because you will be safer.'

'I have never sought safety, nor company. The Scedu hunt alone.'

Tanalan watched her pull a comb from her pack and jerk it savagely through her hair. 'Though you do not seem to care for yourself, there are others who do, both among the Sunnen and the Meduin,' she went on quietly. 'Whatever Tel's faults, you may trust that he will not desert you.'

'Perhaps I will desert him.'

Tanalan's gaze did not falter. 'I do not believe you are of that kind either.' There was a short silence and Tanalan gathered up her things. 'I will see you after the ceremony so we may make our farewells then.'

Chant stood contemplating the swinging flat, letting her temper cool. Outside she could hear the chatter of voices as the wedding feast was prepared. The Meduin gardened and hunted, Kanan had said, and the balance seemed to serve them well. She had seen no hunger in her time here and the people had leisure to fashion fine things. In

contrast, the Sunnen seemed always to be working in the gardens. Her thoughts moved to the Sceadu. The land would be gentle now, under the kindly hand of Snowmelt. Even so, there would be few who might rest, none who might waste their time as she was now doing.

She paced restlessly round the tur. Tanalan had said that she was strong; how little she knew! She was not strong, she was lost. Lost on the wrong side of the mountains, lost among strangers, lost even to herself. Once she had known so much; her name, her path, who she would wed. Now she knew nothing. She was even less of a woman than she had been when earthnamed. She had been Fleet then, both in name and deed, now she was Chant. What story had she to speak, what song had she to sing? Who had sought her in marriage?

Ah, there it was, the thing which had been like a knife in her flesh since daygrow. Tanalan had barely her number of Snowmelts, was unmarked, yet soon to be a woman. If only she had not pledged Tel to wait until after the ceremony! She stared grimly into space. She was to be forced to witness Tanalan's marriage and she very much doubted her strength to endure it.

Toward evening, Kalia came to the tur, bringing berrem, and dried fruit and fish. She also brought several thin dresses and breeches. 'They belonged to my daughter.'

'Your daughter?'

'My first born. She died with her child. It is long ago now.'

Kalia's face betrayed a momentary flash of grief and Chant was reminded of Tel. Tel standing desolate in the rain, believing Tanalan lost. It seemed to her that the isolated manner of Sunnen and Meduin life led to this burden of feeling. The death of a mother or father, was the loss of all love, and in Tel's case, of all fatherly relationship. She paused. Tel's loss of father ... what had Duran said?

Kalia watched the Sceadu carefully. She looked to be no more Gatheringtimes than Tanalan, and at this moment, a lot less sure of herself. In fact, she did not seem to fit Tel's description at all. She might well have crossed the mountains alone, and led Tanalan through the flooded Cleft, but these strengths did not make her as invulnerable as Tel supposed.

Tel might well have the skill to set the mighty gardens with their stone streams,

Kalia surmised, but in many ways he had less knowing than Kanan. At least Kanan was not frightened to open himself to love, whereas it seemed to her that Tel equated such giving with weakness. Well, it was time he was made to see what was before his eyes. And she would enjoy a little match-making, for she had had scant practice since that time three Gatheringtimes past, when Kanan had first seen Tanalan. Chant glanced up, surprising a small secret smile on the old woman's face.

'It is customary for the women of the Stead to wear these ... to honour the bride,' Kalia said, producing some strands of beads and flowers from among the folds of the clothing. Chant took them reluctantly, unwilling to offend her. She wondered what else the old woman had concealed about her but she was already moving toward the door. 'I will wait,' she said, and the door flap fell back into place.

Chant stared at the dresses and the tangles of beads and flowers. The beads were the same as those Tanalan and Tel had worn at the time of Wait, but unlike anything worn by the Sceadu. Her mind touched on the things she had burned before leaving and she dismissed the thought angrily; that time was no more, she must think only of what was to come. She slipped on the Meduin dress; it was too short and a little loose on the top. Kalia's daughter had obviously been both smaller and plumper than she was. Still, with the light breeches underneath, it looked well enough. Finally she slid the necklaces over her head. One of the garlands was too small so she twisted it about her wrist. Then cautiously, she stepped out into the corral. Only Kalia was there, bedecked with flowers and beads as she was. Chant sighed with relief.

'Tarish and Tel and have taken the men's path and we must now take the women's.'

'Do we not follow the same way?'

Kalia smiled dryly. 'Have men and women ever followed the same way?' Then relenting she added, 'At the time of a wedding, the Stead divides, as the unmarried men and women are divided. The women walk one way, the men another. Only after the ceremony, at the ending of the men's and women's dance, do the two come together again.' She glanced at Chant briefly. 'That garland is for your head.' Chant slipped it from her wrist, fingering it awkwardly.

'Let me,' Kalia said, taking it from her. Chant stooped low and Kalia positioned it expertly on her hair, surveying her critically. The girl looked dazzling; the pale mauves

and pinks of the blooms Kalia had chosen specially for her, softened the whiteness of her skin. If Tel did not notice her beauty, then he was even blinder than Kalia thought.

They walked slowly, Kalia leaning heavily on the Chant's arm. 'I am sorry I delay you,' she muttered.

Chant smiled. 'Only when one goes thus, can the earth be heard.' Dusk was close and Chant glanced up at the sky, noticing that She had already risen, though the sun had yet to set.

Kalia followed her gaze. 'Tanalan tells me that the moon is special to your people.' Chant nodded. 'The Meduin say that the moon is a woman and the sun a man,' Kalia went on. 'The sun understands what is lit, knowing nothing of what is hidden. But the moon is of darkness. She sees what the sun does not. Only together, do they make the world whole. So it is with women and men. That is why the wedding ceremony must take place when both the moon and the sun are in the sky.'

Chant said nothing, but the old woman's words troubled her. She knew only the hunter's moon, that which held the beast Willing. She had not considered before how the sky might be shared. *So it is with women and men.* A vague feeling of unease settled over her, a sense of emptiness, a perception of lack.

'Tel has said to me that you are married, and Tanalan has said that you are not.' Chant started, jerking abruptly from her thoughts. Kalia certainly did not waste time on the small courtesies of conversation. The old woman's sharp eyes were upon her, taking in the flush which was already staining her cheeks.

'I lied to Tel.'

'Why?'

'He made me angry. I do not act well when I am angry.' Kalia continued to stare at her shrewdly and they came to a halt. Ahead Chant could hear the soft sound of music and the murmur of voices, but the old woman seemed in no hurry to move on.

'I do not think that is the reason. I think you told him you were married to keep him from you.'

Chant stared at Kalia incredulously, feeling the fire in her face deepen. 'He is a gardener,' she snorted derisively.

'And you are a hunter,' Kalia replied. 'It is a mix that the Meduin find serves them well.' Chant would have liked to stride on but Kalia rested on her and she could hardly

shrug her off.

'He is arrogant and bossy and thinks me ugly!' she expostulated, turning her face away. She felt ridiculously close to tears. She stared back to the mountains until her vision had cleared.

'Forgive me, I am an old woman and can no longer afford to waste time on politeness.' The girl's distress did more to confirm her belief than to dispel it. She stroked her arm gently. 'Come, the joining of two who love each other must be a happy time for all people.'

Tel sat on the ground next to the small, flower-strewn podium. Tarish was next to him then the rest of the Meduin stretched away in a loose semicircle to his right. On the opposite side, the women made up a similar line. There were but two breaks in the circle, one at the point where the groups of men and women would otherwise have met and where the couple would enter, and one opposite him, where Kalia would sit. His eyes scanned the sea of flower bedecked women before him. Chant was not there either. Perhaps she would not come, though she had pledged Tanalan that she would; perhaps she had already set off for the west. He was half inclined to go back to Kanan's stay and check, but it would be improper for him to leave the ceremony.

Behind him the music came to a halt and there was a general movement of people as they craned round toward the way the couple would come. Tel also looked and then the drum started once more. He glanced back to the women opposite. Kalia was there now, being helped to her place by a Meduin girl. He looked again at the sweep of dark hair from the crown of mauve and pink flowers. She had released the old woman's arm and had settled by her side, but did not look up. He stared at her in fascination, willing her to raise her face, but her eyes remained downcast, her hands clasped in front of her. He noticed the tenseness of their grip and whiteness of the knuckles.

The drum beat quickened and those about him surged forward. He brought his eyes to the procession of elders now entering the circle but his thoughts did not follow. He flicked his gaze back to Chant, but her face stayed hidden even when Tanalan and Kanan passed by her. It was plain to him that it was not insolence which kept her frozen in that attitude, but distress. He wondered at the cause of it. Had she had argued with Kalia, or was it that the ceremony stirred memories of her absent husband? Whatever the

reason, he had an overwhelming urge to comfort her. He quelled the impulse. He must be still until the rites were complete.

The music swirled around her and Chant at last turned her mind to its patterns. The little drum she recognised, and the soft lilt of a flute, as sweet as the scented air. Its song eased the tightness of her throat and after a time she felt the sense of desperation begin to lift. There was an old voice chanting, then the lighter tones of Kanan and Tanalan. Then came the quick beat of the drum. Those about her rose, and she with them, helping Kalia once more. But still she did not trust herself to look up.

A slow melody began, the voices of the women carrying it as high as the breeze. They began to move in small rhythmic steps, taking Chant with them. The drum beat quickened and then slowed and the men began to sing. The circle was complete now, Kalia shuffling in front, the rest of the Meduin women following behind. Chant lifted her eyes at last. In the middle of the circle Tanalan and Kanan stood with linked hands, entwined by trailing vines of pink and yellow flowers. Beyond them, keeping the same rhythm as the moving women, the men also danced. But while the women faced inward, toward the newly married couple, the men danced looking outward, their backs to the women. Even so, Chant recognised Tarish, and next to him, the taller shape of Tel.

She jerked her gaze back to Tanalan and Kanan. She envied Tanalan her happiness and wished her well, and yet all she wanted was to be gone from this place. The music throbbed in her ears with the voice of the Sceadu drum and the Sceadu flute, and before her stood Tanalan and Kanan, or Scead and Siah - it mattered not which - for their love was the same. Her head whirled and she shut her eyes. The music came to an abrupt stop and a man's voice rose through the darkening air. There was a hum of movement and Chant saw the men on the other side of the circle turn so that they now faced the back of the women. There was no sign of Tel.

Her skin flicked and the sweat started on her brow. Then a woman took up the song, her words echoing the man's. There was a shuffling of feet and the women turned and she with them. She did not raise her eyes. There was no need to. She knew his scent, the flesh of his shoulder where the knife had slashed, the arrogant tilt of his head. Once she would have raised her face in challenge, but not this night. She felt wounded, like a beast struck with an ill-timed arrow. It was as if the music and the dance had entered her, had forced a way through bone and sinew. She felt blasted by their passage, torn open

for all to see. Stumbling from the circle, she fled from the light, from the music and the pattern of the dance, into the deep silence of the dark, and Tel turned and followed her.

Chapter 39

Chant sped along the path, her hair streaming behind her, her feet barely touching the ground. She thought of nothing except the need to be gone; the need to cleanse herself of the anger and longing and loneliness. To Tel it was like chasing a shadow. She made no sound, and at times seemed scarcely substantial; the paleness of her shift sometimes catching the moonlight and sometimes not. He had called to her once, but whether she had heard him he did not know. In any case she did not stop, nor lessen her pace. After a time, he was forced to drop to a walk and the tenderness he had felt for her during the dance was replaced with the more usual feeling of dull anger.

Why must she always disrupt the times which were special to him? Firstly he had had to abandon the pleasant happenings of Wait to pursue her and Tanalan through the miserable weather here, and now she had broken the circle which bound the newly pledged couple to the rest of the Meduin. He came to the corral and strode to the stay she shared with Tanalan. The storm of bitter words were already assembling on his tongue but before he could utter them, another sound intruded. It was the sound of crying. He stopped and listened. The sobbing was unmistakable. She was lying face down on the bed, her head cradled in her arms, the flowers and beads in wild disarray.

'Chant ...' In a single, swift movement she came upright, her hand going to the empty place at her hip. Always the knife, he thought grimly. He stood motionless, waiting for her to know him. 'What has upset you?'

Chant stared at him, trying to force to mind a suitable answer. For once his tone was gentle, as if he held real concern for her. Yet she felt shattered, as if her very essence had been scattered to the winds and she was appalled that he should witness it. He took a step closer, and then another, and still she could think of nothing to say.

'Chant?' He reached out to gently brush the hair from her eyes and she jerked back. Tel let his hand fall. She did not want his comfort. The pain of the revelation surprised him. Why should he worry himself about her in any case, he questioned, trying to summon up his previous anger. 'It might be well if we started our journey this night,' he said coldly. 'Are you prepared?' He saw her nod. 'I will collect my pack,' he said, disappearing through the flap.

Chant sat for a moment staring into space and then slowly extricated the flowers

from her hair. They were very beautiful, the petals deep and lush, their colours as vivid as a rainbow. She brought them to her face, and the scent of the wedding ceremony flooded her senses. If only there was someone to hold her close, to love her with the tenderness of Ket. She wanted it more than anything else at that moment.

The first part of the journey took them west to the Groves where Chant had hunted with Tarish. They travelled in silence and it suited Chant to do so. The panic which had beset her at the marriage ceremony slowly ebbed away, leaving her as empty as a Snowcome creshan.

'We rest here.' Chant roused from her reverie and settled on the ground. She had seen no scintion prints in the Meduin lands, and Tarish had spoken of no large beasts which might take the hunter. Even so, she loosed the bow from her pack and laid it ready with an arrow by its side. Then, spreading her jacket over herself, she curled up. Tel stared down at her. 'Do you not want a biraq?'

Chant shook her head. 'It is a fine night.' He stood irresolutely for a moment. She was right; it was a fine night. When he woke the next morning, she was gone. He scrambled to his feet, staring in disbelief at the place she had lain. There was nothing to show she had ever been there. He cursed loudly, forcing his sleep-drowsed mind to think. He had no hope of finding her if she did not wish to be found, for her skills in that area were far greater than his. He felt the chill of disappointment settle over him. The thought of the long journey alone was dreary indeed. He rolled up his cape and began to cram it savagely into his pack. She had broken her pledge to travel with him by slinking off into the night, and he had misjudged her. He had thought her many things, but not faithless. He pulled the lacings tight with a grunt and was about to stand when the slight crackle of twig made him glance up. She was standing before him, her hands filled with wildfruit.

'I thought you had left.'

'I agreed to journey with you. I do not break my pledges. I have found us some breakfast,' she said offering them to him. The gesture was simple, but it seemed far more to him at that moment, almost as if she was offering him friendship for the first time.

'Thank you Chant,' he said solemnly.

They went on, in the same manner as the first day, but after a time, Tel began to feel as if

he was travelling alone after all. Occasionally he would flick his eyes over his shoulder to see that she followed, and always she was there, some five paces behind him. He began to feel uncomfortable and was glad when the sun told him it was time to rest and eat. They settled on the gentle slope above the Sunwash, and shared the last of the wildfruit, before unwrapping a portion of the berrem. 'It has been twice baked,' Tel explained, and should last us most of the way there.'

Chant looked at him sharply. 'How many days is it?'

Tel chewed slowly, considering what he knew of the journey. It had been almost three Gatheringtimes since he had last come this way, and his memories were fading. 'Perhaps seven.'

'I thought you knew the land.'

'I know it well enough,' he replied shortly. 'Towards dusk we will come to a place where the Sunwash sweeps steeply to the west. Here we leave it for a time and strike across the land. Near the end of the third day we should come to what the Meduin call the Old Stead. The Meduin lands end here and we must cross the river and travel on the western bank until the Marshlands.'

'Marshlands?'

'Where the river leaves its banks, saturating the land between. Nothing grows except grass which is taller than a man. From this point it is less than two days to the coast.'

'Coast?'

'Where the sea meets the land,' he explained.

'The sea,' she sighed, and a look of intense longing flickered over her face.

'Why are you going there?' The question had long intrigued him.

'It is my task.'

'Ah, yes ... the task the Siah has given you and which must be carried out.' His lip curled contemptuously and Chant flushed. How sure of himself he was, and how smug; as narrow and confined as the corrals which divided his people. She got to her feet and jerked her pack back on. 'Chant ...' he began, but she interrupted savagely.

'Why do you ask me for things which you will not listen to?'

Her venom surprised him and roused his own. 'I will not stand idly by while you

put yourself into danger.'

She turned on him furiously. 'I am no concern of yours. I am not Tanalan, or Duran, or Inkala, or anything else you own. I am not even Sunnen! What I do, or choose not to do is entirely my affair.'

'It is not your affair. There is your husband for one, and all those mothers and fathers who love you. You owe it to them to act responsibly, to not place yourself in peril.'

Chant gaped at him. How dare he reprimand her. She had been wrong earlier when she had thought him merely blind, for it was now clear that he could not hear either!

The journey until nightfall was undertaken in silence. They travelled quickly though, for Tel strode over the ground, his simmering anger lending him speed. His thoughts roamed far and wide and he hardly noticed the earth over which he trod. The sun was near to setting before his temper cooled sufficiently for him to glance over his shoulder. She was some way behind and limping heavily. He felt a pang of remorse. He had forgotten that her ankle would not allow her to travel in the way he did. She came level with him and stood, a little apart, surveying him coldly. 'I am sorry I set such a pace. I did not think of your ankle,' he apologised grudgingly. He spread the biraq and beckoned her to it. 'It is warm and large enough for both of us.' Chant settled silently on its edge, and began to rub her throbbing ankle. 'Let me,' he said abruptly, moving forward. She jerked her foot away. The thought of him touching it was repellent. Tel sighed in frustration. 'Why will you not let me help you?'

'I ... I do not like the scar touched by others.' She looked away. Beyond, the Sunwash rippled and splashed and the darkening air was filled with the murmur of birds seeking rest for the night.

'Why?'

Her eyes flashed back to him. 'It is ugly, and it makes me ugly! Each time you look at me, I see your revulsion and pity. I do not want either, nor your help!'

Tel stared at her in shock. He could see only too well now how his feelings had betrayed him, and how she had mistaken them. 'I do not think you ugly.' She snorted contemptuously and he felt again the enormity of the gulf between them, like he had on

that day by the Sunwash, so long ago. He drew a deep breath. 'When I look at your ankle, I am revolted, but not for the reasons you think. Each time I see it I am reminded that I have done this to you, that it is I who have caused your suffering and left you thus marked.' He paused, before going on bitterly, 'It was I who set the traps.'

'I know. Tanalan told me.' He gaped at her. She was quite composed, her voice calm. 'And I say to you what I said to her; it is not your fault. Before I left the Sceadu, I committed a very great wrong. That is why I put my foot in the trap.'

Tel's brows drew in a heavy frown. 'You see it as a punishment?'

She shook her head. 'No, but it taught me much.'

'It seems a painful way to learn,' he observed.

Chant gave a short smile. 'I have yet to find a way of learning which is not.'

Chapter 40

Tel woke early the next morning, the wind warm on his face, heavy with the scent of rain. He scowled. It was one thing to welcome the rain to the gardens while snug in his stay, another to have to sleep and journey in it. He glanced over at the sleeping girl and the questions which had long plagued him came to his mind. Who was she, what was she? His eyes traced the curve of her hip beneath the jacket and her long muscular legs. Her eyes opened and he flushed guiltily, but she did not notice the direction of his gaze, busying herself replacing her arrow and bow. Tel wondered again whether such preparedness was for him or for the wandering beast. 'I have seen no large animals in my travels here,' he tested.

Chant had drawn a comb from her pack and was busy with her unruly hair. 'I have seen none either, though their prints follow the way we go and their scent travels on the air.'

Tel grimaced; he had seen nothing. 'Perhaps we should take turns in sleeping at night, if it is dangerous.' Chant stowed the comb before looking up. Her hair swirled about her face in blue-black strands and he resisted the urge to smooth it back.

'Scintons kill from above. They like steep rocky places and sturdy trees. Unless they hunger greatly, they will not hunt here. The land ahead would suit them better.'

'It is the way we go,' he replied soberly.

The morning grew old and the clouds built, drawing the sky down in a sullen sea of grey. It was not cold but nor was it pleasant, the warmth having a sticky, oppressiveness which brought no ease. Beside them, the river took the sky's colour, carrying it along in a great murky sweep.

'We need to collect water for we leave the river for a time,' Tel said, turning back to her. 'A little ahead it veers north, skirting the place the Meduin call the Old Stead. It is far quicker to continue west and rejoin the river when it swings back.' Chant nodded; the sooner the journey was complete, the sooner she would be back among her own. In the distance, a jagged outcrop began to take shape. It reared from the land's smooth skin, its edges angular and sharp. Chant stared at it and a surge of savage pain knifed through her ankle, bringing her to her knees.

'What is it?' Tel's voice was tight with alarm.

'My ankle,' she grunted, unable for a moment to say more.

He looked at it closely. There were no signs of new injury. He began to massage it gently, and for once she did not push him away, her eyes fixed on the distance. 'What is it?' he repeated, with more calmness than he felt. She was obviously frightened, and he had never before seen her so.

She dragged her gaze from the looming presence to the man by her side. How could she answer him? Her pain made no sense, and Tel must always have sense. 'Must we go this way?' she asked at last.

'If we go north following the Sunwash, it will add at least another full day to our journey, perhaps more. There are tales too of another people who roam that land and who have little liking for strangers.' 'What do you fear?' he probed gently.

'I cannot tell you.'

'Why will you not trust me?' he demanded in exasperation.

'I did not say that I *would* not tell you, just that I *cannot*.' Tel stared at her in bewilderment, the distinction lost on him.

Chant sighed. 'When I look upon the Old Stead, I see the trap. And with it comes the pain ... in my ankle, where I was caught before.'

'But surely, it is but a memory of the pain?'

She shook her head. 'The pain is real, Tel. And it gives warning. Pain always gives warning.'

'Warning? How could it?'

Chant pushed his hand away and struggled to her feet. He had asked and she had told, and again he had not believed. She hobbled off along the track, the pain in her ankle excruciating.

Tel hastened after her and caught her arm. 'I am sorry,' he said, forcing out the words.

She jerked from his grasp. 'We were born on different sides of the mountain,' she muttered, moving off. The first fine drops of rain began to fall and Tel lengthened his stride to keep with her.

'What do you mean?'

'Ashali has two faces. One sees the sun rising, the other sees its setting. Neither

sees both.'

'Ashali?'

'That which you call Anarkin.' She glared at him resentfully. 'Perhaps it is no one's fault that our words do not mean the same.'

'You have crossed the mountains, and we now journey together,' he pointed out. She frowned doubtfully. Perhaps he was right, perhaps understanding would come.

The clouds pressed lower and the air blurred, so that the dark outline of the outcrop seemed to waver and shift. Chant was hungry but there was little point in stopping to eat cold, wet food. They must wait till they reached the shelter of the Old Stead, if shelter was to be found. Tel strained ahead. Chant had spoken no more of her fears but he was not fool enough to think that she no longer held them. Could they have some substance? He had passed through the Old Stead before without mishap, he only hoped that together they would repeat the feat. He trudged on, shortening his stride so that Chant did not fall behind. The roughness of the track would slow her, and he did not want her far from him. He glanced back to reassure himself that she was close. Her face looked very white, the slashes across it intense. She did not smile at him, but came steadily, carrying her bow before her, the arrow set ready.

He stared up at the rocks uneasily. They were jagged and broken, their deep clefts and canyons deeply shadowed. In the half light they looked sinister, as if readying themselves to plunge down. Tel dismissed the thought swiftly. He had come this way before; there was nothing to fear.

'Good scinton country.' Chant's voice was close in his ear and he started in spite of himself.

'Does your ankle still pain you?'

Chant smiled humourlessly. 'No, but there is something here.' Tel scanned the heights once more. 'Are you not going to argue?' she queried sardonically.

'Not today, I am too wet.' Chant's face broke into a grin and he smiled in turn. 'Do you want to lead, or shall I?'

'Better you.' Tel went on, wondering whether it was indeed best that he went first. She had the arrows after all, while all he carried was a knife. They toiled on up the slope, sometimes forced to anchor themselves with the small scrubby bushes. The rain

continued to sheet down and the daylight to dwindle. Tel had just begun to sift his memories for possible places to spend the night, when Chant's grip on his arm brought him up short.

'Berian,' she hissed. He looked wildly about. He did not know the word, did not know what beast she had seen in the rain-drenched gloom. Her grip tightened and he followed her gaze. Still he could see nothing. She was staring toward a narrow path to their left. The thump of his heart filled the air, joined abruptly by a long low growl. He felt the skin on his neck shift.

'Do not move!' To his left something flickered; a shadow within a shadow. Again came the growl. Then a massive black bear seemed to materialise from the substance of the rock. It came upright, its lips drawing back from its teeth, its small eyes holding them in an intense stare. 'Get down!' Tel looked at Chant wildly. She had made no move to ready her arrow. 'Get down!' Her hand was like a vice on his wrist, forcing him to his knees. Shock at her strength mixed with his fear of the bear, rendered him speechless for a moment.

'Shoot it!' he gasped at last. She seemed not to hear him. She had thrust him behind her, and was crouched low, her head bowed.

'Get back. Get back. Do not look up!' This was madness. At any moment the beast would be upon them and all would be lost. He could already feel its teeth upon his flesh, the rip and tear of its claws. He scrambled back as best he could along the steep, rain-slicked slope. 'Keep going, keep going. Don't look up.' Her breath was as harsh as his own, and they were both covered in the thick oozing mud. He did not know how long they went thus. At some point they must have blundered off the track for he found himself floundering among the saturated foliage and thorns of the small scrubby trees of the slope. After a time she called a halt, coming to rest at his side. She still held the arrow, he noted in annoyance. They lay for a while, letting their breathing quieten.

'Why did you not shoot it?' he hissed, riled at the way he had been forced to grovel away.

'I will not kill without need.'

'Without need?' he whispered harshly, 'I would not like to see a time when there was need.' He flicked his gaze back the way they had come, fearing that, at any moment, the bear might burst upon them through the tangle of growth. She wiped the water from

her eyes wearily.

'Do you know of another track?'

Tel shook his head, struggling to think. They had not eaten since dawn and his hunger added to the misery of mud and water. 'It is probably gone now. Why can we not use this path?'

Chant shook her head. 'It belongs to the berian. It will kill anything which moves upon it, whether man or beast.'

Tel's lip curled sardonically. 'It did not kill us.'

'That is because by submitting to it we were no longer a threat. A berian does not kill without purpose. Only men do that.'

Tel grunted in annoyance. Had that last jibe been aimed at him? He did not know, for her face betrayed only a muddy weariness, not unlike his own, he surmised. 'Well, we cannot stay here all night,' he muttered. Hauling himself up, he offered her his hand and together they began the unpleasant journey back through the scrub.

Chapter 41

After a time, they stumbled upon another track which seemed to lead off in the direction they wanted. There was much debris upon it, and moss, but it had withstood the attempts of the trees to invade it. Tel peered at it closely. It was not of earth at all, but of small blocks of stone laid side by side. Ahead, it broadened and larger blocks of stone emerged from the gloom. They lay scattered to either side of the path, their angular sides betraying the work of a stonemason. Tel did not pause though, for none would afford them shelter, and they had great need of shelter now. Chant was obviously thinking the same. 'Are there caves this way?'

Tel shrugged. 'I do not know. Kanan did not speak of any, but then he did not speak of these stones either. The Meduin do not come here, and much has been forgotten.'

Chant paused, wiping the rain from her eyes. The rain! The wonder of it filled her mind. So much beautiful water and yet here, only here, on the Sunnen side of the mountains. Why not on the Sceadu side? She shook her head in vexation.

'Your ankle pains you?' Tel asked, catching her movement.

'Not as much as my stomach.'

Tel grinned. 'Ah, mine is growling louder than that bear. But I do not want to eat here, I want to be dry.' He stared ahead. 'If we do not find something soon though, we must stop, and make do with the biraq.' She nodded, and he breathed a sigh of relief. How much easier it was when she was in accord with him. They had not gone much further when they came to a place unlike anything Tel had seen before. Mighty stones leaned together, forming parts of immense stays. He gazed about, remembering after a time to close his mouth.

Chant's hand gripped his arm and he saw that the shock too had caught her off guard. 'Who could have made such things?'

'The Meduin call this the Old Stead, but they do not speak of those who once lived here. At least they may afford us some shelter,' he added. They wandered among the massive walls but all had lost their roofs, though they could see where the great timber lintels must have once fitted.

'I do not like this place,' Chant muttered.

'You smell scintion or bears?'

She was shivering slightly, her eyes darting round the cavernous stones. 'I do not think there are beasts here, just the dead footfalls of those who have gone.' He placed his hand over hers, feeling how cold it was. She sensed things he did not, but here was their only chance of finding somewhere dry to sleep. Keeping her hand in his, he made his way forward. On the very farthest edge, where the broad sweep of ground came hard up against the slope of the hill, several stones leaned together, forming an angular cave. It was musty but dry and the back of it had formed a natural trap for windblown leaves and branches. It was not long before he had a crackling fire lighting the night.

'This is better than the cursed rain,' Tel observed cheerfully.

'Do not curse the rain!' Chant said sharply. 'Without it there would be nothing. Nothing but hunger!'

Tel turned to her in surprise. 'Is this what has happened to your people?' She nodded dumbly. 'And is that why you have left?' Again the assent. Tel let his breath out slowly. What did she hope to achieve? A lone woman could not bring the rains, no one could, no matter their strength or resolve. Why in The Mountain's name had she been sent on such a senseless mission? He voiced none of these thoughts though. The fact that she had at last opened to him filled him with immense satisfaction, and he was not going to risk her closing off again.

The chill of his clothes penetrated his thoughts; they must warm themselves. He had pulled off his wet jerkin and shirt and had taken dry ones from his pack before he noticed that Chant had made no move to change. 'Are you not going to put on some dry clothes?' he asked anxiously, remembering how ill she had been after the Terecleft.

'I cannot.'

'Cannot?' He saw her discomfort and difficulty in meeting his eyes.

'I cannot take off my clothes in front of you.'

Tel stared at her in surprise. The Sunnen bathed together, both men and women, for it was not considered necessary for the body to be hidden. It seemed strange to him that while the freedoms she enjoyed as a Sceadu woman were so great, she should be constrained in this manner. 'Do Sceadu women not even bare themselves for their husbands?' he could not resist asking.

'You are not my husband.' She was very close to tears and he instantly regretted

the quip.

'I will wait outside,' he said contritely.

'You will get wet again. Just do not watch.' He busied himself with the fire, taking care to look only at the pulsing coals within. It was a measure of her trust in him that she had allowed him to stay, he considered. What a strange mix she was. He had once thought her hard, but he had been wrong. It was true that she had great physical strength and determination, but she was also vulnerable. He wanted to comfort her, but he had not the right. Where was her damned husband?

'I am finished,' she said in a small voice. She was dressed as he had first seen her. Then it had been in the cold early morning light, now her face was gilded by the flicker of the fire. She smiled at him a little uncertainly and he jerked his gaze back to the coals. He wanted her. The realisation was like a knife in the heart. He wanted her. The thought hammered insistently and he took several deep breaths, trying to steady himself. Was he mad? Perhaps he was feverish from the rain. He flicked his eyes to her once more. She was busy taking the food from her pack. Her hair had fallen forward, hiding her face, but he could see the line of her shoulder and the soft curve of her leg. And again he felt the warmth of the realisation ooze through his body.

What of Nasala, he questioned, trying to drag himself back to the chill of reality. He had held her, had kissed her. He had done neither of these things with Chant. And yet, even with Nasala in his arms, he had not felt as he did now. He might as well have held Tanalan, he conceded, for there had been no fire.

'Are you not going to eat?' She was holding a portion of berrem and dried fish for him, waiting for him to take it.

'I thank you,' he said vaguely.

Chant eyed him anxiously. 'Is something wrong?' Perhaps he was only now remembering some hazard further along that he had earlier forgotten.

'Nothing is wrong that a good night's sleep will not cure,' he said softly. He fervently hoped that it was so.

Chant relaxed, easing herself back against the stone. She was warm and the food was good. Lazily she scanned the massive stone structure around her. 'They must have been a skilful peoples,' she said wonderingly. 'And yet, they have gone. Why would they have left such a Stead?'

Tel shrugged. 'Nothing lasts forever.' Chant felt a prickle of apprehension run along her spine. The Great Turret, alive with the chatter of the old and the high pipings of the young - silent forever? Its thatch ripped by the wind, slowly taken by the whitelands; the hunting paths overgrown, perhaps even those of the berian. She shut her eyes for a moment. It was too painful to contemplate.

'Life would be easier for the Scedu if they were to grow their food,' Tel's voice broke in.

'There is nothing to say that those who built this place were not gardeners, and yet they are no longer here,' she pointed out, still disturbed by her vision.

Tel's brows drew in an intense frown. 'I have seen no evidence of gardens.'

'As you said, nothing lasts for ever,' she responded tartly. There was a long silence broken only by the crackle of the fire. Tel pushed the rest of the food back in his pack. What he felt for her had not diminished, but now it was mixed with fear for her, and with frustration. The rains were failing and the Scedu with them. But there were better ways of living and she must be made to accept them. There were perhaps five more days to the Okianos, and they would stay there a while before returning. He fervently hoped that it would be time enough.

Chapter 42

Chant peered out at the early morning. The rain had stopped and there were pools of gleaming water laying scattered among the bright, moss-dappled stones. It was beautiful but she could take no pleasure in it. Once this place had been filled with the chatter of people, with their small doings, with their lives. She glanced back inside. Tel was lying, his head propped on his arm, watching her. She lingered for a moment, wanting to escape his eyes but reluctant to go out. There was something about the shamble of blocks which her skin did not like.

'Shall I light the fire again?' She shook her head. The sooner they were gone the better she would feel. She stooped to her pack, and a sear of pain erupted in her ankle, making her sit heavily. Tel was at her side in an instant, his hands gentle upon her foot.

'It is nothing,' she panted.

'I'll decide what is nothing,' he rejoined tersely. 'Is it worse here?' Chant shook her head. 'Here?' She winced and the tears started in her eyes. He slipped off her sandal and flexed the foot gently backward and forward. After a time, he heard her breathing steady.

'I have never understood why you limp more heavily in the morning than after a day's journeying.' He was crouched in front of her, carefully massaging her foot.

'It is stiff until the muscles warm,' she replied vaguely. There was something in his face at that moment that reminded her of Sced - Sced and his passion for healing. Tel's skin was dark and his eyes light, whereas with Sced it was the opposite, but there was still something; a certain gentleness, an openness. Chant's heart faltered, and she looked away. There could not be any similarity between them! Tel was unmarked and no man was unmarked. But the assertion rang hollow. It was an old thought and an old belief. Sekwana was a man, and Duran. Kanan also, for she remembered how he had stood waiting for Tel in the centre of his corral, and his pride as he had pledged himself to Tanalan before the Meduin.

For the first time she wondered how it might be for Tel. He controlled his stay, even his mother who was many Snowmelts older, must bend to his will. Was that what it meant to be a man among the Sunnen? And what of marriage? Was there someone waiting patiently in the Stead for his return? The question intrigued her. He had spoken of no one, not even in his sleep.

Tel watched her mind drift. He had long noticed the softening of her face in her unguarded moments, and for the first time wanted to know what was going on behind those black eyes. 'What are you thinking?' he asked gently.

'I was wondering why you had not married.'

Tel's face hardened and he lowered her foot carefully to the ground. 'I have to care for three women in my stay, I have no wish to add a fourth.'

'Tanalan is no longer there,' she pointed out, puzzled by his sudden coldness.

'Yes, and that adds to my problems. When a Sunnen woman marries, she joins the stay of her husband, her labour then being directed to his gardens and orchards. For that reason alone, I will have to marry soon.'

Chant surveyed Tel critically. 'It does not seem to be a very good reason to marry.'

'The Sceadu have better reasons for marrying?'

'The Sceadu marry for love.'

Tel's lip curled in contempt. 'Yet they may break the union, if this love fades away. Perhaps if they chose their partners for what they might contribute to their stay, they would eat better than they do.' It was an unforgivable jibe and Tel saw it for what it was the moment it had left his lips. She had confided the Sceadu's plight to him, and he had thrown it back at her in some petty game of point-scoring. She did not say anything, just turned away and refastened her sandal, but the rejection was worse than her fiercest retorts.

'We should eat now so that we can journey while the weather is fair.' She passed him some berrem, her face perfectly composed, betraying no emotion. It was the mask she had worn in all but the last day of their travel together. Tel struggled to think of something to say, of some way of making amends. He watched her gather up her pack and move into the open. She looked very alone. He cursed himself bitterly. He had hoped that the dawning would clear his mind of the strange feelings which had descended on him the previous night, but it had not. Instead his confusion seemed to have grown. He had lain near her in the night, feeling the soft touch of her hair against his face and the gentle rhythm of her breathing. He had never before slept closely with another, had never felt the contentment which such closeness could bring.

And at last she had opened to him in a way which touched him deeply and he had

betrayed that trust. All because he could not admit to her what he was only just coming to know himself. He had always thought of marriage as a duty he must perform to ensure the well-being of the stay. The awful vulnerability that love brought, that he had feared from childhood as he had listened to Merala cry herself to sleep night after night, had hardened him against such sentimentality. Even his time in Sal's stay with the attentive Nasala always near, and later at Wait, had not convinced him otherwise. It was only as he had watched Kanan pledge himself, saw that Kanan's love for his sister did not diminish Kanan, did he have his first doubts. And then, the strange chance of coming together with Chant in the men's and women's dance. He had found her proximity disturbing, and when she had turned and fled, he had followed.

Tel rolled up the biraq and thrust it savagely into his pack. Half the time he did not understand why he was here at all. Everything in his life had been so carefully planned, laid out as neatly as the orchards and gardens. But since he had set off with this Sceadu, the order of things had dissolved. There had been bears where none had been before, and rain after its time. And now a strange churn of feelings seemed to have overtaken him, robbing him of his wits. He pulled on his pack and stepped out into the chill morning. It was well that she was married. He had heard of passions which possessed a man for a short time and then passed away. She was a Sceadu and married, he repeated to himself. Such knowing should guide him well until his old ways of thinking returned.

Chapter 43

They went on, following the stone path which had brought them to the broken buildings. It wound down the slope, going in the general direction they must travel. The massive blocks of stone became fewer as they descended, and the way more rutted and overgrown. Tel searched his memory as he went. When he had last come here, he had been able to see where the river swept back to the south, whereas now all he could see was a wall of garron and thatch. He had been higher then, he recollected, on the spur's back. 'We need to go up.' Chant followed his gaze and he saw her nostrils flair. She shook her head and his irritation stirred. They had journeyed all morning in strained silence, and now she was going to be even more difficult. 'There is a path there, whereas there is none here,' he pointed out with studied care.

'The one above is a berian path.'

'How do you know?'

'The wind tells me.'

Tel scowled. He could not argue with her on that. He turned resentfully to the way ahead. 'Keep close behind then,' he ordered. 'There is no point both of us being torn to pieces.' He began to force passage through the growth, using his knife to hack a path where necessary. Chant followed closely, but even so, the twang of released branches sometimes caught her, making her face sting and smart. They struggled on and the sun climbed higher. After a time, Tel paused and wiped the sweat from his eyes.

'Let me go first for a while.'

He glanced back. There was a deep score across her cheek, beaded with blood. 'You are already scratched. You will be more so if you lead.' He tipped a little water into his hand to cleanse her wound, but she stepped back, ignoring the gesture.

'We are of the same height, and carry the same knife. It matters not who leads.'

He tossed the water on the ground in disgust. 'I lead.'

'Why, because it is a man's task?' she sneered.

He rounded on her angrily. 'Do not speak to me of manhood! Where is the man you married? Safely back on the Scedu side of the mountain. If that is Scedu manhood, then it has nothing to do with me or anything else Sunnen!' She drew her knife but he threw back his head, laughing derisively. 'Stabbing me will not change the truth. Why do

you not wound my right shoulder this time, and even things up?' he goaded.

She glared at him in fury. He was right but the knowledge only stirred her to greater passion. Travelling with him had been a mistake right from the beginning, but she would soon remedy that! Abruptly she began to hack her own path down the slope. He stood watching her and she crouched down, wanting to be out of the sight of those cold, mocking eyes. It was actually easier thus, she discovered after a time, for the tangle was less, and there were paths that small beasts had made between the trunks. She heard him call but did not answer.

'Travel alone, Sunnen man,' she muttered grimly. She could barely feel her elbows and knees so badly were they bruised, and she could taste the blood on her lips. Again she heard him call, fainter this time, his voice carrying an edge of alarm. She came to a ragged halt. Her breath was like fire and her fury had all but spent itself. She sucked the blood from her hand, and grimaced. What had she said to Kalia? That she did not act well when she was angry? How true those words were. She wondered where Tel was. Still hacking his way manfully forward? He was as trapped as she was, but at least she knew what she must do. Wearily she pushed her hair out of her eyes, then forced herself onward once more, taking her time now to choose the best route. After a while the woody stems thinned and she was able to stand. The river was less than twenty paces below her. Tel was nowhere to be seen. She slipped off her pack. Still there was no sign of him. Changing swiftly into the lighter Sunnen garb, she began to bath her wounds.

Tel broke through the final mesh of branches and looked wildly about. He could see the glint of the Sunwash but little else. Where in Anarkin's name was she? Had she gone on? He came down to the river; she was perhaps ten lengths from him, perched by its edge. An immense feeling of relief swept over him. It had come to him, in the tangle of cursed clinging bushes, that he might not find her again. She did not look up, though she must have known of his approach. He crouched on his heels beside her. He was weary from his struggle with the bushes and sick of arguing with her. 'I have not acted well. I am sorry.'

She looked at him for a long moment and then dropped her gaze back to the water. 'I have not acted well either,' she admitted grudgingly. He settled by her side. She had changed into the thinner Sunnen dress, and he could see that she was scratched as badly as he was.

'Those damn bushes,' he muttered.

'Scratches do not kill; berian do.' There was no challenge in her voice, she was merely stating a fact. He peeled off his heavy shirt and stepping into the shallows, began splashing water over himself. Ah, it felt good. Chant watched him, seeing the muscles of his back and the scar where she had plunged the knife. She had held the knife against him since, once in the stay, and again this day. And yet it was not the Scedu way to turn weapons on another, nor her way. When she had lain in the trap, she had not known that he was a man, but she had known since. He seemed to bring out the worst in her, to rouse her to a point of fury she had never experienced before. He could be kind and open, but she never knew when the change might come; the sneering words, the mocking laugh. And always the need to control.

'I think we should part.' There, the words were said, falling like stones through the sunny air.

He had stilled, though his face betrayed nothing. 'Why?'

Chant moved uncomfortably. Were not the reasons obvious? 'I have always hunted alone; I do not make a very good travelling companion.'

He had stepped from the water and was rubbing himself dry with his shirt. 'I enjoy your company.'

Chant snorted, and stood up. 'We have done nothing but argue since we left. And they are not small arguments. Before,' she jerked her head up the slope, 'I wanted to kill you. And I have already wounded you, as you have pointed out. This is not the Scedu way, it is not my way!' She moved distractedly. 'When I am with you it is as if part of me is torn away and replaced with something I do not know.' Her description fitted the churn of his own feelings exactly, and gave him a strange sense of comfort.

'I know that you wish to journey as quickly as possible, so that you may return to the Scedu. I can help you do that. Once we reach the ocean, my kin can aid you further.'

'No, Tel,' she said gently.

He felt a cold stab of fear but his voice did not falter. 'I will not let you go alone, Chant, it is not safe.'

'I am not your concern.'

'That is where you are wrong. You have been my concern since the day you put your foot in the trap.'

'The fault was not yours! You owe me nothing!'

He took her gently by the shoulders. 'I am not speaking of debt. We are both a long way from home. A little further on live a people who have no liking for anyone but themselves. Still further, the river breaks into many parts, soaking the land between. It is difficult to find a path there, but I have some knowing from before, and you have a sense of what the earth and air might tell. Together, we can find a way through.' She shook her head slowly. He stood contemplating her for a moment then slowly drew out his knife. 'This belonged to my father, it is the only thing I have of his.' Chant stared at the knife, and then at his face. For the first time it was completely open, his expression one of intense yearning. 'His father came to your place and was given this knife. Are there no stories among the Scedu of strangers visiting?'

'There are old tales of black men who came over the mountains, plundering and killing,' she said reluctantly. 'That is why when the snows closed Ashali, there was at first great relief. It shut enemies out, though it shut us in. It is only since the rains have failed that we have perceived our safety as a trap.'

Tel said nothing. He began to understand her lack of trust in him and why she had never spoken of her path over the mountain. The Sunnen were certainly darker than she, but black?

'If the knife was given him, then he must have been counted a friend; such knives are not given lightly.'

He looked up, grateful for her words. 'How did you come by yours?'

She took her own knife out and looked at it thoughtfully. 'In the early days of the Creshan Turrel, those among the old ones who have special skills, choose a child to teach. I was fortunate to be chosen by Ket.' She ran her fingers tenderly along the blade. 'Ket could smell a scintion before the wind blew, could beat the foam of the creshan to the valley floor, could feel the strike of an ariet before even the beast it killed.'

'Does he still live?' Tel asked, noticing her sadness.

Chant sheathed the knife and slipped her pack back on. 'She was well enough when I left,' she replied brusquely.

'This is all I have of my father. You could give me more.' Chant paused, looking at him in bewilderment. 'My father's father told many tales of the Scedu, and these drew my father to the mountains. He believed that there must be a way over, because of

Anarkin's name.'

'What do you mean?'

'Anarkin means *two ways*, but most Sunnen believe it is so-called because of its cleft. My father did not. He was journeying there when the snow took him.' Chant stared at him in horrified silence. 'If you would stay with me, and speak of your people, it would be like speaking to me of my father.'

Chant dropped her eyes. Tel's need was real and painful. How must it be, to have but one mother and one father and then the father goes and does not return? 'I will stay and speak of what I can, if you will listen with Scedu ears, not Sunnen ones.'

Tel smiled, the tension seeping away. 'I thank you.'

Chapter 44

Below the Old Stead, the river broadened and seemed to flow more slowly. There was a gentleness in the land too, the harsh thorn-laden bushes which had left their mark upon them that morning, giving way to open grasslands. They walked side by side, Chant speaking of the Sceadu. Tel said little, for he did not want to risk insulting her by questioning what she told him. There was much which made no sense to him though; their way of living, of naming, of reliance on foretelling for guidance. And yet there were other things, such as their sharing of work and the care of the young, which he felt might serve the Sunnen also. Some things especially intrigued him. He knew that her mother had born no others, and that she was dead, for she had said as much earlier. And he knew of Ket, and that Chant had a husband. But what he could still not understand was why these, who were closest to her, had allowed her to go. The words of the Siah were powerful and yet he could not accept that they would override the bond of love she shared with Ket, or more particularly, with her husband.

The notion that perhaps the marriage was not happy occurred to him for the first time. That would at least explain why he had neither prevented her going nor accompanied her. It would also give reason for her refusal to speak of him. This alone, struck him as particularly strange. Tanalan had plagued him and the entire stay for almost three Gatheringtimes with talk of Kanan, and he remembered well Merala's long grieving for Barin. Yet Chant said nothing. He did not even know her husband's name. Perhaps it was their way not to speak of such things. Certainly talk of one's innermost feelings was not encouraged among the Sunnen. And yet ... earlier that day she had spoken openly of her anger and uncertainty, and more than once they had argued over the nature of love. He sighed in frustration. He had pledged to listen with Sceadu ears, but he could not prevent his mind filling with Sunnen questions.

The sun was sliding westward before Tel sighted the straggle of trees marking the edge of a vast forest. This was the place Kanan had spoken of, where they must cross the river. He stopped, and slipping his pack to the ground, began to unlace his shirt. 'We must cross here.'

'Why?'

He paused; he had forgotten that Chant knew nothing of Kanan's words. 'Those

trees mark the beginning of unfriendly lands. The people whose place it is do not tolerate strangers. We will be quite safe on the other side though.'

'There is no crossing place.'

He pulled off his sandals and pushed them into his pack. 'The flow is gentle. We will swim it easily.' Still she did not move and he looked up.

'I will not cross.'

Tel grimaced. Why must she always challenge him? 'If we go on, the people Kanan has spoken of might kill both of us. Or they might kill me and take you.' He had explained it as clearly as he could, yet she remained staring at him, her face curiously immobile. It was not perversity which caused her reluctance, he suddenly realised, but something else. 'What troubles you Chant?' Her eyes came to his, dark and intense and the memory of another crossing stirred. He had been carrying her and they had both been wounded. *I cannot cross the mirian*, she had said. He had not known the word then though he knew it now. 'Tell me,' he said softly.

She swallowed several times. 'I cannot swim.'

He stared at her incredulously and his thoughts whirled. She had passed through the violent churn of the Terecleft! He forced his face to relax and his voice to become businesslike. 'I will go first with the packs. Then I will come back for you. It will be easier without your sandals and breeches,' he added casually, keeping his eyes on his pack. After a moment, he heard a slight rustle and she was beside him, woodenly pushing her clothing into her pack. 'Give me your bow and quiver too.' He busied himself fastening them together then hoisted the whole lot onto his shoulder.

He walked slowly into the water, testing the pull and direction of flow, and when he could walk no more, he began to swim, careful to keep his shoulder and the packs dry. His strokes were slow and methodical but his mind was in turmoil. What if she would not come with him? He could scarcely force her. And yet she had come through the Terecleft! He did not know whether to feel admiration for her bravery, or horror at her stupidity. Soon he felt the mud beneath his feet and stepped carefully out of the water. If he were to slip under now, he would have no hope of getting her to cross. He peered back. The current had carried him some distance downstream, but he could see her, a forlorn figure on the opposite side. Leaving the packs, he made his way upstream so that the current would bring him near her when he recrossed.

He entered the water and began the swim back. Chant watched him come. Her heart thudded sickeningly and she felt that she might well be ill. She would have to cross. There was no other way. Her pack was already on the other side and now she must follow. The sun was warm, yet she felt as cold as the whitelands. Tel came up the slope towards her, water streaming from his sleek body, a smile curving his mouth. He held out his hand. In the bright sunshine, his eyes were as light as Siah's. She did not move.

'Come.' As if in a dream, she placed her hand in his. He turned and they went slowly down to the water. He did not alter his pace as he stepped in. Nor did he speak, fearing to break the fragile bond which bound them. The soft material of her dress drifted about them, drawn out by the current, and her hair joined the water's darkness. He turned so that he was facing her. 'Join your hands around my neck. I will swim and the water will bear you along behind. You must hold to me though and let the water take you.' She remained motionless. 'Put your arms around my neck Chant.' He turned away and her arms slid round him, gripping each other. 'I will tell you when we are there,' he instructed, pushing away from the soft ooze beneath his feet. He swam slowly, more slowly than he had before, for he did not want to cause her alarm. If she was to lose trust in him and struggle, then they might both drown.

He swam steadily, reassuring her as he went. She did not reply. He was being carried downstream further than he intended, but it did not matter. All that was important was that she gave up herself to him, and to the water. At last he felt the slip of mud and began to half tread as he swam. When he was sure the river was less than shoulder height, he brought his feet to the bottom and turned back to her. 'We are across. You can stand here Chant.' She did not seem to hear him. Her arms remained clasped about his neck and because he had turned, his face was now very close to hers. Her eyes were wide and unguarded, her mouth soft, and partly open.

'You can let go now Chant,' he repeated gently. Her eyes refocused and then suddenly, she clung to him. For a brief and precious moment, he felt her softness through the swirl of the water, and the warmth of her cheek pressed against his shoulder and then too soon, she pulled away. They came up the bank, into the warm sunshine and she peered about, her brow wrinkled in concern.

'Where are our packs?'

'Further upstream,' he answered vaguely, his blood still alive from her touch. She

set off along the bank and he followed. He could see the form of her through the wetness of her dress and the swing of her hair as she walked. More than anything else at that moment, he wanted to hold her again.

It was good to feel the earth beneath her feet, to take what the air gave, not what the water washed away. She unlaced the packs and clipped her knife back on. The hunter again, Tel thought dourly. Solitary and self-contained, needing no one. If only it was the same for him.

Chapter 45

They travelled steadily until the sky began to darken, and the jagged patterns of sunlight upon the water's skin, to fade. Chant felt weary, but curiously content. Little speech had passed between them since the crossing, but it did not seem to matter. The scent of him by her side, the occasional brush of arm or wrist, the rhythm of his movement, was a kind of speech in itself. She felt in accord with him, like she once had with Flint and Ket. His skin was dark like all Sunnen, his nose straight, his brows slightly arched. When he smiled his whole face lit up, but in repose it was stern, perhaps almost sullen. She had noticed few of these things before. Her eyes watched the water or the land they passed, but her whole intent was now focused on him. She scarcely questioned the nature of this change or what had prompted it, for it brought her a sense of belonging she had long craved.

It was completely dark before they came to a halt. There was no moon, but the sky was full of stars and the air pungent with the fragrance of seeded grasses. Tel eyed the remaining supply of food anxiously as they ate, his mind sifting his memories of the way ahead. They should come to the Marshlands on the morrow and if all went well, be clear of them by dusk. Then it was perhaps three nights to the coast.

'What is it?'

He started, bringing his eyes to hers. 'I was considering how much further we must travel.'

'And whether we will run short of food?'

Tel grimaced. It was pointless trying to hide things from her; she seemed to read him as easily as she read the beast. 'Could you hunt?' he asked tentatively.

Chant considered him thoughtfully. 'If there is but a few days to your kin, there would be little point. It might well take me that time to find a beast and return with it. Or I might return with nothing. It would be better to eat less.'

'I cannot believe that you would ever return with nothing,' he chided lightly.

Chant eased off her sandal. 'When I was young I once hunted for five days and did not even loose an arrow. After the first three I was very angry and very hungry, for I had only taken food for two.' She gave a short smile. 'No beast will give itself to the angry hunter.'

He watched her begin to rub her ankle. 'And now you are so much older, you are more successful?' he queried, drawing her foot onto his lap. His hands moved over it methodically, flexing it as he had learned to do, easing the tightness of muscle and sinew.

'Only if I am not angry.' His fingers were warm on her ankle, their strength easing the ache which always seemed to be there. She turned her face to the stars and drew in the soft, Snowmelt air.

'And are you often angry Chant?' His voice was as quiet as the night and she let it flow over her and through her, releasing what had long lain hidden.

'I was angry all the time in those last days with the Sceadu. Angry that I had been ill-named, angry that Ket had abandoned me, angry that Siah was sending me to my death.'

His hand came to an abrupt halt and she brought her eyes to his. 'To your death?'

'It is well known among the Sceadu that there is no way over the mountains.'

'But you went?'

'Yes.'

'You were prepared to go to your death because Siah ordained it so.' There it was said. He could not help but utter it and he sat for a moment waiting for her withdrawal, for her cold contempt of his ignorance of Sceadu ways.

'There were other reasons.' She sighed deeply. 'I was angry, as I said, and part of me hoped to prove her wrong, to show that there was a way and that I would find it.'

'And then?'

'And then I would return triumphantly and reclaim something she had stolen from me.' Tel stared at her. Her tone was deeply ironic, but it was an irony turned against herself. She half smiled at him. 'But I was wrong, and she was right. There was a way, and what she had, I have come to know, was never mine. So, I am no longer angry, or at least, not most of the time,' she added dryly.

She slipped her sandal back on. 'And what of yourself?'

'What do you mean?'

'Why are you here Tel?'

'Oh, chasing you and Tanalan,' he began lightly, 'and I had long planned to visit the Okianos. My father's father was of that people, and the children of his other son still dwell there.'

'Most Sunnen do not travel though, do they?' He moved restlessly and Chant could see his discomfort.

'No.'

'And yet you have been this way before.'

'Tel clambered to his feet. 'Are you saying that I transgress Sunnen ways?' Chant considered him carefully, thinking how best to answer. 'I am held in great regard by my people,' he went on. 'It has been my skill which has allowed the orchards to flourish, the gardens to have water even if they be far from Silver or Sunwash. It was I who made the first stone streams, who stopped the bears from plundering what we had.'

'It does not seem to have made you content to remain among them.'

'It is part of the duties of the head of the stay to visit his family's kin.'

'Like your father.'

'I am not like my father! He abandoned us to pursue his own pleasures. Inkala was yet to be born when he was killed, and I barely twelve Gatheringtimes. He had not the right!' He took several steps away and stood staring out into the darkness. Chant could see his turmoil in the way he held himself and in the rigid jut of his jaw. She knew how he felt, had shared the boil and ache of blood, had lived with it since she had watched the flames rise and consume the scinton skin. She could help him, but it was clear that he did not want her aid. Perhaps it was because she was Sceadu and a hunter, perhaps it was the gulf which separated men from women.

She repacked the food and settled down alone on the biraq. She wanted him by her and her sudden need of him surprised her. Resolutely, she forced her mind to what lay ahead. In a few days they would reach the great tarn, and then she must find that which would unlock the waters of Snowcome. The enormity of the task seemed to grow like the darkness, filling the night and blocking out the stars. Crossing the mountains had once seemed the same, she reminded herself swiftly, stilling the surge of panic. What Siah had told *was* true. She would complete her task, and then ...? She would return home.

They reached the edge of the Marshlands a little after dawn. A fine mist of rain had begun to fall and Tel scowled as he rubbed his painful back. He had not rested well and the anger he had carried to sleep, still remained. Now to add to his discomfort, it was

raining again. He did not welcome it, but no doubt the Sceadu would, if it fell on their side of the mountain. There could be no way of living for them if the rains continued to fall, no life for Chant. It would be far better if she remained with him, living among the Sunnen. The crystallisation of the thought, which had come to occupy his mind only in a vague form before, brought him up short. He wanted her safe with him. He wanted her. His need for her made no more sense than it had earlier. He was Sunnen and she was Sceadu, and married. He stood glowering down at the mosaic of mud and water, his thoughts as tangled as the Sunwash's new course.

'What has made this?' Chant was staring at the morass before them.

'The ground here dips like a bowl, causing earth and water to mix. It is as if each no longer knows how it should be, for the land will not bear the tread of man or beast, and the river turns away from the sea.'

She looked at him sharply; he was anxious, though he sought to hide it. 'What do you fear?'

'Nothing!'

'If there are beasts within the marshes, then speak of them. How can I travel with you if you keep me blind?'

Tel smiled sardonically and Chant felt her irritation rise. He was the Tel of old, superior and mocking. 'There are no beasts among the marshes Chant, save those we take with us.' His face was grave and her annoyance changed to confusion.

'I do not understand you.'

The fine rain had beaded her hair and strands of it had strayed across her face. With infinite care he smoothed them back, tracing the outline of her wet cheek with his finger. Then gently he tilted her face to his and kissed her. 'Do you understand me now?' Chant gazed at him, feeling the fire where his lips had touched hers, feeling the insistent thud of her heart against her ribs. He turned away from her then, into the taller, coarse grasses which marked the beginning of the Marshlands, and dazedly, she followed. She thought of little except that Scead had never kissed her, and that Duran's kiss had not been as Tel's. Tel! Yet he moved before her as if nothing had happened. Why had he kissed her? Was it another way of proving his dominance? Yet his eyes had been gentle ... and what had he said? *Do you understand me now?* Surely he did not love her? She snorted; the thought was ludicrous. He had only lately curbed his antagonism, not

because he enjoyed her company, but because he was a man who could not tolerate being alone. No, she had erred once before in matters of love, she would not make the same mistake again.

The rain grew steadily, as did the difficulty of their route. The boundaries of land and water seemed to blur, so that most of what surrounded them was a deep, oozing mud. It was well after the midpoint of the day, Chant guessed, when they came to a halt. They ate quickly, perched among the broken stalks of the tall grasses and assailed by the myriad of stinging creatures, before going on. They spoke little as they travelled, both intent on finding a route through the islets of solid ground scattered through the sea of mud. Tel's anxiety grew though, with the darkening of the sky. They should be almost through by now, yet he could see no end to the sweep of mire before them. At last he came to a stop. It was almost dark and he felt curiously light-headed.

'Are you unwell?' Her eyes were intense upon him.

'No, just tired.' He scowled up at the sky. 'I am no longer sure where we are. We should have been out of this stinking hole by now.' He slumped to the ground. 'Perhaps you would have been wiser to travel alone after all,' he added bitterly.

'There is nothing amiss with your leading. We still go west.'

'How do you know?'

Chant shrugged. 'I have always known these things.' He remained staring bleakly into space and she crouched beside him, moved by a sudden need to comfort him. 'Do not fret. We will sleep here and at daygrow things will be clearer.'

Chapter 46

Tel came fitfully awake. He had again slept poorly and his head felt thick for the want of it. A great thirst burned him and he fumbled his waterskin to his lips, gulping down the cool liquid. Dawn was close, the eastern sky already bleaching the colour of honeyapple blossom. Chant still slept, her face white with weariness and smudged with mud from the day before. And yet even in sleep there was something about her - a self-containment, a strong solitariness, which seemed to heighten his own sense of weakness. It was true that he had designed and laid the stonestreams and set the traps which kept the bears at bay, and that these accomplishments had earned him much respect from the Elders. But he had never felt comfortable with their praise, fearing that one day they might discover the true hollowness of his abilities. Whereas Chant Her abilities were proven. She had come over the mountains alone, and when she set out on hunt, she did not return without a beast. She even knew the way westward, while he ... he pushed the biraq away irritably. He was hot now whereas a moment ago he had been cold. If only they were out of the mud!

They breakfasted quickly and set out once more across the scramble of mud and water. Tel led, and Chant followed, intent not only on the track he made, but on how he made it. There was a stiffness to his shoulders which had not been there previously, and the back of his shirt was stained with sweat. It was clear that he was unwell, whether he cared to admit it or not. She wondered whether he had taken chill from the constant wetness of his clothes, and her mind went back to the illness which had affected her after Terecleft. It had not been like this though. In some strange way, she knew its cause had been the water which had sought to consume her.

They went on and her anxiety grew. Sometimes now as he stepped, he was unsteady, and she feared that he would stumble into the thick ooze between the islets, and that she might not have the strength to pull him out. The sun rose higher and with it came the swarms of winged creatures which had plagued them the day before. Tel forced himself on, driven by the dread that he had missed his way and that they were doomed to wander for ever among the stench of mud and the sting of fliers. He yearned to stop and drink, to sink for a while into the embrace of the tall grasses, despite their sharpness. He did not feel hot, though the sweat coursed down his face, but he did feel light-headed, as

if he had not eaten for many days.

After a time he noticed that the islets of earth were becoming larger, and the pools of mud between them drier. There were few places now where water shone on the surface, and the incessant torment of the stinging and biting began to lessen. He trudged on, not varying his pace, hoping with all his heart that the Marshlands were coming to an end. It was but a little further when the tall grasses abruptly gave way to the pastureland they had traversed before. Perhaps fifty paces to the south, the Sunwash glinted. They had strayed north of its course, but they were through.

He slumped down, relief flooding over him, and drawing out his waterskin, drank until it was dry. A shadow fell over him and he peered up. Chant was standing before him, offering her waterskin, and he took it gratefully, drinking deeply. He barely wondered at his thirst, so great was his joy at being free of the mire. Chant knelt before him, bringing her hand to his forehead.

'You are ill.'

'It is nothing,' he muttered between gulps.

'You need to rest.'

Tel wiped the water from his mouth. 'We are over two days from the Okianos and we have little food. We cannot rest.' She remained crouched in front of him, her brows drawn with worry. He felt pleasure in her concern, despite the pain in his back and a thirst which raged without ceasing. 'You are so beautiful.' He saw the colour mount her cheeks and the sudden flash of fear in her eyes. He frowned, forcing his mind to what it might mean and she withdrew, busying herself with the packs.

'What ...' he began as she finished lacing them together.

'I carry both,' she said in a voice which brooked no argument. She helped him to his feet and paused a moment while he waited for the world to stop swaying. Then they set off. Chant walked beside him, her eyes often on his face. His lips were dry she noted, and though his skin glistened with sweat, he shivered also. What if he were to collapse here? She knew nothing of his kin, nothing of the Okianos. She trudged on, schooling her face to blandness, while her thoughts raged in endless circles. It was all but dark before they halted for the night. Chant spread the biraq and Tel lowered himself slowly onto it. She watched him curl on his side, and the tremors which shook him, increase. Then she pulled the biraq over him and unwrapped the last of the berrem. He drank but

would not eat.

'You must have it,' she said urgently.

Tel smiled humourlessly. 'Are you a healer that you know how to make me well?'

'No, that was Scead.' There was something in her voice which roused him from his fever; a certain sadness and yearning.

'Is he your husband?' he asked thickly. He felt that he was on fire and yet he was shaking.

'No. He is the husband of Siah.' Again the poignancy in her voice. Tel tried to hold her words in his mind, but he felt his attention waver. His eyelids grew heavy and then the drag on them unbearable. He let sleep come.

Chapter 47

Chant remained crouched at his side. His eyes had closed so quickly. Was he unconscious or merely asleep? Grasping his shirt, she shook him vigorously. 'Tel?' There was no response. The evening was cool but his skin was clammy with sweat. 'Tel!' Gritting her teeth she slapped him sharply across the face. He groaned but did not wake. She took several steadying breaths, trying to ease the panic which had seized her. Somewhere to the west, perhaps two days travel, were the Okianos. To the south were a people whose land they dare not cross. What lay north she did not know. She pushed the hair wearily from her face. Suppose he was to die? To die here alone, far from his kin? He is not alone, she affirmed fiercely, but he was far from those who might help him, as she was. Her eyes moved over him; his chest was rising and falling rhythmically, his breathing strong and even. The feeling of intense dread lessened a little.

She must think, must force order to the whirring fragments of her mind. He had been ill all day, but had still set a steady pace. It was likely then, that the deepness of his sleep was due in part to exhaustion, not just to fever. Perhaps at daygrow, when he had rested, they might be able to go on for a while. Even if he could manage to travel till the mid point of the day, it would bring them closer to the place where she must leave him. The thought appalled her and yet there was no other way. She must go on alone to the Okianos and beg their aid. She knew nothing of them, of the manner of their lives, of their regard for strangers. Still, she could not sit here and watch him die, nor would she abandon him. She smiled wryly, remembering Tanalan's words. She had been right in her judgement after all.

There was a movement at her shoulder, slow and gentle, fine as a cat's tongue. Her hand went to the knife, and with infinite care she turned. Above the deeper edge of blackness, She rose, Her circle almost complete. Chant crouched in the darkness, watching Her. Her face was hard and blank, not like Tel's. Tel ... she understood him less and less. Gently she smoothed the hair from his face; in Her icy sheen, his skin looked as white as Ashali's and even as she watched, he began to shiver. Once when she had been young and blind, she had lost herself in the whitelands. Ket had come for her, finding her half frozen, incapable of thought or speech. They had been far from the Great Turret and Ket had dug a snow shelter. Then she had pulled her inside, opening her jacket and

holding her close against her skin, warming her back to sense. Raising the biraq, she crawled in beside him. He did not stir. Very carefully she edged closer until she was lying alongside his back. Her heart thudded in her ears but still he lay without movement. Finally she parted her jacket so that only the thin shirts of each separated them.

She lay rigid, readying herself to spring away. Nothing happened. After a time she relaxed somewhat; the tremors which had racked him eased, and the steady rhythm of his breathing drew her into a warm drowsiness. She had slept like this with her agemates in the Creshan Turrel, but never before with a man. His back was firm and muscular and his scent pleasant. She liked his nearness, liked the comfort it brought her, though she was laying thus only to bring him aid.

Tel half woke, his need of water immediate and intense. He struggled to sit and she was there beside him, the suddenness of her appearance vaguely surprising.

'Do you thirst?' He nodded, his mind dully grappling with the soft warmth of the biraq and the strange sense of intimacy pervading it. He drank, watching her fasten her coat against the chill of early morning. Her hair was tousled, her face tinged with a soft blush of pink. She looked back to him and her brows drew in an intense frown. 'Are you able to journey?'

'Yes,' he answered shortly. Chant rolled the biraq and pushed it into her pack. Why would he not admit the illness? She stood then and offered him her hand. 'There is no need,' he muttered resentfully, struggling clumsily to his feet. They started off, Chant careful to keep the pace slow. They went steadily, and for a time, well. He did not speak, nor did she expect it, for she could see that he kept all his strength for travelling. He carried the waterskin with him, drinking from it often, and when it was empty she refilled it at the river, letting him go on ahead. Neither of them had eaten this day, for they had no food. On hunt she had sometimes gone for three daygrows without eating, but such hunger dulled her skin. She was hungry now, but for once the hunger seemed to have sharpened her senses, showing her all too clearly the precariousness of their position. She could already see the toll the morning's journey was having on him. His shirt was drenched with sweat and he moved forward in a staggering rather than walking gait. Silently she lifted his arm over her shoulder, so that she took part of his weight and he grunted his thanks. There was no argument, for they both knew it was necessary.

The day grew older and she was forced to take more and more of his weight, so that after a time, her shirt was as wet and her breathing as harsh as his. Finally, when their shadows stretched like seresnakes behind them, they came to a halt. Chant lowered him to the ground and he lay without moving, only the raggedness of his breathing disturbing his stillness. His waterskin was empty again so she let him drink from hers, holding it to his lips, for he now lacked the strength even to do that. Then she stood for a moment, letting her own breathing quieten. He had said before that it was two days to his kin. How far had they come this day? She stared down at him. He had not moved since they had stopped; even were she to force him to his feet now, their progress would be painfully slow. No, it was better to leave him and go on alone. She gazed around uneasily. There was no shelter of any kind; no rocks, or trees, not even small bushes; just the open, rolling grasslands. She had seen no print of scinton or other large beast either, she reassured herself, yet if they were here, he would be vulnerable.

She sighed heavily. Already the sun was slipping beneath the roll of grassland, and soon any beast which dwelt near would come to drink. She would wait to see what came. That was all she could do. She shook the biraq from her pack and rolled him onto it, tucking it over him securely. Then she filled the skins and placed them by his side. She would have no need of hers, being able to drink at the river as she travelled. Then she settled beside him to wait. The gold of the grasses ripened and then faded to silver and the warmth of day ebbed away. Above, a star twinkled in the sky. Astrin - the first star of evening, perfect in its pure tarn of blue. It would be a fine night and a fine day. The wind stirred and she brought her eyes sharply to the river. The grasses bent under its caress and then parted. A small beast, less than half the size of a dybuck, stepped through. Chant stared at it, fascinated. It had stopped on the edge of the grassland, and stood testing the air with nose and ears. After a time, it came forward to the water's edge and another appeared. Soon there were a group of seven drinking, some with young at their sides. Then, as abruptly as they had appeared, they turned and vanished into the wall of grass.

Chant let out a long sigh of relief. She now knew the beast which left the small cloven pattern, and that it posed no threat to Tel. It also gave reason why she had seen no greenfood since the Old Stead. The creatures' fine teeth would make short work of any tender shoots. She could leave now, but first, she must know the name of his kin and

the place of the tur. 'Tel!' He did not move. She took a handful of water from the skin and threw it in his face. He started, and his eyes opened. Seizing his shirt, she leaned over him until her face was almost touching his. 'What is the name of your kin?' His eyes blurred and she shook him roughly. 'Your kin. What is his name?'

'Turai.' His voice was so faint she wondered whether she had heard him correctly.

'His name is Turai?'

Tel's head moved slightly, his lips forming a word. She stared at him intently.

'Woman?' Tel nodded imperceptibly.

'Where is the tur?' she shouted, shaking him ruthlessly. She had to know. She could see how he struggled to hear, to give her what she wanted.

'Last one.' The words were little more than a harsh breath. It made sense though. All Tel's kin seemed to live on the edge of their peoples' place. She eased him back and secured the biraq round him again. It was time to go yet still she lingered.

'I do not want to leave you Tel,' she muttered at last. In the east, the sky was slit with a slash of fierce white light, but she kept her eyes on Tel, refusing Her summons. The light grew, throbbing in the air about them and at last she was forced to raise her eyes. She gazed down upon them both, terrible in Her perfection. Chant came to her feet, her fists clenched defiantly. 'All right! All right, I go.' She snatched up her bow and slung the quiver over her shoulder. 'But I will come here again!' With one last despairing look over her shoulder, she moved away into the darkness.

Chapter 48

Chant forced her feet to a disciplined rhythm. She could not hope to run as she had done on hunt, for the same strange trancelike state that had allowed her to go on and on, without rest or thought. Nevertheless, she must go as best she could. The injured ankle had long robbed her of symmetry, but she had thought little of how she might overcome it. Now she shortened her steps, finding that such movement reduced the unevenness of the limp and allowed her greater speed. It was very hard though and soon her shirt was drenched with sweat and her breath as harsh as a scintion's snarl. She slipped through the night, conscious of her feet patterning the earth, of the dark wash of the river, of what the air told. She dared not think of Tel laying alone and unprotected, nor of how far the Okianos might be. When the sear in her chest and legs became unbearable she slowed to a walk, and when the pain eased, she ran again, and always she pushed herself on.

The light of She ebbed and a new wind was born. It came from the west, carrying with it something so strange that Chant staggered to stop. She stood, the sweat stinging her eyes, her heart hammering in her ears, her whole being intent on its message. It was not of beasts, nor of that which grew. She went forward cautiously, trembling slightly with exhaustion and fear, but with fear of what? Each new pulse of air brought the same shifting scent, and after a while, a dull intermittent roaring. She had heard this sound before, at the Terefall. It was the sound of water, of massive amounts of water.

She must be very close. There would be others soon, strangers. She fitted an arrow to her bow. After a little, the shadowy outline of a tur materialised out of the darkness. It was of pale stone and there was no corral. She passed quietly on, keeping as far from it as the flow of the Sunwash allowed. There were others now, scattered away from the river's banks, lying quietly, without light. It was very late, closer to the new day than the old, and those within would be sleeping. It was better so: she had no wish to meet others at this moment.

She went on as quickly as she dared, her skin flashing warning. Ahead, small abrupt hills rose like humped driftsnow. Sand, she remembered Tel saying. The sound of roaring was so loud now that it filled her ears and the air about her was as sharp as a knife. The scattering of turs dwindled and she edged closer, struggling to judge which was the last. She drew near it, tightening her grip on the arrow. There were several

smaller buildings apart from the main one and she was reminded of the smoketur of the Sunnen. Abruptly the silence was shattered by a raucous barking. Chant crouched instinctively, drawing the gut taut. She had seen few saman dogs but she knew their sound. It was at the side of the tur, ears flattened, lips pulled back from a row of sharp dirty teeth. She swung slowly round, aiming the arrow at the point below the jaw, where the blood pulsed close to the skin. There was a muffled curse and the thick door of the tur swung open. Someone was there, fumbling with an ill-lit lamp, chastising the dog in a heavy sleep dulled voice. It was a man. The lamp flared into life and he swung it high.

Chant remained motionless, momentarily blinded by the yellow glare. The man too did not move. They stared at each other. He was short with a thick mane of tousled black hair and massive shoulders, his small eyes narrowed under shaggy brows. 'The dog will do you no harm,' he said gruffly. She did not move, nor lower the arrow. Septin stared at her, some of his initial shock beginning to leave him. Seeing her in the bright flare of the lamp was like one of old Baktar's tales coming to life. The white skin, the long black hair, the slash of patterning across the face. There was no doubt in his mind that she was Sceadu, but he could not fathom what she was doing here. 'Who do you seek?' She still said nothing and he began to think that he was mistaken, that she was not Sceadu and could not understand his speech.

'Turai.'

He felt the thrill of surprise add to his wonder. 'She is within. Leave your weapons at the door and come.' He turned away, setting the lamp on the table before looking back. He saw that she was without the arrows and bow though she still wore the knife at her belt. It was fair, he conceded, for she knew nothing of them. 'She sleeps, I will rouse her.' He opened a second door and disappeared through it. Chant scanned the room quickly. There was a cooking place with simple platters, a wooden table with stools set about it.

The door opened and Chant's hand went to her knife. There was a woman there. She came forward into the lamplight and Chant started. She was very like Tel, though older. 'What is it you want?'

'I come from your Sunnen kin, Tel. He is ill. He needs your aid.' She saw their astonishment, and Turai's intense concern.

'Where is he?'

'I left him at the place where the Sunwash widens, at the time of moonrise.'

The man's heavy brows drew in a frown. 'You must be mistaken. You could not have come that far in so short a time.'

She rounded on him fiercely. Tel was laying ill and alone while this man haggled over the manner of her journeying. 'It is as I have said. I am a hunter. I am not mistaken!'

Turai stepped forward, her voice calm and authoritative. 'What is the nature of his sickness?' Chant dragged her attention back to the woman, forcing herself to describe the fever and shaking which afflicted him. The woman listened gravely, and Chant saw her exchange glances with the man. At least she seemed to believe her.

'Will you aid him?'

'He is my kin,' Turai answered shortly. Chant barely noticed though, for the man had disappeared and the woman seemed to be in no hurry to start the journey.

'We need start now,' she said urgently.

'Preparations must be made,' Turai responded gently, seeing her agitation. Going to the cooking place she rebuilt the fire so that the dull glow of the coals was soon a bright gold. Then she ladled a thick liquid into a pan, and set it on top. Chant prowled distractedly about the room, stopping at the window to push the shutters wide. The darkness was not quite as deep, the stars less bright. It would be daygrow soon; and she had left him only a little after nightfall. She brought her hand to her face.

'When did you last eat?' The voice was close beside her and she jumped. 'You must eat,' Turai repeated firmly.

Chant shook her head. 'We must go. I have left him alone. I do not know the beasts of this land.'

'You cannot go until they have readied the boat.' Turai began ladling out the soup. The girl came to her, limping heavily. 'You have injured yourself?'

Chant shook her head, preoccupied with Turai's words. 'It is an old wound.' What was *boar*? She sat down at the table and began to eat. The soup was thick with fish; she could feel it warming and reviving her. Turai ate also, watching the girl. Some of the haggardness was leaving her face, but her exhaustion was plain. If she had come from the place she had said, then it was little wonder. If...

The door swung open and Septin reappeared. 'We go now.' Chant dropped the

spoon and hastened after him. Turai frowned down at the girl's half finished meal. Her fear for Tel was both obvious and acute. If it was Tel, if the sickness was as she had said. The whole thing made little sense. Tel was so careful, so ordered. Why would he risk the marshes at this time of year, with a Scedu woman of all people! She grimaced; she had not even asked her name. Her eyes went to the window. Dawn was not far off. She rose, her mind moving to what she would need. If Tel had taken sick with one of the marsh fevers, then there would be ample time for all these questions to be answered, ample time to come to know the reasons for his journey. For the sickness brought a great weakness, and sometimes, if aid was not gained early, death.

Chant followed Septin along a narrow track which wound towards the sandhills. He walked slowly, his back slung with a large pack, seemingly without urgency. Chant jostled at his shoulder, maddened by the delay. Had the man no feelings for this wife's kin? His small eyes regarded her dourly. 'The tide is on the turn. We will travel faster if we wait.' Chant stared at him incredulously. 'We must go against the river's flow. Once the tide has turned, it will aid us.' The hard blankness of the girl's face remained unchanged. If she was Scedu, she would know nothing of tides, he recollected.

They rounded a curve and came to the river once more. There was a small wooden bridge jutting out into its flow, and tied to the bridge what seemed to Chant to be a flattened and curved tree. She stared at it in amazement, realising after a time that another man sat within it.

'This is Dargil, my brother,' Septin said shortly, handing the other man the pack. Chant nodded vaguely, her attention caught by the frail bobbing craft. There were joins in the wood she perceived, it was not a single piece of tree after all, but a structure made from many pieces. 'You sit at the prow, Dargil and I will row.' Dargil extended his hand to help her in, but Chant stood frozen, staring at it in a horrified silence.

'We go in that?' she gasped at last, turning her intense eyes upon Septin.

Septin snorted impatiently. 'This is the way we go ... if you wish to go as swiftly as you claim.' Chant took the proffered hand and stepped into the boat. It rocked under her and she blanched in terror. Dargil's strong grasp steadied her, holding her until she was seated.

'Have you not been in a boat before?' he asked kindly. Chant shook her head, too

terrified to reply. Septin stepped in and the boat rocked sickeningly. Chant shut her eyes and willed herself to be calm. She must trust to these strangers now, for she had no choice. The boat stilled and then she felt it move forward. She opened her eyes and saw that Septin and Dargil were sitting side by side, pulling rhythmically on pieces of flattened wood. It was the motion of these which pushed them along. She let her eyes slide slowly to the water, saw how it parted before the narrow front of the boat and skimmed away on either side. It seemed the boat sat on the water, moving curiously, as if sliding on tarn ice. After a time, the terror which had gripped her began to subside. She loosened her grip on the edges of the boat and rubbed her aching knuckles.

Dargil was watching her, a sympathetic smile creasing his face, but Septin's face was heavy with mistrust. 'There is nothing to fear. Septin here is the finest seaman of all the Okianos, and they are fine indeed. And I am the second finest,' he added dryly. Septin grunted, and his scowl lessened slightly. 'You have not told us your name,' he went on, his small eyes expectant. He was a younger, less grizzled version of Septin.

'Chant.'

'Ah,' he said, his smile broadening, 'I like that name. And tell me Chant ..'

'Watch that oar,' Septin interrupted gruffly. Dargil rolled his eyes and brought his attention back to his task. The older man though, remained stern. Mostly he gazed ahead, watching the flow of the water, monitoring the movement of the boat, but occasionally his eyes rested on her, and when they did, she could feel their suspicion. Chant cared little for his feelings, and after a time, she cared little about the boat. She was utterly exhausted and could think of nothing except Tel. Had the fever worsened, had he wandered away, had some beast taken him? The sun was above them before Septin's voice roused her from her reverie. 'The river narrows soon.'

Chant forced her attention to the land they passed. They must be close. She had sat near Tel and had watched the small beasts come to drink; the place would have many prints. She raised her face to the wind and Septin saw her nostrils flare. 'It is here,' she said abruptly. Cursing under his breath, he struggled to bring the boat round to the place she indicated. The prow slid ashore and she was off, scrambling swiftly up the bank. Her speed surprised him and he smiled sourly as he watched her flee through the swaying grasses. What game she had been playing he knew not. Still, he must make a pretence of following her.

'Hold the boat,' he ordered Dargil, as he picked up the pack and followed her up the bank. He came to the top and stopped in amazement. She had not escaped into the grasslands after all, but was crouched over the dark shape of what undoubtedly was a man. He hastened forward and felt tentatively for the pulse on the man's neck. He was alive and it was Tel, although so changed he scarcely knew him. 'Sit him up,' he ordered, fumbling in the pack. He drew out a small skin of liquid and Chant could smell its bitterness even from where she sat. 'I am afraid that he is not going to enjoy this,' he muttered, almost to himself. He forced the drinking spout into Tel's mouth and tilted it. Tel roused, jerking his head away, half choking. 'Hold him still,' he ordered. Chant did as she was bid, but every fibre of her being rebelled. Septin brought his massive hand to Tel's jaw, forcing more of the liquid into him. Tel groaned.

'You are hurting him,' she exploded, her hand going to her knife.

'Do you want him to live?' The question was callously blunt. Chant stared at him, panting in fury. Septin's gaze was equally hard, holding hers until he saw her nod. 'Then ensure that he drinks this.' He resumed his grip and tilted the skin once more. Chant held Tel still but she would gladly have killed Septin at that moment. At last the skin was empty and she lowered him back to the biraq. His breathing was ragged, and though he had struggled, he had not woken. She glared at Septin as he put the skin back into his pack. 'It is good that he fought, for it shows that he has strength.' Chant stared at him sullenly. 'Take the packs to the boat and send Dargil up,' he ordered, ignoring her obvious antagonism.

She gathered them up and still boiling with resentment, made her way back to the river. 'Septin says you are to go to him,' she muttered. Dargil handed her the rope which secured the boat against the flow, and disappeared up the bank. She knew that she should be grateful to Septin, but his callous roughness was infuriating. After a short time, they came carefully down the bank, carrying Tel between them. His head lolled back and his limp fingertips skimmed the water as they lifted him carefully in. He looked dead already. They cushioned his head with the packs and used the biraq to shade him from the sun.

Then Dargil reached over the side and with his mighty arms, lifted her in. She thanked him shakily. She was so tired that she could not have clambered in without his help. 'Why do you not sleep on the way back?' he suggested kindly. Chant nodded,

almost incapable of speech. She sat hunched in the prow as she had on the outward journey, her head resting on her knees, her eyes on Tel. What if he were to die, even now? She had brought him aid, he was no longer her concern. Her strength and her intent must now be focused on the Scedu and their need. She did not have the right to put him first, or herself. For a time in the marshes she had forgotten this, had begun to think of being with him, of perhaps loving him like she had once loved Sced. But now that the river flowed clear and free again, she saw all too plainly what she must do. Sighing wearily, she closed her eyes. She dreaded what the morrow must bring.

Chapter 49

Turai sat in the quiet of the stay, her eyes sometimes on the warm glow of the coals, sometimes on Tel. She had seen many who had suffered the marsh fever, but seeing her kin so had shocked her. Still, Septin had done well in getting a skin of kina into him; that and the speed with which the Sceadu had travelled, had probably saved him.

Chant she was called, and a pretty enough name, but not very suitable, if Septin's gruff description was anything to go by. She smiled slightly, thinking of his incredulity at her threatening him. And to add further insult, he had been proved wrong about her intentions to flee. It was strange to have a Sceadu here again after all these Runs, in this very stay where Baktar's father's Sceadu wife had died. His vivid tales of that time and his continuing sorrow at her loss, had left a lasting impression on Baktar.

Tel moved restlessly and groaned, and she went to him. He was a little better, she thought, although he slept a sleep which could not be roused. Almost as Chant now slept, although hers was caused by exhaustion, not fever. She wondered again why he had travelled with a Sceadu. She held great affection for him, but no illusions about the way he thought. He was not a man to act on impulse, his every move being meticulously planned. She grunted impatiently; it seemed she must curb her curiosity until one of them woke, and that was unlikely this night.

Chant dragged her eyes open, a vague feeling of unease disturbing her rest. The walls were unfamiliar, the bed strange. Where was Tel? She threw back the blanket and wrenched open the door. There was no bright coolness of daygrow air but a short space and then another door. She pushed it open. It was the room where Turai had given her the soup and where they had laid Tel the day before. She was to him in a moment, her eyes moving over him fearfully. He seemed no worse than that last dreadful time she had seen him, being carried like a dead dybuck by Septin and Dargil. She touched his cheek briefly. He was cooler!

'He is mending,' Turai said, 'come and eat.' She was seated at the cooking place, a large pot bubbling on the coals. Chant could smell the rich odours of greenfood and fish but she came reluctantly, sick of being a stranger within strange turs. 'It is a long time since there has been a Sceadu in this stay,' Turai began. Chant looked at her in

surprise. 'My father's father had a Sceadu wife,' Turai explained.

'You have Sceadu blood?'

'No. She died in birthing her first child, and the child also. He then took another wife. It was she who birthed my father Baktar, and later Barin, Tel's father.'

'You look like Tel,' Chant observed, feeling the warmth of the soup ease the tight knot of her stomach.

Turai nodded. 'My father came west to the sea and took an Okianos wife. Tel's father went east into the mountains and did not return.'

'So Tel has said,' Chant said softly.

Turai finished her soup and put her bowl aside. Her quiet eyes came to rest on Chant. 'You are a long way from home.' Chant returned her gaze. Turai's eyes were light like Tel's, but in years she looked almost as old as Ket.

'You know of Sceadu ways?'

Turai nodded. 'Baktar loved his father's tales, and spoke of them often.' There was a short silence.

'Sometimes when the airname is given, a task is given also,' Chant began hesitantly.

'I have heard that it is so,' Turai affirmed quietly.

'My task was to come west. To come to the edge of a great tarn and to find that which would unlock the snow and bring water to the Sceadu.' She braced herself, but there was no scorn, no derision. 'I have since discovered that the tarn is the ocean,' she went on bitterly, 'but I do not understand the rest of my task.' She flushed, appalled that she had at last admitted her weakness.

Turai sat contemplating her. She looked very unsure at this moment, quite different to the one who had stood toe to toe with Septin earlier, demanding aid for Tel. 'It was a Siah who gave you the task?' Chant nodded. 'I have heard that a Sceadu Siah is a very mighty person.' Again came the assent. 'And yet the Siah knows less than you.' Chant's eyes flashed up. 'The Siah looked with Sceadu eyes, and saw a great tarn. Whereas you know that it is no lake, but an ocean.'

'I have yet to see it.'

Turai smiled. 'It is just the other side of the dunes. Can you not hear her voice?' Chant nodded, but her eyes strayed once more to Tel. 'He is safe here,' Turai reassured

her gently. Chant rose and moved to the door. 'Remember, words can mean many things. Go now and look, but do not use Sceadu eyes, for you are no longer in the mountains.'

Chant went slowly, Turai's words filling her mind. It struck her as strange that she had once said something very similar to Tel. To understand, must she now put aside her Sceadu ways? She came to the little wooden bridge where they had taken the boat in the last night. It was there, as well as others. She stared at them as she passed, fascinated by the way they sat upon the water. Ahead the path dipped round the feet of the sandhills. Dunes, Turai had called them.

She rounded the last of them and came to a halt. Beyond, the world had turned to water. It rose like a wall, touching the sky; it roved like a scintion up and down the land, it seized and devoured the Sunwash. After a while she became aware that she was on her knees, the sand silken beneath her. Shadows whirled overhead and she looked up. Silver birds rode the sky, or did they ride the constant roar of the water? She staggered forward, the sand slipping beneath her, as slick as meltbright. When she neared the water's edge the going was easier, as if the water welcomed her. She stopped near the fine lace of bubbling surge.

The vast sprawl of water was both beautiful and terrifying. So much water, so much ... while the Sceadu had so little. Crouching, she scooped it to her mouth. Her head reeled, and it was all she could do to stop herself from falling. It was salt. It was salt! She wanted to laugh, to shout her derision to the wind. Siah had sent her to a vast tarn of salt! Clever Siah, and clever, clever Chant to come so far.

She drew a long shuddering breath. She must think, and think clearly. What had Siah's words been? She had not said that the water would aid her, but something near it. She peered desperately up and down. The sand stretched away as bright as the whitelands under a Snowmelt sun. At the furthest points, broken rocks rose in dark thrusting headlands. The ends of the Brindlebacks and Teresas, Chant realised suddenly. The place of the Okianos was not unlike her own, sheltered by mountains on three sides with the ocean shutting off the west, whereas it was the drylands which confined the Sceadu. And the similarity did not end there. In the Sceadu lands, the snow held the water confined, but here it was the salt. Yet what she sought must be here!

She wandered aimlessly along the sand. Here were the tracks of a beetle, there the glitter of a shell. Tanalan's marriage taka came to mind. Perhaps they held the

answer, for they gleamed as brightly as She. What else was there? A scatter of polished stones along the water's edge, a toss of water weed. Nothing which touched her heart, nothing which moved her. The belief that she would know that which she sought, know it in the way she knew the scinton's lair buried deep in drift snow, had long sustained her. Now as she scanned the vast sparkling sweep, she had her first doubts. It was all so big, so alien, so empty, while she felt as small as the grains over which she trod. She turned back towards the Sunwash, weariness from the last night's journeying dulling her steps and concern for Tel crowding her mind.

Tel. Chant sighed. Leaving him to his fever and to what might prowl by, had been hard, harder even than bowing before Siah in the Naming ceremony. She could no longer pretend that she could walk away from him. And yet, what else could she do? She was not free, she was not free!

Only Septin was in the stay, busy gutting fish. He glanced up, his expression one of mild amusement. 'And how do you like the sea?'

'I do not like it,' Chant returned dourly. 'It is too big and it is salt.'

Septin's eyebrows rose and the gleam in his eye increased. 'It is well known that the sea is salty.'

Chant scowled at him, stung by the implied criticism. 'On this side of the mountains, perhaps,' she replied coldly. She wandered across to Tel's bed, acutely aware that Septin's gaze followed her. She wished that he would wake. Tel's eyes might often be mocking but at least they were familiar. He seemed improved even from earlier that day, and yet he did not wake. She peered at him closely. He had lost much weight in his illness, and it came to her that it would take Tel many days to regain his strength. What if she was to find what she was looking for at the next daygrow? Would she turn back without him? She did not know. She simply did not know.

Chapter 50

It was not until the dying of the next day that Tel woke. Turai had gone to gather greenfood and Chant was again roving along the beach. Only Septin was within the stay, preparing the fish, as he always did, for the meal that night. When he saw that Tel's eyes were open, he wiped his hands and went to him. He stood looking down at him, seeing again the sunken cheeks and hollowed eyes of the younger man. Slowly Tel's eyes focused on him, and he saw the spark of recognition.

'Septin,' Tel croaked in wonder. 'Septin,' he repeated, clearing his throat, and then his face broke into a wide smile.

'It is me all right,' Septin responded gruffly. There had never been great warmth between him and his wife's kin, for he had always found Tel to be rather closed and aloof, but at this moment he was genuinely pleased to see him awake at last. 'About time you joined us,' he added with a grin. He watched him frown, and his eyes move past him, trying to make sense of the room. 'Its been nigh on two days since that Sceadu woman of yours appeared in the yard demanding that we come and collect you,' Septin went on, seeing Tel's confusion. He saw him start and try to pull himself upright. 'There, there. Don't go tiring yourself or Turai will have me for wairbait. The Sceadu's on the shore, where she spends all of the time when she is not here staring at you, or threatening me with that knife of hers,' he added dryly. He saw Tel relax and his weakness as he sagged back onto the bed. 'I've some soup on the flame, you should have some.'

Tel watched him ladle it out, but after a little, even keeping his eyes open was an effort. He let his mind drift until he heard Septin come back. 'Up you come,' the older man was saying, taking him gently and pushing pillows behind his back so he was forced to sit. He dragged his eyes open again to see Septin busy spreading a cloth over the blanket with his massive hands. He had forgotten what a great bear of a man he was. 'It's food you need now, not sleep. You must eat if you want your strength back.' He held the bowl close to Tel's mouth and gave him the spoon. Tel began to eat but the effort was exhausting. By the time he had taken half a bowl he was liberally coated in it and too weak to continue. Septin gently cleaned his face and put the bowl to one side.

'Ah, I am sorry Septin to cause you this trouble.'

Septin shrugged. 'We are always glad to have our kin visit, but what possessed

you to come at this season? Had you forgotten that the marsh fever is at its worst?' Tel shook his head wearily. In truth he had not forgotten. But Chant had wanted to come, and he had thought it worth the risk to be with her. He shut his eyes and Septin saw him begin to drift once more. He rose and went back to his fish cleaning, although his thoughts stayed on Tel. The Sunnen was not the type to ignore such a fact; he was so careful in all that he did. The clue as to why he had come most probably lay with the girl. He smiled wryly; women again. There was a story there no doubt.

The door opened and Turai appeared, taking in the pillows and half eaten soup at a glance. 'He has woken?'

'That he has.'

Turai set down the basket of greenfood and stood staring at her husband. 'Well?' she demanded impatiently.

Septin continued cleaning the fish, his knife moving up and down methodically. 'He woke, I gave him some soup, and now he sleeps.'

Turai snorted and sat down beside him. 'Did he not say why he had come?'

Septin glanced up, noting her impatience without surprise. 'I asked him if he had forgotten that this was the season of marsh fever, and he shook his head. Then he went back to sleep.'

Turai continued to stare at him expectantly. 'Did he speak of Chant?'

Septin shook his head. 'I told him she was here and he seemed content.' Turai snorted and began to sort the food she had gathered. Now and again her eyes lighted on her husband in irritation, but Septin seemed unaware. He continued his task in his usual unhurried fashion, and then drying his knife, rose and went to the door. 'We might try the river tonight,' he said by way of farewell, as he went out.

Turai sighed and putting her things to one side, went over to Tel. He was sleeping, as Septin had said, but it was no longer the sleep of fever. Damn Septin. He might have called her. She went back to the cooking place and began to clean the greenfood. The door clicked and Chant came in. Turai acknowledged her nod and watched her go to the bed. She saw how her face softened as she looked at him, and the gentleness with which she smoothed the blanket. The link between the two intrigued her greatly. It was clear that the Scedu loved him, but she wondered at Tel's motives. She could not imagine him taking a Scedu wife, and yet here he was with her, having risked

the marsh fever and having left behind the duties of his stay. She frowned. Nothing of what he had done fitted her memories of him from three Runs back. As solid as a sea-swelled log, and just as predictable, Septin had said contemptuously. And she had reluctantly agreed. It was as if his path was already set, and he would be as he was until old age and death claimed him. Septin held that it was the way of all Sunnen, who lived too distant from the cry of the gulls and the restless ever moving waters, but that was a seaman's prejudice.

It seemed to Turai rather that he had sorely missed growing with Barin, that he saw a wandering spirit not as part of the wild yearnings of youth, but as weakness, binding himself to Sunnen ways in atonement for his father's desertion. There was no use in saying such things to Septin though. Turai smiled fondly and shifted the pot back over the coals. For all his keen fisher eyes, he was blind to such things. Chant came and settled beside her. 'He has woken,' Turai said slowly, rising to fetch bowls.

The girl's dark eyes were suddenly upon her. 'When?'

'Before dusk, when only Septin was here.' She watched Chant closely, seeing her delight, and then her wariness. Her reaction puzzled Turai. She was about to probe further when the younger girl spoke.

'Why is it that the sea comes far up the sand one day, and stays back on another?'

'It is the moon. Sometimes she takes the water to her and sometimes she lets it go.'

Chant's gaze was intense. 'Why would She do that?'

Turai shrugged. 'It is the manner of all things, this coming and going. The wair run from the south, and then the silverfin, and then it is the time of the dart. The greenfood seeds, sprouts and dwindle, and when the rains wet the ground, comes again.'

'What if She were to hold the water, hold it and never release it?'

Turai paused, struck by the desperate note in the younger girl's voice. 'The tides turn in a day, but it takes many Runs for the silverfin to grow strong. All things which go, return, but it may not happen in the time that we are given to live.'

Chant dropped her eyes and Turai saw how deeply troubled she was. 'If there is no way to bring water to the Scedu ...' She sprang up and took several swift paces away before turning on Turai angrily. 'But Siah said that there was such a thing, and Siah knows!'

'Words may mean many things,' Turai reminded her gently. There was a short silence. Chant remained staring at her and Turai began filling the bowls. 'Have you found anything at all on the shore?' she asked after a while. Chant did not answer and she glanced up. She was holding out a handful of shells. 'They are very pretty,' Turai commented, concealing her surprise. She herself had collected them as a young woman when Septin had first brought her here. What surprised her though was that Chant should do the same girlish thing. She carried the burden of the Sceadu upon her shoulders, and the strain of it was etched into the planes of her face. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, she was young and carefree again, taking innocent delight in the trinkets of the sea.

They ate for a while in silence, but the unanswered questions crowded her mind. 'How is it that you came to be with the Sunnen?' she asked at last.

'When I came from the mountains, I put my foot into a trap. Tel and Duran found me and I lived with them until it healed.' Chant spoke calmly, but Turai felt a cool jolt of shock. Her eyes drifted to the jagged scar encircling the girl's ankle, and she began to see so much more. 'When I was well enough I came west, through the Terecleft to the Meduin,' she went on. 'Tanalan came with me, as she had long wanted to go there.'

Turai's eyebrows shot up. 'Tel came also?'

Chant shook her head. 'He came later,' the girl's emotionless voice went on. Turai restrained a smile. She little doubted that indeed he had. She could well imagine his reaction! 'After Tanalan was married, Tel offered to show me the way here, as he had come this way before.'

'He allowed Tanalan to marry?' Turai gasped, unable to restrain herself any longer.

Chant looked at her sharply. 'He did not have much choice once she had reached Kanan's stay,' she admitted with a small smile, 'but he did come to understand that she loved Kanan and Kanan loved her ... eventually.'

'That is not a basis for marriage within the Sunnen.'

'So he said.' Turai collected the bowls and shifted the pot from the fire. The Sceadu really had thrown Tel's careful life into disarray. Chant sat turning the shells over in her hand. 'Tel guided me here because he blames himself for my injury. The fault was not his, and I have told him so.' She took a deep breath. 'But whether he owed me or not, he has now discharged the debt. When I have completed my task, I will return to the

Sceadu and he to his stay.'

'Is that what Tel believes also?'

Chant closed her hand over the shells and prowled to the window. 'I do not know what he believes.' She stood for a moment peering out before turning back. 'We have argued most of the way here. He is bossy and arrogant and always he wants his own way.' She faltered and an intense flush stained her cheeks. 'I am sorry, I had forgotten he was your kin.'

'Do not be. He is as you say, my kin, but I know him well.' She gave a short smile. 'When Septin and I were first married, we did nothing but argue.' Chant stared at her in surprise. 'I am Sunnen and he is Okianos, remember. A great big stubborn sea-log of a man, I once called him, and he retorted that I was as rootbound as a honeyapple too long in its pot.'

'And yet you stayed?'

Turai nodded. 'He will always be Okianos and I will always be Sunnen, but love does not care about such things.'

'It is not the same for us,' Chant said thickly.

'It could be.'

She shook her head miserably. 'No. I am a hunter and I must hunt now for that which will aid my people.' She smiled but Turai could see her distress. 'And when I find it, I must return.'

Chapter 51

Chant pulled the blanket close and tried in vain to recapture the warm drowse of sleep. She did not know why she had woken. The bed was soft beneath her and there was no sound to disturb the tur. She tossed to and fro for a while then rose and went to the window. Daygrow was creeping across the land, taking the stars as surely as the ariet a mouse. Her fingers drummed on the window sill and she sighed impatiently. She was no closer to finding the thing she sought than when she had first arrived. She shook her head in frustration and ran her tongue over her dry lips. She was thirsty again. She seemed always to be thirsty in this place. Perhaps it was the salt. Salt in the air, on her skin, crusted on the sea-scraped rocks. So much water, but so much salt.

There was a water pot near the cooking place she recollected, like the Sunnen used. Quietly she went to the main room where Tel slept. Turai was not there, though she had half expected her to be, for she seemed to keep strange hours, waiting for the return of Septin and Dargil from their fishing expeditions. Taking a small drinking cup, she dipped it cautiously into the pot.

'Chant?' She froze. He was awake, and with his wakefulness came all the unresolved difficulties she had managed to push aside during his illness. She brought the cup to her lips, tasting nothing. 'Will you open the shutters?' The window was at the foot of his bed and she went to it, pushing the shutters wide before turning unwillingly to him. He lay there, contemplating her in the first pale light of dawn. 'You look well,' he said after a time.

Chant half smiled. 'You do not.' Her response seemed to break the tension between them and she heard him grunt. She came to the side of the bed then, and settled on its edge. 'Septin said that you were a fool to come through the marshes during the season of fever.'

'Septin is probably right,' Tel muttered, his eyes searching her face. Had she changed while he had slept, or were his memories of her distorted?

'He did not know that I heard him though,' she said with a quick grin. The smile faded and she was serious once more. 'Did you know of it?' she pursued.

'Of the fever? I had known once, though I did not think of it again until I had begun to feel unwell.' Chant continued to look at him, her brows drawn in a slight frown.

She wondered whether he had taken the risk for her sake. 'Have you found anything on the shore?' he asked. He wanted to keep her near as long as possible. Chant shook her head. His hand came to hers. 'You know that there may not be anything?' He saw her uncertainty and then the sudden fire in her eyes.

'Siah would not have sent me if there was nothing here.' Tel sighed, as the old feelings of frustration welled within him. He was as weak as Barebranch sunshine, too weak to argue with her. Groaning slightly, he shut his eyes. He felt her withdraw her hand and gently smooth the hair back from his forehead. 'You need to rest, not to fret about me.'

Tel forced his eyes open. 'I am sick of resting,' he said bitterly, 'whereas I never tire of thinking of you.'

Chant flushed and dropped her eyes. 'Do not speak so.'

'Why?' he asked softly.

'You are Sunnen and I am Sceadu,' she muttered as her heart began to beat uncomfortably.

He reached forward and caught her hand again. 'Turai is Sunnen and Septin is Okianos and their marriage has worked well enough.' Her heart was pounding in her ears so loudly now that she could scarcely think. She jerked her hand free and sprang away from the bed. She still had her task to carry out, to find the thing which would aid the Sceadu. She had no right to put herself before them.

'I am not free!'

His gaze did not waver. 'If you do not return your marriage will be broken. There is nothing there for you Chant, you know there is not. What can unlock the snow and bring water? Not even Siah can do that. But you could live well with me, on this side of the mountain.' He was leaning forward, his eyes shining eagerly, his breath coming in short stabs.

She had forgotten the lie which lay between them, forgotten that she had never undone it. She should speak the truth to him now. 'Tel, I ...' There was a soft click and Turai appeared. Chant faltered and then nodding to her briefly fled from the stay. Turai stared after her in surprise and then brought her eyes back to Tel. He had sagged back on the pillows, but his gaze was still fixed on the door, his face bearing a strange mixture of sadness and anger.

'I am sorry. I seem to have come between you and your Scedu,' she began lightly.

'She is not *my* Scedu,' Tel replied bitterly, 'for she is married.'

Turai's eyebrows shot up. 'She told you this?' she asked in astonishment.

Tel's eyes narrowed. 'Yes. Why?'

Turai shrugged uncomfortably. She felt abruptly that she had stumbled into something she ought not have. 'Did you know that Baktar and Barin's father once took a Scedu wife?' Tel looked at her in amazement, shaking his head dumbly. 'She died in childbirth and he married the woman who birthed them.' Turai pulled up a stool and settled by his side. Tel looked haggard in the early morning light, and in need of more rest, but Baktar was his kin also and he had a right to know. 'Baktar's father spoke much of her, and of the ways of the Scedu, for he lived among them for a time. Perhaps because Baktar was so much older than Barin, this knowing did not pass to your stay,' she added.

'So Baktar told you of their ways?' Tel prompted, his eyes fixed on hers.

Turai nodded. 'He spoke of their patterning much, for it fascinated him. One at the time of the first name, one at the time of the second name ... ' Turai paused, but Tel's eyes were expectant. 'One at the time of marriage.' There was a long silence.

'Perhaps Chant left before the last was added,' he suggested.

'It maybe as you say,' Turai said rising. 'But when Baktar's father took a Scedu wife, she would not leave her place until the patterning was complete. The delay took them deep into the Scedu season of snow, and almost cost them their lives in their journey over the mountains.' Going to the cooking place, she rebuilt the fire, glancing now and then at Tel. He had not spoken, but his face had hardened.

'So, she has lied to me all this time,' he said at last.

Turai shifted a pan of water on to heat and came back to him. 'I might be wrong,' she suggested, not liking to think of the upset she had caused.

'We both know that you are not,' he retorted. He shook his head angrily. 'What a fool I have been.'

'Why?'

'I have believed her! If she has lied about this, then no doubt there are many other

lies between us.' He laughed contemptuously. 'To think, I assumed her reluctance to be with me was out of loyalty to her husband, while really it was because she lacked feeling for me!'

'You are wrong in that.' Tel glared at her resentfully. 'I was here when she first came seeking aid, and I have seen how she has looked upon you since. Whatever the reasons for the lie, they are not as you say.'

Tel snorted. 'Whether that be so or not, I will have no more of her trickery. I have shown her the way here and owe her nothing more!'

'That is what she said.'

Tel stared at her in surprise before the cold mask reassembled itself. 'Then for once she has spoken the truth.'

Chant ran from the stay along the little path which led to the shore. Septin and Dargil were securing their boat to the small wooden bridge, but she did not stop, nor acknowledge them. She sped on past the last of the dunes and into the full clasp of the sea. The air streamed through her hair and the moist sand spurted from her feet, and all around was the deep drumbeat of the waves. Her breath was like fire, her heart like that of the dying beast and yet she went on and on, scouring the tangle of feeling from her mind. At last she threw herself down, her cheek against the myriad grains, her back to the warming sun. When at last her breathing stilled and the ragged thump of her heart steadied, she turned over and sat up.

The water stretched away until it touched the sky, breaking white as Ashali where it met the land. Sometimes great branches of weed were plucked from the ocean's depths and deposited on the sand, sometimes shells. She had come every day and once at night, and always it was the same. There was nothing which flashed within her, answering light to light; no cat's tongue of warning upon her skin. She let the sand slip from her fingers, watching the wind take and scatter it. Something flashed blue and she paused; she had caught a small shell like Septin and Dargil caught fish.

It was the same colour as the azurine the Scedu used for beading. There was only one place in the redlands where they could be found, and there was much labour in making the holes and in threading, and yet all Scedu girls owned one. Except for herself, she corrected. Hers lay mingled in the ashes of the scinton pelt. What a long time

ago it now seemed. A long time ago and a different life. Putting the shell carefully to one side, she sifted the sand about her for more. She hardly noticed the growing height of the sun so absorbed was she, and a small pile had accumulated before a shadow fell across her and she looked up. It was Septin. He lowered his bulk onto the sand beside her with a grunt. She would not have chosen company at this time, least of all Septin's.

'You have run well and far,' he commented after a time.

Chant flushed. She had not known that he had borne witness to her sprint along the sand. 'Once I ran well, now I merely run.'

Septin regarded her through narrowed eyes. 'Sceadu hunters are known for their speed. They are also known for hunting alone,' he added, looking at her sideways.

Chant felt the heat in her face increase. 'I have had to live differently since I crossed the mountains,' she muttered. She scooped up the sand and let the wind take it from her fingers. Surely Turai had told Septin what she had said. Must she say it all again?

'Dargil knows well the ways of the wair and of the dart and silverfin. He knows when they will come, and when they will not. I know the seas. We fish in company not because we are brothers but because together we are stronger than one.'

'It is not the same in hunting,' Chant returned shortly.

'Perhaps not on your side of the mountain,' Septin replied simply. He got to his feet, moving with surprising agility for such a heavy man. 'Beyond the headland is the place of the Vulturis. It is best not to go that way, for they have a taste for pretty things.' He turned away and Chant watched him make his way steadily back along the sand.

Chapter 52

Tel was sleeping again when Chant returned to the stay. The westering sun bathed the walls in a warm glow and the rich aroma of soup filled the air. Turai was already filling a bowl for her and she settled herself at the older woman's side, laying the shells carefully on the floor beside her. 'You do not eat enough,' Turai said reprovngly, eyeing the sharp bones of her face and wrists.

'When there is food we eat, when there is not, we don't,' Chant commented, mimicking the oft repeated phrase from the Great Turrel.

'The Sceadu lack food?' Turai questioned, sensing the nature of her reply.

Chant swallowed down the last of the soup. 'There is less since the rains failed, but we have enough.' Her eyes flashed to Turai and the older woman saw the resentment in them. 'The Sceadu have hunters, and when the beast is Willing we eat well,' she added.

There was a short uncomfortable silence and Turai glanced at the small pile of shells at Chant's feet. 'You have done well to find so many pinaret.' Chant smiled delightedly, scooping them up and holding them to the light so that they flashed iridescent blue-green. Turai watched the girl's enjoyment, reminded keenly of herself at the same age. She remembered the strangeness of the stone stay, of the vast, sprawling ocean and windswept plains, of the intense painful nature of her love for Septin.

'I will give them to Tel when he wakes,' Chant was saying, her face lit with joyful anticipation. Turai smiled in turn, remembering the little gifts she had once given Septin. She glanced across to Tel and her smile faded. He was angry with the girl's deception, but surely when he woke he would see what was obvious even to Septin? Chant felt the soup warm and comfort her. It was rich and tasty but she had eaten nothing else in her time in the tur. She wondered greatly at the manner of the beasts which might live in the Okianos lands. 'Do the Okianos hunt?' she asked after a while.

Turai shook her head. 'The Okianos are fisher people, and the sea gives us most of what we want. There is greenfood too, and white root with which we may make a kind of berrem, although Tel would not agree that it is so,' she added wryly.

'You do not hunt the small beasts which dwell in the grasslands?' Chant pursued.

'The sivet? I wish we did, for their meat is very sweet and a welcome change from fish. Sometimes, at the Feast of the Run we take them, but not often. The Okianos

prefer to hunt the waters, not the land.' There was a rustle as Tel stirred and both women turned. Chant scooped up the shells and went to him. Turai shifted the soup once more to the coals and began to stir it slowly.

Tel came fully awake and Chant waited until his eyes had settled on her. Then smiling, she showed him the shells. 'Look what I have found,' she said excitedly, moving her hand so that the last rays of the westering sun caught them, making them fire blue and green. She glanced up at him. His face had a strange set quality, and his eyes were cold.

'They are very pretty,' he said tonelessly.

Chant stared at him, not understanding the change. Perhaps he was still drowsed with sleep. 'They are for you,' she said gently, offering them to him.

He remained staring at her coldly. 'They are a woman's trinkets. Perhaps it is best that you give them to Tanalan when you again see her.' Chant continued to look at him fixedly, struggling to understand this new twist. He held her gaze and the hardness of his face did not alter. Then, slowly and deliberately, he turned away so that his eyes were directed to the wall. Turai heard Tel's words and saw him turn, but she could not see Chant's face. She brought her lips together in a thin line and tightened her grip on the ladle. It was something the two must sort out among themselves, she reminded herself, forcing herself to remain silent.

Chant felt as though he had struck her, although no blow had landed. She scooped up the shells from the bed and came back to the cooking place. Turai was still there, her eyes kindly in the dimming light of the tur. For a moment Chant stood staring down into the bright glow of the fire. Then tilting her hand, she emptied the shells into its depths.

Turai started and her heart went out to the girl. 'Chant ...' she began, but the girl shook her head slightly, turning from her and going with quiet steps to her room. Turai stared after her disappearing back and then brought her eyes angrily to Tel. She filled the bowl and going to him, waited until he had pulled himself upright. His face had the same set expression as Chant's, but while her eyes held anguish, his held the sneer she remembered well from his last visit. 'That was a cruel thing to do,' she commented, handing him the bowl. He said nothing but the hardness of his face deepened. She waited until he had begun to eat and then she left him, stepping out into the cooling air of dusk.

She needed some sea air to blow away her bubbling anger. They were not her concern, she repeated to herself as she made her way along the beach path, and yet what was happening was very hard to bear.

Chant stood staring at the stone walls of her room. For a long moment she could neither move nor think. It seemed almost that she could not breathe. Everything which connected her to the tur, to those within it, seemed to have been abruptly torn away. It was wrong, all wrong, and she was wrong. She forced the air into her lungs and struggled to feel the pulse of it against her skin. Memories of her time among the Scedu began passing through her mind, like wind through a hollow reed, making no music. The memories were as empty as she was. Ket and Sced and Siah. They had all been right, and she wrong. And now Tel. Why could she not think as these others, be as these others, know as these others!

Once all things had come to her; in the deep of redland and whiteland she could hear the earth breathe, read the air, know the heartbeat of the beast. She knew the beast but she knew nothing of people. Her quiver and bow were propped in the corner, long unused. She ran her hand over them lightly. How familiar they were and how proud she had been to use her first full-sized bow, to hunt for ariet feathers among the stands of ashin and fyr to fashion her arrows. She yearned to be like that again, to keep company only with the beast she followed. She paused. Turai had shown her much kindness and Turai had need of meat. She slipped the quiver and bow onto her back. The window was small, but not so small that she could not ease herself out of it. Landing soundlessly, she made her way round the tur, careful to avoid the window she knew belonged to the cooking place. It was almost dark, a good time to leave. Adjusting her stride to the smooth, grass-tufted land, she set off up the Sunwash.

Tel finished the soup and put the bowl to one side. The stay was very quiet without either Chant or Turai. Turai was upset with him he knew, but it was better this way. His feelings for Chant would pass, in the same way as the fever. He must have lost his wits to have contemplated marriage with her, to have considered it possible that they live together. The lie had saved both of them. Her place was with her people as she had said, and his was back in his stay, supervising the gardens, perhaps married to Nasala. It was better so, he repeated.

Once she realised that her task was impossible, as she must soon do, she would go back. And once he had regained his strength, he would return also. Either way, they would not travel together. He had been away far too long as it was, had not acted as he ought, he conceded. Still, it was part of his role to keep contact with his kin, even those who lived in such a wild and unruly fashion as the Okianos. In some ways they were as lacking as the Sceadu, depending on the vagaries of the ocean currents to bring them their meals. No, he had yet to see anything to convince him that the Sunnen way was not the better.

Throwing off the blanket, he lowered his legs carefully to the floor and stood up. For a moment the room swayed and then righted itself. Cautiously, using only small steps, he went to the fire and settled gratefully onto a stool. His legs had carried him well, but he had felt as though his head had gone in another direction. His manner of walking reminded him of how Chant had been when she had first left her bed in the stay. He shook his head irritably, dismissing her from his mind.

The fire had all but died, but the coals still gave off a welcoming heat. He let his eyes wander through the pulsing reds and golds. To one side, there was a small flash of blue. His eyes were drawn to it, and he gazed at it, vaguely wondering how blue came to be among the colours of fire. It was a shell. His heart stilled and his eyes searched the ashes. There were others there, most badly charred, their brightness extinguished for ever. He remembered her pleasure in them, in offering them to him; and now she had burned them. He half shrugged but the importance of what she had done reverberated within him.

It was better so, he told himself, but the assertion rang hollow. Turai had called him cruel, and perhaps he had been. After all, though there could be no love between them, there should at least be a basic politeness. It would make the time they must spend together in the stay a little more bearable. He eyes searched out the door which led to her room, but his legs were too weak to follow. There would be plenty of time tomorrow to make amends, he considered.

He did not wake until the sun was well risen. The small walk to the cooking place had exhausted him, and he had slept longer than he intended. He craned his neck, searching the stay with his eyes. Turai was in her usual place near the fire, but there was no sign of

Chant. He came cautiously to the cooking place and Turai watched his progress, smiling encouragingly. She was baking the spongy pats of whiteroot the Okianos called berrem. She handed him a freshly toasted one and he juggled its hotness while taking small bites. They had no flavour he had ever been able to identify, but were slightly more appealing if eaten hot. 'Is Chant at the shore?' he questioned, when he had choked down the last mouthful.

'I do not know. I have not see her since the last evening,' Turai replied, busy with the turning of them. Tel gazed about restlessly then rose and wandered about the room. Sometimes he peered out of the window, but more often his eyes turned to the door which led to her room. Turai smiled slightly to herself but said nothing. It was nearing the mid point of the day before the door opened and Septin and Dargil came in. Turai saw Tel's expectant glance turn to one of disappointment. She was glad to see Septin, but she was becoming increasingly concerned that Chant had yet to eat. Septin nodded to Tel and drawing the large heavy chopping block onto his knees, started to clean his catch. Dargil began tucking into the berrem with an appetite which amazed Tel.

'Did you fish the sea or the river?' Turai questioned, setting some water to heat.

'River,' Dargil mumbled, his cheeks bulging with berrem.

'I do not suppose you have seen Chant this day?' Turai asked. Septin shook his head, sweeping the scales into a wooden bucket by his side.

'We saw her last night, though,' Dargil interposed helpfully, reaching for more berrem.

'Where?' Tel interjected, leaving his bed and coming to the Okianos' side.

'High on the Sunwash, just before the turn.'

'Near the mid point of the night,' Turai murmured, 'and yet she has not returned.'

'She is going home,' Tel said heavily, feeling a sudden and acute sense of loss.

'I think not,' Septin said, his knife flashing through the white flesh of the fish. Tel turned to him hopefully but he said nothing more, his attention taken with his task.

'Why do you think not?' Turai demanded in irritation.

'She carried no pack, just her arrows and bow.' Septin emptied the fish into the heated water and brushed some errant scales into the bucket of cleanings.

'She goes hunting,' Turai said softly, her eyes flicking to Tel. Her cousin's brows were drawn low, his eyes flashing angrily.

'She has no right to go alone. It is not safe.'

'Chant is no concern of yours, as you have said,' Turai reminded him tartly. He glared at her before dropping his eyes, aware that Septin's shrewd glance was now moving between the two of them.

'She is strong that one,' Dargil observed, 'she will come to no harm.'

'How can you say that?' Tel expostulated. 'Do you know every beast which roams these parts? Do you know the intent of the peoples who live to the south? What if she was to stumble and fall into the water? Are you aware that she cannot swim? How can you be so sure that she will be safe?'

Dargil stared at him, a look of bemused surprise suffusing his face, but it was Septin who spoke. 'To live in absolute safety is no life at all.' Tel gaped at him. What The Mountain was his kin's husband mumbling about now? The older man's small eyes were fixed upon him and Tel had an uncomfortable feeling that his words implied far more than he had said.

'To take unnecessary risks is the height of foolishness,' he retorted.

Septin sat in silence so long that Tel thought that he would not reply. 'Who is to judge what is unnecessary? The act of living itself is a risk. You risked your life by coming through the marshes in the season of fever. The Scedu risked hers in crossing the mountains and coming west. The woman who loves a man and carries his child risks herself in the birthing. The man who chooses to give his heart to a woman must risk the losing of it. Which of these would you judge to be unnecessary Tel?'

'It is unnecessary for her to hunt when there is food in the stay,' Tel returned, ignoring the import of his words.

'Perhaps she does not hunt food,' Septin replied equably.

'What else is there to hunt?'

'Ah,' Septin sighed, easing his feet toward the fire. 'There are many things to hunt, and most of them cannot be seen.'

Tel snorted in disgust. 'You speak in riddles.'

Septin smiled good naturedly although his eyes retained their sharp glint. 'Only to those who will not hear,' he said.

Chapter 53

Chant lay watching the clear blue above the forest of golden grassheads. A gentle breeze stirred and they swayed, releasing sweet pollens. She felt happy here, curled snug as a berian in a Snowcome den. She had often lain thus in the Scedu lands, but then her bed had been needles of fyr, and her view that of ashin and fyr crowns. There had been little warmth either. Now she flexed her muscles luxuriously under the sun's gentle touch. A whirring creature buzzed near and she flicked it away with her hand. Her skin was as golden as the grass, though not as dark as Tel's. The thought of Tel brought her the same pain Sced once had. She sat up, the enjoyment of the moment gone. Damn Tel, damn them both. She was a hunter, and hunters lived alone. She had no need of either of them, nor of any other man whose shadow might darken her path.

She stared down at the Sunwash, trying to bring her seething thoughts to order. The beast would not come to an angry hunter. Angry and hungry, she added. It had taken her more than the first night to reach this place, and she had used the daygrow to watch, and the time since. But nothing had come to drink. It was the same place she had first seen the beasts, *sivets* Turai had called them; the place she had left Tel to seek help from the Okianos. Tel ... She blocked the thought, forcing her attention to the pattern of tracks on the opposite bank. It was hard to see from where she lay whether they were fresh or those she had looked on earlier, and she could see no scatter at all. Perhaps they only watered in this place occasionally. There were fewer tracks on her side of the river, so their visitations here might be even less frequent. She could well be wasting her time. How much longer would she wait? One night out, at least another back; she calculated quickly. She could perhaps wait another day. Any longer and she would weaken from lack of food and even if a beast came, she would lack the strength to carry it back. And she would not waste the Gift.

Even if nothing came, it was pleasant here. She was tired of the ever-moving sea, of its insistent rumbling voice and shifting sands. Here the grasses were rooted to the earth, and the air smelt of the green and growing, not of salt. And she was alone, without prying eyes upon her. The sun began its downward slide and Astrin appeared, pure and white against the fading wash of blue. Chant shivered slightly, the dampening air moving with chill fingers through her light clothing. The breeze turned and strengthened and she

drew her bow taut. The thick curtain of grass on the far bank parted and she watched the first of them step through, pause and begin to drink. They were as she remembered, small and almost the same colour as the grasses. The group was smaller than last time though, with fewer young among them. They crowded the Sunwash's edge and then as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone.

Chant remained motionless. If they dwelt on her side of the water they must come soon. The darkness deepened and more stars appeared. A bat clicked away to the east and the wind slowly died. Chant felt the dull drag of disappointment begin to close over her. It seemed that she would be returning empty-handed after all. Below her the Sunwash moved on, darker than the night, and then, on the very edge of its curve, a shadow moved. Chant tensed. It was a sivet, but where had it come from? Certainly not from the grasslands stretching away on either side, as those others had. She strained into the gloom. There was but one. Chant frowned. She had not seen them solitary before. Was it old and sickening, or perhaps a youngster separated from its mother? She would not take a young one, nor one dying.

She hesitated, watching it move along the water's edge. It cropped at the lush plants as it went, its eyes catching and holding the star shine. Chant felt the prickle along her skin, and the quickening of her blood, so that after a time, her heart beat in rhythm with the beast's. The air was full of its scent and the odour of death. It came level with her and raising its head, waited. Chant loosed the arrow, felt the heavy thud of metal against flesh, saw the beast spring away into the darkness. She stared at the empty space in disbelief. The beast had been Willing and the arrow true, and yet it was nowhere to be seen. She forced herself to still and to think of what she had seen; the direction of its leap, the narrowing of the river's edge. Then she made her way along the darker shadow under the Sunwash's bank.

The starshine did not reach here nor the carry of the wind. If she had shot poorly, the beast might be far from this place already, might suffer and die deep within the grasses. She did not like to think of it happening. An ill-timed shot from a poor hunter wasted the Gift as surely as a beast abandoned. She could see and hear nothing. Behind her, She started Her long climb into the sky, part formed, Her light lacking the strength to illuminate the way ahead. Chant stood in the shadows, not knowing which way to turn. An image of Tel came to her mind, and with it, a feeling of intense loneliness. She

raised her face, but the air told her nothing and her skin was blind. For a long moment she was held thus, then she began to grope her way forward, feeling that any movement was better than none. She had gone perhaps ten paces before the strange numbness began to wear off. Faint in the darkness, above the mutter of the Sunwash, she heard a soft panting. She turned sharply, readying her knife. She saw the haft of the arrow first, glowing palely in the starshine, a little high.

She knelt by the beast, placing her hand on its neck. Even as she did so, it leapt convulsively, its small hardened hoofs catching her face. She reeled backwards, bringing her hands to her eye, terrified that it had blinded her. For a long moment she lay gasping, waiting for the sear to subside, then gingerly, she peered up at the sky. The starlight was blurred, but she hoped with all her heart that it was because the eye wept so. She struggled to the Sunwash and scooped the chill water over the injury; already the eye was beginning to close. The silver half circle of She floated on the water and Chant turned away angrily. Her swiftness had been taken; was it not enough?

The beast was dead. She could see it was so even with her one functioning eye. She took no pleasure in the fact though. She had not hunted well; the arrow had not been true and she had been careless in her approach to the wounded beast. She was fortunate to have escaped serious injury. She extricated the arrow and removed the entrails, laying them out as was customary. Her face throbbed and burned and her usual feeling of elation in this, the last of the hunter's task, was lacking. Finally, she washed the blood from her knife and hands, and lifting the sivet over her shoulder, set off.

She went steadily, pausing only to drink from the river. The sivet was smaller than a scinton, but after a time it seemed to weigh heavier. Her face felt tight and puffy and her eye was now completely closed, so that she must carry her head at a strange angle, turning completely if she wanted to see the land to the north. She was also very hungry. In many ways she dreaded returning to the Okianos tur. Tel was there and the vast, empty ocean, and somewhere, the thing which might bring water to the Sceadu. Her wounded ankle twisted beneath her and she almost fell. She was so tired. Tired of carrying the beast, of carrying a task which was too great for her, tired of hunting alone.

Chant slumped down at the edge of the water. Daygrow was not far off, the darkness of the air giving way to a wash of silver and grey. She should bath her face, she should drink, she should take up the burden and go on her way. In the dying moments of

night, nothing stirred. No cry of bird, no hum of flying creatures, no child's voice. Chant laid her head on her knees and brought her arms round herself, and in the far west the moon slipped beneath the world's watery edge.

Tel forced himself to walk around the inside of the stay one more time. His legs trembled and he cursed the weakness which beset him. Turai would rise soon and Septin and Dargil return from their fishing. The stay would be filled with people then, with the exchange of news of their doings, with the easy companionship of those who lived and worked together. It had been so in the last night, and the night before. He had left his bed and sat with them. Turai, Septin and Dargil, but not Chant. He had never felt so bereft in all his life. The first night of having to endure Septin's thinly veiled criticisms was hard enough, but the last night had been worse. She should have returned. He knew she had taken no food with her, and he knew there was none where she had gone. She should have returned!

He came to the window and peered dully out. In the east, the sky was already streaked with a soft grey. Where The Mountain was she! It was not that he had any love for her, he assured himself, but rather that he owed her protection in the same way as he had owed Tanalan protection and must still care for Inkala. After all, she was a woman and far from her kin. His mind moved over her probable route. She was going hunting but there was little to hunt. Turai had told him that she would be safe from larger beasts because few roamed the grasslands near the sea. There were however small beasts called sivets just west of the marshlands and sometimes these were hunted by saman dogs which had long ago turned wild. She would not have gone so far though. He moved from the window and forced his legs to carry him round the outer edge of the room once more, before sagging onto a stool. He must soon make the journey home, and he could barely manage to move from one end of the stay to the next!

The door opened and he spun round. It was Turai, still securing the end of her braid. Her hair was liberally sprinkled with grey, and she wore it as Sunnen women did, in single plait. Not like Chant. He grimaced, and his feelings of frustration grew.

Turai eyed him as she began to rebuild the fire. He looked better each day, although his brows were now drawn low, and his eyes moved restlessly between the window and the door. 'Are you well?' she asked politely. Tel nodded but he did not

smile. Turai opened the water pot and began to fill the pan.

'Has Chant returned?' he asked after a time.

Turai set the pan on the coals and straightened. 'I do not know. Why do you not see if she is in her room?' Tel gazed at her, and she saw his indecision. Finally he rose and made his way carefully to the door which led to the sleeping rooms. Opening it gently, he stepped through. The bed was empty; it had not been slept in. He went to it and sat down, cursing again the trembling of his muscles. He rested for a time, waiting for his strength to build. Her pack was propped against one wall, the small comb she used lay on the simple wooden chest. On an impulse, he reached down and brought the blanket to his face. It held the faintest scent of her.

It was soft against his skin and he was reminded of the way her hair had sometimes brushed his arm. He groaned; how had he come to be like this? Life had once been so simple, so ordered and known. If only he had not become ill, if only this damned weakness would leave his limbs, he could be far from here. Once he was back in his stay, his life could return to the way it had been before. Rising wearily, he went slowly back to the cooking place. Septin and Dargil were there now, and a happy hum of talk filled the air. Dargil was engrossed in a comical tale of how Septin had all but tipped the boat up, and the older man was intent on his first bowl of soup.

Chant would not be eating. She had not eaten for two nights now. How could she bear it? He had need of food at least once a day, and when he was in his stay he ate more often. There was always food there; either berrem, or smoked fish, or fruit, or greenfood from the gardens. The Sunnen were not thin as Chant was, even his mother who was now old, had still the rounded cheeks of youth. How hard and angular Chant had once seemed to him. She had none of the soft womanliness of Tanalan. He had long thought such hardness reflected her determination and intent, and perhaps it did, but it also reflected hunger. He wondered for the first time what she had thought of the well fed Sunnen, and more particularly of him. She had long challenged him; was it because she thought of him as less than a man, lacking the honed intent of the hunting Scedu men? What did any of it matter anyway? He had no interest in her thoughts, and no longer any trust in her.

Dargil came to the end of his story and throwing his head back, laughed heartily. Turai joined him and even Septin grunted his enjoyment. Tel could not bring himself

even to smile though. There was a leaden hand over his heart bringing with it feelings of helplessness and despair. Rising wordlessly he took himself back to his bed and lay down once more. Outside the window, the sky was bathed in the full golden light of day.

Chapter 54

Chant came the last of the way to the place of the Okianos. The sun was high overhead, setting her brow on fire and sending the rivulets of sweat down her back. The weight of the beast dragged at her and it was all that she could do to keep going. She had never travelled so poorly. In fact, the whole hunt had been ill-conceived, the journey too long, her judgement lacking. She came across the open space between the smokestay and Turai's door and stopped. It was as if her feet refused to go any further. Should she leave the beast outside or take it in? Her mind was sluggishly considering this problem when the door opened and Septin stood there.

For a moment they contemplated each other and then he eased the beast from her shoulder. 'That is a nasty bruise,' he said shortly, his small eyes fixed on her face. Chant had to turn her head slightly to meet his gaze. She nodded, following him inside. Only Tel was there, and she turned from him to the fire. Septin laid the sivet down and busied himself filling a bowl of soup for her. He passed it to her silently and watched her eat. When she had finished he refilled it and she took it thankfully. Then he rose and went through into the sleeping rooms. Chant ate the second bowl more slowly, sitting with her eyes shut, savouring its flavour.

It felt good to have food in her stomach, to no longer carry the beast, to rest. The soup sent a wave of drowsiness through her and for a moment her thoughts drifted. There was a slight movement and she dragged her eyes open, expecting that Septin had returned. It was Tel. Chant felt the wave of well-being evaporate. She wanted sleep now, not his antagonism. She bowed her head, so that her hair fell forward, hiding her face. He had long thought her ugly, she must appear doubly so to him now.

Tel stared at her, his thoughts seething within him. One side of her face was swollen, her cheek and eye blackened. She sat with her other eye closed, her hands clasped around the bowl, and it almost seemed to him that she slept. She was exhausted, he could see so from her face, and her dress was stained with blood from the beast she had carried. As he stared, she lowered her head so that her hair formed a curtain around her. He understood the gesture, for she had used it before to shelter from him. He did not know what to say. Half of him wanted to shout at her, the other half to hold her.

The door opened and Septin returned carrying a small pot of paste. He settled on

his stool and took out the thick cloth stopper. 'Let me have a look at that bruise,' he said firmly. Obediently Chant raised her face and taking her chin, Septin tilted it to the light. Tel watched his eyes narrow and him reach for the paste. He began smoothing it on, his massive hands dark against the whiteness of her skin. He was remarkably gentle for such a strong man. 'How did you manage to do this to yourself?' he asked as he worked the paste carefully round her eye.

'By hunting badly.'

Septin replugged the paste and sat surveying her stolidly. 'Does your head ache?' Tel saw Chant nod imperceptibly. 'Is the other eye blurring?' Chant shook her head. Septin peered at her a moment longer before releasing her chin. 'When you have eaten, you are to go and rest, and I do not want to see you on the beach before the next dawning.' Chant nodded taking the third bowl of soup he gave her. Tel watched him put the paste to one side and bring the big wooden chopping board to his lap. He hauled the beast onto it then and began to ready it for cooking. He worked quickly and methodically, his attention now solely on his task.

Tel looked on enviously. How surely Septin had dealt with her. And she had accepted his words. How different it was with him. Chant finished the soup and looked up. Tel's eyes were hard upon her as she had known they were, and yet he had not spoken. She had been waiting for his usual contemptuous outburst since she had returned, but it had not come. Perhaps it was the presence of Septin which kept him silent. She stood and he stood also, blocking her way. She raised her eyes then, and her gaze was so potent it was as if she had called his name. Then brushing past him she moved to her room. Tel watched her go, the turmoil within holding him still. The rhythmic chopping of Septin's knife gradually seeped into his consciousness and he brought his eyes to the older man. Septin returned his glance impassively. Tel remained fixed, unable to call up what had gone before or predict what might come.

He had never felt so before, and the sensation alarmed him. His feet carried him to the door and he stepped out into the sunshine. The noise of the ocean was abruptly, terrifyingly loud. He had come here to bring Chant to the vast ever moving sea, yet he had still to look upon it. Ignoring the weakness of his muscles, he set off towards the sandhills.

Septin paused at his work and sat considering the beast. It was large enough to be shared among several of the stays. And it was timely that Chant had killed now. The silverfin were coming to an end and the run of the wair yet to begin. He would call his kin together, to share their food and their small doings, to give thanks for what had gone before and welcome what might come. He cleaned the knife and rinsed his hands in the water bucket before making his way towards his sleeping room. Chant's room was quiet: it seemed that she had taken his advice and gone to her bed. He washed his hands and face in the large bowl of water set there, then stretched himself out on the bed. He had been on the sea most of the night and was weary. He lay quietly, his mind moving between the Scedu and the Sunnen within his stay.

Baktar's father had loved one such as she, had brought her to this very place, and had she not died in birthing, he might now have Scedu blood in his own veins. She had left her people, as Chant had, to live among strangers. Turai too had left all that was known to her to be with him. He smiled fondly. She was not like the other Sunnen he had met, and certainly not like Tel. He scowled, thinking of what Turai had told him.

It was well for the Scedu that Tel had turned from her, for she had need of a stronger man than him, he concluded contemptuously. Still, none of it was simple or easy. The misery that beset both of them was plain to him, and he had felt sorrow for Tel earlier, when the Scedu had returned, her face bruised and swollen. He had watched him torn between what his heart told him to do and what his head forbade, and in the end he had followed his head. It had not made him happy though. Septin eased his back, feeling the first gentle fingers of sleep steal over him. He must ask Turai to bake extra berrem, and he must prepare the stay. He was looking forward to the gathering.

Tel lay propped on the warm, drifting sand. He had forgotten the enormity of the water and the way the waves broke, slashing the intense blueness with white. He had forgotten its saltiness, the throb of its voice, the silver of the gulls as they rode the air above it. What must Chant have thought when first she had seen it? He regretted very much that he had not been there with her. His eyes scanned along the sweep of sand to the dark, jutting headlands and back again. There was nothing here which could help her. He wondered if she realised that yet. Probably, for she was no fool. And yet, she would keep searching because a foreteller had instructed her to.

Tel shook his head in disbelief. How could she continue in a quest she knew to be hopeless? Turai had told him that she had spent all her time on the shore ... when she was not in the stay looking at him. Tel cut off the thought and glared across the ocean. And she had told him of how Chant had threatened Septin as he had forced the kina into him. Tel smiled in spite of himself. He could well imagine Septin's reaction. Surely these things meant that she had some feeling for him? Picking up a shell, he tossed it violently at a hovering gull. What did it matter anyway? He had made his decision! Made it but could not live with it, a small voice whispered.

Why had she lied to him? Her deceit burned at him, and always his thoughts came back to it. Did she think he might force himself on her during their travel together? Was that why she slept with her hand on the bow? He thought not. She had never shown fear of him, even when in the trap. Why then? Was it a device to keep him from her? And yet it had not prevented him asking her to stay with him on this side of the mountain, nor he recollected, her gentling towards him. He stilled. Was it perhaps part of an elaborate mask she had constructed to protect her own feelings?

He thought of when she had given him the shells. Her face had been truly open to him for the first time, but he had been angry, shunning her and the gift. And then she had burnt them. She had burnt them. The memory was graven in his mind. There was something final about the gesture. If only he could cut himself loose as easily and cleanly as she had! She had gone back to her hunting, had taken up her old ways as though their time together had never been. And had returned injured. His stomach churned, remembering how the bruising on her face had mingled with the patterning.

The patterning; two lines instead of three. She had once taunted him about his blindness, his lack of knowing of the naming line and the marriage line, and how right she had been. She had lied and he had not seen it, though the evidence of it had been stark before him. Two lines instead of three: even Turai had seen it. Why had she lied? The question tormented him. If nothing else, he must know that. Rising wearily, he made his way slowly back to the stay.

Chapter 55

Septin's kin began to arrive as the day cooled to evening. They were short like him, with the same powerful build and lined faces. Septin brought each to Tel and Chant, and a courteous exchange of names took place. There was the family of the wife of Baktar, and the cousins of this group. Then there was the family of Baktar's long dead uncle. There were even those whose blood was closer to Sunnen than Okianos, those whose kin linked to Barin, rather than to Baktar. Of these Tel tried to keep special note, for it would not be fitting as the head of his stay to confuse them, but he found the task daunting. He began to see also, how it must have been for Chant, firstly among the Sunnen and then the Meduin, for the Scedu made no distinction between people, knowing all as blood kin.

At last the final introductions were complete and Tel breathed a sigh of relief. Now perhaps he could find a quiet place to speak with Chant. But Septin was still beside him, directing him to a space on the woven mats where many of the older men were sitting, and he could see that Turai had taken Chant with her to where the women gathered. Chant settled uncomfortably between the two younger girls whose names she had already forgotten. They smiled cheerfully at her and then brought their attention back to the fire and its bubbling meat. Septin had dragged out the woven mats and stools and had found large pieces of driftwood, and people were now perched on these in a loose circle round the cookingplace. Chant's mouth watered at the smell of the roasting meat. The Okianos diet was certainly rich enough, but varied little. Always the thick fish and greenfood soup, and the heavy moist errem.

The wave of happy chatter grew around her and she watched the movement of Okianos across the open cookingplace. After a time she noticed that the younger Okianos girls with whom she sat, were intent on the group of young men who sat almost opposite, divided by the leaping flames of the fire. There was much nudging, and whispering and giggling. Chant smiled to herself, reminded of the times when the Turrels mixed. The best of these gatherings had been at the ending of Snowcome, when the barriers of Tissan Turrel and Creshan Turrel were dissolved. Then the youngsters of both came together away from the watchful eyes of Aunts or Uncles.

At Tissan it had been Ashin who had come to her side, among the hooting and

derision of the other boys. And he had come to her at the time of Creshan too, when they had both left the games of boys and girls behind. No one had come to Flint, for she was often absent, lying ill within the Great Turrel, under the all-seeing eyes of the Old Siah. And then, at the ending of Creshan, she had gone on hunt, and when she had returned, Ashin was Scead and Flint was Siah, and they had married.

For a moment the happy noise ebbed away, and the warmth of the air seemed fade. She was back in the chill of the Scedu lands, standing outside the tur which had been Talith's, staring at the patterning of marriage and manhood on Scead's face. She felt the cold wash of pain even now. Her eyes searched out Tel on the other side of the circle. His path was set. He would leave soon and return to his tur, caring for those there and for the gardens. She envied him his sureness, yet it was not a life she could follow. The corrals separated each tur from the next, the trees grew in rows, not as seedfall dictated, even the rivers were not free to go as they would. She grimaced. How proud he was of his stone streams, of the way he took the water and brought it to where the Sunnen dwelt. How proud he was of bringing the water.

Chant stared at him blindly. The Okianos continued to move around her, but they were blurred, as if moving beneath tarn ice. She found that she had risen and was pushing her way through the throng, pushing her way towards the solitude of the beach. She must have a place and time to think. It could not be, it simply could not be! The fragments of her mind were as scattered as the sand beneath her feet. Siah had said that she would find the thing on the beach, and yet she had met Tel a long time before. It could not be him. She came round the last of the sandhills to the dark, restless water. The waves surged up the shore, sucked back and surged again. Their rhythm beat against her, insistent and unending. She stood staring at them, noting vaguely the water was out, much of the sand lying empty. But even such larger ebbs and flows were regular, not like the Snowmelt rains.

It was Tel. She knew it, as surely as she knew the print of the hunting scintion. How could she have been so blind? How could she have carried the knowledge of his skill so long and so far and yet have no understanding of it? She felt like laughing and weeping. Siah had been right; Siah had been right in everything.

'Why have you left the gathering?' She spun around. Tel stood there, his voice heavy with accusation. 'You went from the Sunnen Wait, you disrupted the marriage of

Tanalan. And now you have insulted your hosts here. Do not the Scedu practise courtesy?' Chant swallowed several times, unable to bring her mind to framing a response. His face was in shadow for She had yet to rise. Chant had little doubt of his expression though. 'You are skilled at having things your own way, are you not?' His tone was scathing, more so than she had heard it before. She realised vaguely that he was upset, but the import of her discovery filled her, excluding all else. He stepped closer, but still she could not see his face. 'If it does not suit you to stay, you do not. If it does not suit you to tell the truth, you do not.'

Chant roused at last. 'What are you saying?'

'I am saying that you are a liar.'

Chant's heart faltered. He knew about the marriage line, but how? 'I have lied no more than you,' she said softly. He was to her in a stride, his hands gripping her shoulders. She did not resist him and her calmness surprised her. Perhaps because she had at last found what she sought, all else had ceased to be of consequence.

'That itself is a lie,' he spat furiously.

Chant felt the tears hot in her eyes. 'You have said that you wanted friendship between us, that you wanted me to stay with you.' She saw him falter, and his anger mix with pain. Then his face hardened once more.

'You have destroyed anything which might have been between us with your deceit.' There was a faint light now; perhaps She was at last rising. The strange passivity which had beset her dissipated abruptly and she wrenched herself free.

'I have destroyed nothing! It is your fear which has destroyed it. You cannot give love, for love cannot be controlled like your neat gardens or cursed stone streams. Love is free, and freedom is dangerous.' She was crying now, her breath coming in great ragged sobs. 'Go back to your stay Tel, go back to the safety of your corral.' His breath was as harsh as her own and for a moment she thought that he would strike her. Instead he turned away and strode back toward the stay. 'Tel ...' the word died on her lips, as soft as the hiss of the waves. She stood staring after him, only gradually becoming aware of the fine shift of her skin. Numbly she turned toward the great surging beast. It had taken She and scattered Her fiery flesh over the water. Chant gazed at it blankly. The fragments of light shifted and blurred, tearing apart then drawing together again. At times it seemed almost that they formed a path over the water. Chant was drawn to it, to

its shimmer and shift, at once substantial and insubstantial. As if in a dream, she moved off up the sand.

Within the darkness loomed a greater darkness, vast and towering. She came to a ragged stop and stared up at it in bewilderment. It was the headland, but she had no memory of coming so far. Septin's warning penetrated her mind and she turned back towards the Okianos. But there was something there on the sand behind her. For a moment she thought Tel had followed her, but then she saw the blade of the spear glimmering in Her light. It was not Tel, nor was it an Okianos, though he was about the same height. She could see the glitter of his eyes and the way he planted his feet. The spear was pointed at her heart. 'Okianos,' she said carefully, gesturing to herself. He said nothing but raised the spear. She saw the muscles of his arm tense. Was he going to kill her? She held herself still but her mind raced. She had left her weapons in the stay; she was not even carrying her knife.

'Emar!' Chant stared at him uncomprehendingly and her bewilderment seemed to anger him. 'Emar!' he repeated more harshly, flicking his head in the direction of the headland.

'Okianos,' Chant repeated softly, edging cautiously to one side. He drew his throwing arm back. In a moment she would be dead. Her skin flamed then flashed cold. Was this the way of the Willing beast? Must she at last atone for her breaking of Talabraith? He was glaring at her and she could smell his anger and his fear. Abruptly she dropped her head so that her eyes no longer challenged him, and forced the stiffness from her shoulders. She must be as the cub before the he-berian, must give way before him and bide her time.

He shoved her roughly round. 'Emar tamou,' he ordered, though this time his voice was slightly less strident. Slowly she moved off towards the headland.

Chapter 56

Tel came abruptly, sickeningly awake. For a moment he lay still, his mind grappling with the dream's intent. He had not dreamed in this way for many days, certainly not since he had left the Stead, and yet the dream was the same. What did it mean? The last remnants of it drifted away and the scene from the last night reassembled itself. Had Chant returned? He felt a surge of the old anger, but his anxiety was stronger. He thrust open the door to her room, prepared if necessary to continue their argument. The room was empty, the bed untouched, her pack and weapons propped in the corner. Where in Anarkin's name was she? She was not his concern, he asserted, but he no longer believed it. He wanted her safe. He was weary of argument, he wanted the closeness they had enjoyed briefly before he had discovered that cursed lie.

He stepped out into the bright morning air and turned toward the shore. He saw where they had argued and where her prints went toward the sea. He went that way also, glancing often at the sand at his feet. The waves were high, but he could still see where she had gone, the print of the wounded foot lighter than the other. They led toward the headland. A prickle of apprehension moved along his spine and he quickened his pace. He had not thought to warn her of the Vulturis, but surely Septin had? The sun was hot on his skin before he came to the tumble of stones at its base. When the tide was low, there was passage round, but now the waves beat against the dark, upthrusting cliff.

He peered about. There were prints leading into the sand dunes. He stared at them in dismay. Surely Chant would not have chosen to return to the stay through the tumble of grasslands? His heart missed, then doubled its beat. They were not hers; there was no tell-tale limp, and he saw now that they did not go into the dunes, but came from them. He started forward, scanning the sand around the base of the headland. Mostly it was scoured clean by the waves, but in one place he found another of Chant's prints and also two others. He straightened slowly, his eyes on the crash and thunder of the waves. Chant would not have gone this way voluntarily, her fear of water was too great. Yet he was certain that was indeed where she had gone. It could only mean one thing. With one last look at the cliffs, he turned and began making his way swiftly back along the beach.

Chant came fitfully awake. Dusty shafts of sunlight were invading the cracks between the

wood and twine of her prison. Her muscles were cramped and her mouth as dry as the dirt on which she lay. He would come back for her soon, and then ...? She ran her tongue over her cracked lips, trying to moisten them. What did she know of the Vulturis? Only what Septin had said. *They have a liking for pretty things.* His words echoed in her mind and the sweat started on her brow. Were they then enemies of the Okianos? Septin had not spoken of it, but it was plain that they were not friends. What else? She knew that they lived poorly, for she had seen as much in the last night. Their turs were a strange collection of drift wood and stone, leaning at odd angles, and even her prison had gaping holes, though not big enough to squeeze through. Scrambling to her feet, she grasped one of the leather thongs binding the crude walls together, and pulled with all her strength. Nothing moved. If only she had her knife! If only she had not wandered so close to the headland ... if only she had not argued with Tel. There had been a time when she had thought he loved her and even in their worse moments, she had not feared him. Not like now. Now there was fear all around her, in the tortuous twist of the corral fence, in the fouled trickling river they had passed. She closed her eyes and leaned her head wearily against the rough wall.

Septin sat staring into the fire, his brows drawn in a heavy frown. Tel had fallen silent some time ago, yet the older man had not roused. Tel glanced impatiently to Turai, but her eyes held clear warning, and he resisted the urge to speak. At last Septin looked up. 'I think it is as you say.'

Tel grunted in relief at the Okianos' agreement but his impatience grew. 'We must go and demand her return.'

Septin looked at him speculatively. 'She is not Okianos, nor Sunnen, and you have said yourself that there is nothing that binds you together.'

Tel stared at him incredulously. 'You would abandon her to them?'

Turai put aside the greenfood she had been preparing. 'No one has spoken of abandonment Tel, but you. But I do not understand your concern. She is not of your blood, and you have made it clear that there is no feeling between you. Why now do you wish to seek her?'

Tel flushed. 'It is not right to take someone against their will.'

Turai's quiet eyes remained upon him. 'All peoples follow their own ways. Is it

not the men of the Sunnen who allow or do not allow their women to marry?"

'It is not the same!'

'There is little difference. The Vulturis do not treat their women badly, as long as they are obedient.'

'We both know Chant will never be that!' He turned his gaze to Septin once more but the older man was intent on the fire. 'It seems I must go alone,' he said stiffly.

'Do not be a greater fool than you already are,' Septin growled. Tel rounded on him furiously and the older man rose. He was the shorter of the two but the more powerful.

'Enough!' It was Turai, her eyes bright with a fire Tel had never seen before. There was a short silence and then Tel stepped back.

'I will not leave her to the Vulturis,' he repeated harshly.

Septin eyed him shrewdly. 'If you go headlong into their place demanding her return, they will most likely kill you. You forget that you are the head of your stay. It is the women there you owe protection, not Chant. Go back to those you love.'

Tel quietened. Septin's words were true, perhaps truer than he realised. He took a deep breath and a peculiar calmness settled over him. 'I love *her*,' he said clearly. Turai's face softened and he glanced to Septin, expecting to see contempt, but the older man's face too had relaxed. There was a long pause.

'Men have been known to do strange things for love,' Septin muttered at last, his eyes gentle upon Turai. 'If you love her then I suppose it is different. Sit down man, and let us decide what needs to be done.'

There was the sound of scuffling footsteps and Chant jerked upright. The door was dragged open and the harsh light of day invaded her prison. She screwed her eyes shut against the jarring ache and was seized and pulled outside. There were two of them now; the one from the last night and another. The second looked like an older version of the first, probably brothers, she judged. He had stepped back, his small black eyes sweeping over her in intense appraisal. Chant felt the blood suffuse her face and she glared at him angrily. Immediately his expression changed to one that matched her own. 'Kintach!' His brows came low and his mouth twisted dangerously. Chant dropped her eyes, remembering the lesson from the previous night. The men dragged her between them

towards the larger tur, jerking her this way and that. Chant clenched her jaw, forcing herself to look only at the gritty earth beneath her feet. They were arguing, but as they entered the tur, the angry exchange abruptly ceased.

The dim interior was crowded with people and for a moment she was reminded of the Great Turrel, but only for a moment. The Great Turrel always held an air of welcome, whereas there was a sense of meanness here. The air was heavy with the scent of close packed bodies and there was none of the happy chatter which filled the Turrel. Women clustered in one corner, some holding infants. They looked much as their men, with long dark hair, and small hard eyes. These were now turned on her. They held no sympathy, nor even curiosity. Perhaps if anything, they held resentment. The men sat on the other side, some smoking pipes, others engaged in a strange game with small white stones. Though they seemed intent upon the game, their eyes slid to her often. There was no kindness there either, and no help to be gained. Even the small children loitering near the women returned her gaze with a sort of blank coldness.

There was a ripple of movement from the back of the tur and an old man appeared. There must either be a second door or another small room like the Seeing Place in the Great Turrel, Chant surmised, as he moved forward. His hair was completely grey, though he was unbent, and he nodded disdainfully to the assembled men as he came, ignoring the children and the women. The one holding Chant jerked her down, so that she was kneeling on floor, though he kept a grip upon her wrist. It occurred to her that he held her, not to prevent escape, but to stake his claim. The older of the two sat on her other side, and they continued to glare at each other over her head. There was a rustling as the old man carefully lowered himself onto the mats in front of them. Chant kept her head down, having no wish to excite the wrath of those who held her or of the man who seemed to be the Vulturi leader.

Her captor began speaking first. Although he spoke calmly, she could sense the barely restrained anger in his voice. He had scarcely finished when the other broke in. He spoke little, but there was a certainty and determination in his voice which the younger lacked. The crowd around them moved restlessly and Chant heard a low snigger run through the men's gathering. Again she felt the blood hot in her face. She longed to wrench herself free and run, but she had little taste for the chase which must follow. She must be calm and wait, as she did on hunt.

'Kilgash thinks that you should belong to him, as he found you. But Shenak asserts his rights as the elder. What do you think?'

Chant looked up in surprise. The old man was speaking Okianos, although heavy with the stain of his own speech. His face was deeply lined, his dark eyes stark against the greyness of his hair. 'I belong to myself,' she said clearly. The old man's expression did not change. Turning to those assembled he repeated her words in Vulturi and the crowd tittered. Chant clenched her teeth and held herself still. To hunt well the hunter must know the beast. How did these people see, what did they fear? 'I have kin among the Okianos. They will search for me.'

The old man brought his shrewd eyes to her once more. 'You are not of their blood.'

'No. But ... I am married to one amongst them, and he will be angered that I have been taken.' The old man stared at her and Chant felt the heat in her face increase. She had never lied easily, and she was sure that he did not believe her. She dropped her eyes. Tel would not come for her, nor Septin. What the Vulturi leader said was true; she was not of their blood. But if she could plant doubt in his mind, then perhaps she might be given time, time to escape. He was frowning heavily, his gaze moving between her and those who held her. At last he issued a terse order and turned away, dismissing them with a shrug.

Chant was hauled to her feet once more and forced from the tur. They came out into the bright light of day and she was dragged back to where she had earlier been confined. She jerked to a stop. The sun was warm and she had had neither food nor drink since the middle of the last day. The man pulled angrily at her wrist. 'Emar!'

Chant shook her head. 'I am thirsty, I need to drink.' He pulled at her again, but she was more than his height and matched him in strength. She heard the older Vulturi laugh contemptuously at the efforts of the younger. 'I need ...' The first blow caught her on the side of the face and she staggered forward, the second sent her to her knees. She was gazing at the gritty dust close to her face, struggling to make sense of what had happened when her shoulder was seized and she was wrenched away from it. The blood roared in her ears and the day shimmered about her.

'Emar,' he snarled again thrusting her inside. The door was shut and the light taken away. Chant clung to the wall, but it was too hard. She allowed herself to slide to

the earthen floor. The first blow had been below the eye already bruised from her encounter with the sivet, the second had been on the other side of the face. She lay shivering on the floor. Her head ached and she felt that she might well vomit. She forced the fetid air in and out of her lungs and her mind drifted. It seemed a long time later that she became aware that the closed heat of the tur had begun to ease and the occasional voices of those outside to fade. It must be nearing evening, she concluded vaguely. She clawed her way into a sitting position and ran her tongue over her parched lips. She was very thirsty.

In the Okianos tur, Turai would be tending the large pot of soup and Septin probably working his nets. They were a strange pair. Septin was not a handsome man, whereas Turai she thought, would have been fair when younger. She wondered why she had left the Sunnen to make her life among so different a people. If Tel had not lied in his feelings for her, could she have done the same? She shut her eyes, wanting to block the thought, but her resolve was as weak as her limbs. She no longer had to make that choice. The tears reached her cheeks unchecked and she wiped them away irritably. What was Tel that she should fret over him? Just another man, like Scead, or Duran, or Septin, or those here.

No, he was not like these. There was a kindness about him, and a need to protect, even if it was misplaced. He was bossy it was true, but that was the way of the Sunnen. The man ruled the stay, caring for but directing those who lived within. His first duty was to his stay. Chant stirred. In the dimness of her confinement she began to see for the first time the other side of Tel's struggle. He owed the stay first. What use was a Sceadu wife? A Sceadu wife would not work the gardens or gather the fruit, for she was a hunter. And yet he had wanted her; she had seen it in his eyes. Seen it but not recognised it until now. For those here looked upon her in the same way. But whereas his eyes held kindness and gentleness also, the Vulturi's held only the wanting. And so he had been as ice and fire; cold when his responsibilities weighed most heavily and warm when his heart spoke.

The crunch of footsteps drew near and Chant tensed, clenching her fists; she would not be beaten again. The door opened and a pan of water was thrust inside. For a moment she stared into the blank eyes of the woman who had brought it, and then the door slammed shut. Chant drank greedily. It was warm, and slightly brackish, but she

cared not. The last few drops she smoothed onto her face, trying to quieten the sear. Ah water; it had driven her forward for so long. From the mountains to the sea, from Scead to Tel. But it was all for nothing. She closed her eyes wearily. Even if she was to ever return to the Sceadu, she had failed her task. She had found that which could unlock the water, but she could not take him back. The tears started down her cheeks once more but this time she let them come. She could not take him back.

Chapter 57

Tel moved steadily along the shore. It would be dusk soon and the tide at its lowest. If all went well he should come to the place of the Vulturis, claim Chant, and pass the headland again before it turned. If all went well ... He brought his mind to Septin's speech and his heart quickened. He was a fool if he thought it would be easy. The Vulturis were a war-like people, Septin had said, hardened by their lives in a valley which was as hostile as the Okianos' was kindly. Only the flanks of the Teresas divided them, and yet the land in the south was drier, the soil poorer, the runs of fish further from the sandy shore. Almost like the Sunnen and Sceadu, Tel thought as he eased the bag on his shoulder. He was carrying dried wait, a fish the Vulturis favoured but which was rare in their waters, and also taka, which the Okianos dived for but the Vulturis did not. If he was to bring Chant back with him, he must trade for her, exchanging her like a good for other goods. His mouth hardened as he remembered Septin's words.

The Vulturis live by scavenging. Whatever they find they keep, guarding it jealously from others, whether they be brother, wife, or children. Nothing is given away once possessed, although it might be traded for something of greater worth. They spend their time wandering the sands, taking the storm tossed wood for houses, and the fragmented stone of the headland. They search the stones there also for shell fish, and set nets along the shore to catch the fish the tide brings. It is a poor life.

Perhaps that was why there were fewer women than men, or perhaps it was because each must look to their own needs and women fed their children first, going hungry themselves. This lack had caused trouble with the Okianos in the past. Septin had spoken of how a young Okianos woman had been taken from their side of the headland, and of how two Vulturis had been killed in her returning. He did not think that they would want that kind of trouble again. Tel fervently hoped that Septin was right. It was perhaps the only thing which was on his side.

Chant was clearly not Okianos, nor in fact was he. But he had kin among them, and Septin was known to the Vulturi leader. Even so, it might not save him. *They will take what you have and kill you if they judge you weaker than them.* Septin's words echoed ominously in his ears. *To succeed you must be as they are.*

Tel reached the first of the rockfall and began clambering over it. He was glad

that it took his all attention, for it helped still the rapid beating of his heart. He had no doubt Septin's words were true and that it was possible he was going to his death. He checked his knife once more. It would be of small use if he must fight them all, but at least he might inflict a little damage along the way. His eyes searched out the rough path while his mind began to rehearse the part he must play. He was the wronged husband of a wayward wife. Naturally he was angry, naturally he was grateful to the Vulturis for keeping her safe until he could arrive and punish her. Naturally he was keen to show his gratitude by compensating them for their trouble. It had all seemed so believable in Turai's stay, now as he neared their lands, its improbability appeared glaring obvious.

He paused and straightened, wiping the sweat from his brow. It was likely that he was being watched now. He had better therefore, begin to look the part. Scowling heavily, he toiled on, coming finally to the end of the scattered rocks. There were perhaps fifty paces of sand to the mouth of a small stream, easy to miss in the dark, Septin had warned. He strode purposefully along the sand, turning where a stain of slime touched the sand. Another fifty paces and he should see the first of their stays. Only the chief's stay was corralled and it was furthest from the beach. Tel made his way through them, trying not to stare at their strangeness. He had not seen buildings like them before. They twisted this way and that, not a single wall seeming straight, or totally weatherproofed.

No one challenged him, although there were women with children sitting round open cooking fires, and men propped against doorways. A scrawny saman dog sniffed at his heels but he ignored it, his eyes on the corral ahead. As he neared it a Vulturi stepped forward, a spear held ready. Tel stood head and shoulders above him, but the man was armed, and had the hardest eyes he had ever seen. Tel stopped, letting his gaze run over him insolently. 'I have come from the Okianos to speak with Kablar,' he said tersely, emphasising *Okianos* and *Kablar*. Septin had said that few Vulturis knew the speech of the Okianos, though their chief Kablar did. The man continued to stare at him, his gaze lingering longest on the knife at his belt. Then nodding curtly, he gestured him in. The ground inside the corral was deep in dust, and held not just the stay but a series of smaller buildings. In the fading light he could almost pretend that he was in his own stay, except there was a poorness about the buildings here which was not Sunnen.

He ducked through the low doorway and paused to allow his eyes to accustom

themselves to the dimness. The air was thick with the stench of bodies and burning fat. For a moment he had an overwhelming impulse to turn back into the fragrant night air, but instead he drew himself up to his full height and slowly surveyed those assembled. Septin had told him that the stay of the chief was favoured, for it was the most likely to have meat. Any Vulturi who took one of the increasingly rare sivets from the grasslands would present a portion of it to the chief to gain his favour, and what he did not eat, others could pick over.

The man gestured him to sit, and he did so, ignoring the stares of those who crowded there. He busied himself with slipping the bag from his shoulders, and settling it before him. After a time, there was a sway of movement towards the back of the stay and Kablar appeared. He was very grey, as Septin had said, but with the same impenetrable eyes as the younger man. Tel waited until he lowered himself to the mat, then he bowed low in the way Septin had instructed.

'I am Tel of the Sunnen, kin of Turai, wife of Septin of the Okianos,' he said clearly. Kablar nodded slightly, though his gaze did not waver. 'As the leader of my stay, I have journeyed far to visit my kin. With me I brought a wife, lately traded from beyond the mountains. A curse she has been to me though she cost me dearly.' He paused, spitting to one side. 'In the last night she again wandered. That is why I come.'

Kablar considered him for a long moment before speaking. 'What is it that makes you think she is here?'

Tel forced himself to hold Kablar's gaze. 'I followed her prints to edge of your land. There is no where else she could be.'

There was a short silence and then imperceptibly, Kablar nodded. 'My younger son has found a woman who is neither Vulturi nor Okianos.' He paused. 'He has long sought a wife and does not wish to trade her.'

Tel's mind raced though he sat frowning as if considering only the son's intransigence. 'The Okianos have told me that *you* are the chief of the Vulturi.' He let his eyes sweep over Kablar in cool challenge and waited. He was playing a dangerous game; his questioning of Kablar's authority clearly insulting.

'It is so,' Kablar acknowledged gruffly, his eyes firing.

'Then,' replied Tel equably, 'it is with you that I trade.' Kablar said nothing though his eyes now rested on the bag Tel had brought with him. 'The Sunnen also trade,' Tel

went on. 'As I have said, the woman comes from over the mountains, and cost me much. She is young and strong and will give me children. However,' he paused, 'I understand that she is of value to you also ...'

'What is it you would trade?'

'My kin Septin is a fine fisherman. As a gesture of friendship he sends you dried wait.' Tel pulled out the fish and passed it to Kablar. The chief grunted slightly and put it to one side, his eyes returning to the bag. 'For my wife I give taka.' He emptied the gleaming pile onto the mat and there was an appreciative murmur from those about him. He saw the chief's eyes widen but the mask of his face did not alter. Only the Okianos had taka and it was much sought after, being traded all along the coast. It was a rich prize indeed. Tel knew it, as did Kablar. 'It is fair exchange,' Tel said grimly, emphasising the point. Kablar nodded and Tel felt the hard knot of his stomach begin to ease. But even as it did so, a strident voice broke in, shattering the silence. Tel jerked round, remembering to draw his brows low. His heart faltered, then began a rapid beat. The voice was that of the younger Vulturi who had brought him in, and as Tel looked at him, he realised in dismay that he was Kablar's son. The one who had taken Chant. The anger which now kindled within him was real, but he set his jaw, refusing to allow it to cloud his thoughts. It was obvious that taka or not, the young Vulturi had no wish to relinquish her.

'My son does not want to lose his wife,' Kablar said, turning back to Tel.

Tel shrugged sourly. 'The trade is fair,' he repeated harshly.

Kablar's eyes drifted to the knife at his belt. 'My son has taken a liking to your knife.' Tel's mind raced. To hand it over now would be weakness, and perceiving this, the Vulturis might kill him. It would also leave him weaponless. On the other hand, to refuse to trade it could mean losing Chant.

He scowled at the younger man, as if reflecting on his insolence. 'I would have proof that the woman you hold is mine,' he snapped. The murmur rose again and Kablar gave a curt instruction. Tel heard his footsteps retreat and he waited, glowering at the mat in front of him. He must be as the Vulturis were, he repeated to himself, even though they repulsed him. He must be as they were to save them both. But would Chant understand? He heard the son's return and rounded angrily. It was Chant, though so changed he hardly recognised her. She stood silently at the Vulturis' side, her head

lowered, the blue-black of her hair dulled with dust. Even under the tangled veil though he could see the bruising vivid on her face. He was to her in an instant, gripping her shoulders and shaking her. 'I curse the day I traded you and I curse you this day,' he spat, cuffing her several times around the head. There were guffaws from the men and a few of the women laughed, but Chant made no move at all. It was an enormous relief that she did not fight him, though her submissiveness troubled him almost as much. 'I have given you fair exchange,' he growled to Kablar, 'but have urgent need to be back in my stay. This one has already caused me much delay. Take the knife, for I have no time to haggle further.'

Seizing her roughly, he jerked her from the Vulturis' side and tossed the knife at his feet. It was a gesture of contempt, but also one of strength. Then turning on his heel, he strode from the stay, dragging Chant behind him. He went swiftly across the corral and along the rows of crooked stays, expecting at any moment to feel a spear in his back. It was all but dark, but he shook her as he went, abusing her loudly. There were few people now outside but he had little doubt that they were being watched. He passed the last of the stays and turned along the small stream. Chant had not spoken since he had taken her, and anxiety for her filled his mind. That she had been beaten was clear, but he wondered how else she had been hurt.

They came to the shore and moved off toward the headland. In the sandhills beyond, shadows moved. He came to a halt and rounded on her, shaking her and shouting at her. It would not be Kablar who followed, but friends of his son's. 'They watch,' he hissed urgently, 'I must play the angry husband until we are safe.'

'I know,' she muttered. He went on along the sand, pulling her behind him. In the last of the light he saw that the tide had turned. It would not be a pleasant trip around the headland, *if* they reached that far. They came to the first of the shattered rocks. Already the froth was licking the pathway.

Chant shrank back, resisting him for the first time. 'I cannot go this way.' Tel's heart raced. They must pass the headland now, for any delay might just tempt the chief's son to reclaim his property. Tel glanced back toward the dunes. Already the shadows there were thickening.

'They will kill me if we do not go now,' he whispered desperately. She seemed to shudder then stumbled forward. 'I will stay close and catch you should you slip,' he shouted above

the roar of the water. She made no reply and he followed her, his eyes flicking between her and the waves. She went steadily, her sure-footedness serving her well, but he could see her fear in the way she held herself, and the way she flinched when the froth of the waves spun over her. The night was warm, which was well he considered, for the spray in the air was like rain. He glanced behind him often as they went, but the broken rocks provided ideal cover. Ahead, the path was suddenly drowned by the surge of a huge wave. Chant froze and he came level with her. For a long moment they stared at the coming and going of the water. There was only a brief moment when the path was exposed, and this time seemed to shorten, even as they watched.

'When I tell you, you must go quickly,' he shouted in her ear. She made no response and he wondered if she had heard. He waited, watching the water draw back, and then pushed her urgently forward. She went swiftly along the path, reaching the higher rocks as the new wave licked at her heels. Tel took several deep breaths, and then choosing an interval, scrambled after her. This time the water clutched at his ankles, but he leaped clear to the higher stones. Chant was some way ahead now, her dress faint in the first light of the moon. He lengthened his stride and closed the distance between them. Only when he was again near did he look up. Ahead stretched the broad sands of the Okianos, and his blood trilled with joy.

He came to a halt, surveying the rocks behind him and the dunes to his side. Nothing moved in the pale shining light. They had done it, they were free of the Vulturis. Smiling in relief he turned back to her, but she was still trudging along the silvered shore. He hastened after her. 'Chant!' She did not stop, nor raise her head. 'Chant,' he repeated, catching her elbow and bringing her round to him.

She allowed him to turn her, as she had allowed him to curse her, and cuff her, and to drag through the crooked ways of the Vulturi stay. It had been necessary, she repeated to herself, but her blood boiled. She waited silently, her head lowered, her hair concealing her face.

He smoothed it back gently. There was a small trickle of blood coming from a cut on her lip. He wondered if his blows had caused it or those of the Vulturis. He scooped up some water and cleansed it gently. 'It will sting a little,' he said tenderly. She raised her eyes to his at last and he glimpsed an intense flash of anger before the blow caught him, full in the face. He staggered back and it was all he could do not fall. His face

burned and he could taste the saltiness of blood there.

She stood before him, her head thrown back, her eyes wild in the moonlight. 'Try the sea water,' she sneered. 'Though it may sting a little.' Turning, she strode off along the sand.

Tel was to her in an instant, the fury hot in his veins. Seizing her arm, he swung her back to him. 'Of all the ungrateful ...' he began, but he got no further. She twisted violently and with a strength which astounded him, turned on him. The blows rained down upon his head, his chest and his shoulders, and he fought to pinion her wrists. 'Chant,' he gasped, but she was beyond hearing him, fighting a foe which was nameless and faceless and made of the darkness which had all but consumed her. She had always been close to him in strength but her wildness now made her impossible to subdue. Vaguely he realised that the best he could hope for was to hold her till she quietened, and to hope that they both escaped injury. He was glad at that moment that she had no weapon, for he had no doubt she would have used it.

At last he caught one wrist but as he struggled to capture the other, the soft sand of the water's edge gave way and they were thrown onto its wet grittiness. She had landed under him and swiftly he used his weight to constrain her. They were both panting with the effort of the conflict, her ragged breaths interspersed with sobs. 'You are safe,' he gasped, but his words were drowned by a wall of icy water sweeping over them. The shock of it invaded Chant's being, blinding and deafening her, tearing her voice from her throat. She was plunged into a void so deep that it held nothing; and she was nothing, not bone, not flesh, not viscera. Tarchanjan, the place between. She must be Willing now to be reborn. She ceased her struggle and gave herself up to the utter darkness.

Chapter 58

Tel pulled her the rest of the way up the sand and gently turned her over. In the moonlight her face was peaceful, the mask of savage rage at last cleansed away. She lay as if she was sleeping, or dead. Swiftly he brought his hand to her neck, feeling for the pulse there, trying to quieten the heaving sobs of his own breathing. She had been beneath the water just a few moments, as he had, but now she lay unmoving. Her skin was warm, the beat of her blood strong and even. 'Chant?' She did not stir. He shut his eyes, fighting the swirl of panic which threatened to engulf him. The moon hovered above and he looked up, seeking comfort. Once before he had crouched thus, struggling to remember the workings of a trap. It seemed long ago now, almost as if he looked upon someone else, someone who had known so much and yet knew nothing. It had taken him a long time to listen to his heart, longer still to believe. He glanced down once more; her eyes were wide upon him. For a long moment they contemplated each other. Then carefully she sat up. Their faces were very close but she did not draw away.

'You came for me,' she said wonderingly. Tel said nothing. He was exhausted, content simply to sit and watch, knowing that she lived. 'Why?'

'I found out I loved you.' He was beyond caring how ridiculous such an answer might seem. She continued to look at him and then slowly her face broke into a smile. He smiled in return.

Reaching out, she ran her fingers gently over his bloodied lip. 'I am not a very rewarding person to love,' she observed. He caught her hand to his mouth and kissed it. She was still staring at him, but he saw her eyes darken. 'It was not ... you,' she began hesitantly.

'I know.' She swallowed several times and her breathing grew ragged. Cautiously he drew her to him and held her close. She did not resist, though she was rigid against him. 'You do not have to hide your pain from me Chant, or your fear, or your anger. You do not have to hide anything.' He felt some of the stiffness ease from her and he tightened his arms. She was soft against him, her breath warm on his arm. He wanted to sit thus forever, without the complications which the morning light would bring. But they were both wet, and in need of food and rest.

It was she who roused first. 'I suppose we must go back to Turai and Septin?'

Tel nodded. 'They will be greatly concerned that we have not returned.' He got painfully to his feet and then helped Chant rise, keeping a grip on her hand. His muscles ached and the languor of the fever still gnawed at his bones. The moon was high in the sky before they came to the Okianos stay. Septin had left a lamp burning at the door, but they found that neither he nor Turai had retired to bed.

Septin was the first to reach them, his roughened face split uncharacteristically into a broad grin. 'You have done it man!' he expostulated, enclosing Tel in a rib-cracking hug. 'I never thought to see you again,' he said then, turning to Chant. 'And I see they have made a fine mess of you, curse them,' he added, his small eyes hardening. Then regaining his humour he beamed at them both once more. 'You have beaten them, that you have, and few can claim to have done so.'

Turai was eyeing them shrewdly, the soup already heating on the coals. 'Dry clothes first, and then food, and then rest,' she ordered briskly.

Septin rolled his eyes at Tel, as Turai led Chant away. The door clicked shut and his countenance grew serious. 'I see you have fought. Take no insult if I say that it surprises me that you have lived to return.'

Tel pulled on dry breeches and a fresh shirt before coming back to the fire. 'That was Chant,' he said evenly, touching his mouth.

Septin's eyebrows rose. 'It does not seem much of a reward for your efforts,' he observed dryly.

Tel smiled. 'She is safe. That is reward enough.'

The older man considered him thoughtfully. There was an air of contentment about his wife's kin which had long been absent. 'And did it go as we planned?' He watched Tel drag his attention back to him and smile ironically.

'Not entirely,' he began. The door opened and he jerked his eyes that way. Turai had combed the tangles from her hair and given her a clean dress, but there was no disguising the dark stain of bruising across her face.

'You have not readied the bowls, Septin,' she scolded, busying herself lifting the pot from the fire. Unperturbed, Septin rose, passing the bowls to her so that she might fill them. Chant sat beside Tel with her eyes shut, savouring the flavour of the soup. She could not remember the last time she had eaten, the last time she had been clean, the last time she had felt safe. She glanced at the man beside her. He had come for her. He had

told her that he loved her. The wonder of it filled her thoughts, but a doubt still niggled there. What if the morning brought with it a change of heart? What if the morning brought his coldness once more? What if she had mistaken his words, his intent? Her eyes burned and the flames blurred and ran together.

'You should sleep now. You are very tired.' It was Turai's voice, gentle in her ear. She started slightly, allowing the older woman to take the empty bowl from her hands. Tel's eyes were upon her, but she did not have the strength to meet them, suddenly fearing what she might see. She was scarcely aware of Turai easing off her sandals or pulling the blanket round her before the darkness of the room closed in. Was she in the small prison of the Vulturis, or the wandering berian caves? Her mind reeled in confusion. She was safe. She was safe! She sighed, and turning once, let the comforting arms of sleep take her.

Septin watched the play of emotions across Tel's face. His exhaustion made him easy to read, and for once he took no care to hide them. There was longing there for the Sceadu, and also fear. He smiled wryly, remembering his early days with Turai. He was glad that the pain and the passion of those times had passed. 'And how was Kablar?'

Tel brought his eyes slowly back to Septin and his face twisted with contempt. 'Greedy for all I had to give.'

Septin nodded. 'He has not changed then.'

'It seems not.' Tel let his thoughts drift back to the inside of the Vulturi stay. 'I do not understand how they can live like that.'

Septin poked the coals absently with a stick. 'People live as they must. It is not for us to judge, unless their ways begin to eat away at ours.'

Tel looked at him sharply. 'Do you expect trouble?'

Septin shrugged. 'You saw how poorly their land serves them. The day must come when they will question why they must trade for that which they could steal.' He paused. 'We both know Chant was on the Okianos side of the headland when she was taken.'

Tel considered him gravely. Septin was no fool, and he had little reason to doubt his judgement. 'What will you do?'

Septin smiled sardonically. 'This is Okianos land. We will not be leaving it.' He

glanced sideways at Tel. 'And we are prepared for what might come. We will deal them such a blow that it will be long before they turn their eyes northward again.'

Tel nodded, but his thoughts had moved to the Scedu. Where was there for them to go? Over the mountains as Chant had, to the lands which were Sunnen? He did not think so, for the Scedu had chosen another way. They had not left their place when the rains had failed, instead they had sent Chant to return the water to them. Tel rubbed his hand wearily over his eyes. In the morning he must confront this last thing which stood between them. He must make her see the hopelessness of her quest, and then he must persuade her to return to the Sunnen stay as his wife. The task was daunting and he had little idea of how it was to be achieved. What he did know though, was that he would not be parted from her again.

Septin rose, yawning noisily. 'You are all but dead man, time to sleep.' He clapped him affectionately on the shoulder as he passed and Tel heard the door shut behind him. Septin was right, he must sleep, but his eyes lingered on the coals. The heat quivered red and gold, reminding him of the sunrise to come. He sighed. He was not looking forward to the new day.

Chant settled on the edge of the bed and began to pull the comb through her wet hair. She had washed herself with the water Turai had left, ridding herself of the last of the Vulturi dust. It was still early, and there were no sounds from the rest of the tur. Wandering to the window, she peered out. The air was mild, but salty as always with the sea. Far away, in the forests of ashin and fyr, the cones would be flowering. An intense longing stirred; how she yearned to be there, to be among her own. Yet she did not want to leave Tel. She sighed heavily. He was bound to his stay in the same way that she was bound to the Scedu; and she must now return to confess her failure.

Tel was already at the cookingplace when she entered, and he welcomed her with a smile. 'You look much improved from the last night,' he said, frowning slightly as his eyes lingered on her face.

Chant flushed and brought her fingers to the bruising. 'Turai says it will fade.'

'No doubt Turai is right, though I would gladly kill the one who made them,' he replied harshly. She settled at his side and watched him the steady the pot of soup. 'Turai is out gathering greenfood, so I have been left in charge,' he said cheerfully, lightening

his voice with an effort. 'What will you have? Berrem with soup, or soup with berrem?'

Chant grinned. 'I think I will have soup this day, just for a change,' she replied, joining in the game. She watched Tel ladle it out and present it to her with a flourish.

'I must say I am looking forward to honeyapple, and to whiteroot, and to berrem which is light and crisp,' he went on, leaning back on his stool. 'And seeing the sun bright on Anarkin, and listening to Inkala's chatter,' he finished with a sigh. 'What is it that you miss most, Chant?' he asked softly.

She finished the soup and sat cradling the empty bowl in her hands. 'Oh, the sound of the wind's voice in the redlands, seeing the first berian cubs of Snowmelt, smelling the drift of sweetstick smoke in the Great Turrel.' Her eyes shone and seemed to gaze beyond the walls of the stay, and Tel began to feel the gulf opening between them again. The chill grip of fear stole over his heart but he shrugged it off. He would not lose her again, no matter the cost.

'I feel the need of some air. Will you walk with me to the shore?' he asked suddenly. Chant nodded. They went along the small path next to the Sunwash and round the steep hills of sand. The tide was in once more, licking high up the sand with white-tipped tongues. They settled themselves in the warm sheltered lee of the dunes and Tel brought his arm around her, drawing her close. For a long while they sat in silence, watching the swirl and curl of the waves. 'I was looking forward to seeing your expression when you at last came to the sea,' he admitted softly.

Chant smiled. 'It was not much to be proud of. I seem to remember spending a long time on my knees.' She paused. 'I could not believe that Siah had spoken truly. Firstly, the crossing of the mountains and then the great tarn.' She shook her head in wonder.

Tel's arm tightened round her, and she looked up, surprised at the intensity of his gaze. 'She may have been right in those things Chant, but she was mistaken in the last. There is nothing which can bring the rains to your people.' He saw her eyes widen and the colour stain her cheeks.

'No, the last is also true.' Tel stared at her in bewilderment. 'I have found it.' There was a long silence and he withdrew his arm. She had found it and she had not told him. She had not told him! In spite of all his resolutions, he was angry. He sat there trying to quieten the boil of his thoughts and she sat beside him, her eyes flicking

between him and the sea. 'I found it on the night of the gathering,' she murmured. His eyes were cold, his mouth hard. She got to her feet and walked away from him, down to the edge of the vast empty sea. He watched her go, a solitary figure, her long blue-black hair streaming in the breeze. She had found it on the night of the Okianos gathering, when they had argued, and she had fled from him into the claws of the Vulturi. He had been in no mood to listen then, even if she had wished to tell him. Was he to be the same now?

He came down the beach and stood awkwardly at her side. She was gazing away toward the horizon, where the swell of the water met the quiet of the sky. 'Will you speak of it?' He saw her swallow several times and the effort it cost her to turn to him once more.

'I found it soon after I crossed the mountains, though I did not know it until that night. I ... I had been thinking about you, while I sat among the Okianos girls, thinking not very pleasant things,' she gave a short smile, though her eyes glistened with tears. 'I was envying your sureness, your knowing of the path ahead. And ... I thought of how you lived in your tur, and how you worked the gardens and ...' She faltered and dropped her eyes. She was distressed, but he could not discern why, nor did he feel closer to knowing what she had found. '... and of how you made the stone streams.' She looked up then; he was watching her intently, his brows drawn in perplexity. 'Do you not see? It is you Tel. You bring the water to the Sunnen with the stone streams. You bring the water.'

He stared at her incredulously and then snorted. 'I cannot bring rain Chant, no one can.'

She smiled sadly. 'I know. That was not the meaning of Siah's words, though it took Turai to teach me so.' Tel turned away, her words crowding his mind. Could it be as she said? He shook his head in wonder. He did not know, but if she believed it? He felt the tension seep away. If she believed it then it strengthened his claim on her as his wife.

He threw back his head and laughed. 'We have journeyed all this way so that you might find what you first came across at the traps?' he choked at last. It was all too ludicrous. 'It seems I must come with you over the mountains.' He paused, shocked by the unhappiness of her face.

'I cannot take you.'

Tel's anger flared once more. 'Is it because I have no patterning? Is it because I am not man enough for you?'

'It is not that.'

'Then what?'

'I did not come over the mountains.'

He stared at her in stunned silence. 'Was that a lie too?' he asked at last. Chant winced; he had never had any understanding of her, why should things be different now? She began to walk back towards the Okianos. 'Chant!' She did not pause and she heard his footsteps come up with her and his hand catch and bring her round. 'I am sorry.' She said nothing, but waited, her gaze on the sand. 'I know you are Sceadu, but what you have said makes no sense to me.'

'I did not come over the mountains, I came through.' He gaped at her in confusion. 'There are drystreams under Ashali.'

A feeling of relief flooded him. 'Then we can both go that way again.'

She shook her head. 'I have no knowing of the path. If I was to miss the way, we would wander until thirst and hunger claimed us.'

'But *you* will return under the mountains?' She nodded. 'Then we will go together,' he said firmly.

She raised her eyes at last. 'No, Tel. I will not risk your life.'

'But you would risk your own?' he demanded, tightening his grip on her arm.

'It is different,' she retorted, shrugging him off.

'How?' He saw the fire die from her eyes, but she said nothing. 'How is it different?' he pursued more gently, sensing her capitulation.

'It is not myself that I love.'

Chapter 59

Turai paused from her mat-making as Tel and Chant came along the small path from the dunes. Chant was slightly in front, her gaze set downward, Tel a little behind. She frowned. When he had returned with the Sceadu she had thought that all would now be well between them, but she could see that it was not so. Perhaps it was the girl's insistence on hunting the rains which preserved the breach between them. Tel must soon return to his stay; perhaps Chant intended to remain here. They came up to her and smiled in greeting, but she could sense the tension there. 'I need more rushes for the mats,' she said briskly to Chant. 'I would have your help.'

'We begin the journey back at the dawning,' Tel said. 'I will make the preparations.' Turai started in surprise. Had the Sceadu found what she sought? It must be so, for she would not leave without it. She glanced sideways at her as they walked. It did not seem to have brought her much joy.

They came down to the broad reaches of the Sunwash where the reeds grew thick and tall. 'I'll cut them and you bind each bundle like this,' Turai explained, demonstrating expertly. Chant nodded, settling herself on the bank. The sun was hot but a cool breeze came off the water, giving papery voice to the rushes. It was very pleasant, and for once, even the strange flow of the Sunwash did not disturb her. It was true that it lacked the brightness of the tissans and the liveliness of the creshans, but it made its own music, and shaped the earth after its own fashion. Turai worked steadily for a time before finishing her cutting and settling on the bank beside her. 'You have found what you sought?'

'Yes.'

'You do not seem happy about it.'

'It is not as I thought.' There was a pause, and Turai waited patiently. 'It is Tel.'

'Ah,' was all Turai said.

Chant turned on her swiftly, her eyes kindling. 'Do you understand what I am saying? It is Tel who I have sought all this time, who can bring water to the Sceadu in the way he does for the Sunnen. It has been him all along.'

'It is well then,' Turai responded. 'You will have no difficulty persuading him to help as it is clear that he loves you.' Chant said nothing but her knuckles whitened on the

reeds she was holding. 'Do you not believe it?' Turai queried, puzzled by her distress.

'I do not doubt that he loves me ... at this moment.'

Turai sighed. 'Do you think he is faithless?' Chant shook her head. 'Is it that you do not love him?' Again the shake of the head. 'Then what?'

'He is Sunnen and a gardener; I am Sceadu, I hunt. I cannot live by grubbing in the ground. I cannot live enclosed by a corral, doing as he might bid!'

Turai smiled. 'I once thought the same. Leave the Sunnen and come and live with the wild Okianos in the west? Leave the soft earth and sweet fruit of the Stead?' She snorted. 'And yet I did it, though I will not pretend that it was easy. I left Septin many times in those early days; once journeying as far as the Marshlands.'

'Then what happened?'

'Oh, my feet got sore, and my temper cooled and Septin came up river in the boat and brought me a bracelet of pinaret which he had collected on the shore.' Turai shrugged. 'But it was not blue shells which brought me back to him and which have kept me here all these Gatheringtimes. And it is certainly not Septin's good looks,' she added, her smile broadening.

Chant looked at her sadly. 'We are not as you and Septin. You have seen for yourself how it is. Sometimes he is warm, sometimes as cold as Snowcome. What is to say that he will not again change his mind?'

'I have known Tel a long time,' Turai said slowly. 'It is true that our stays are far apart now, but we both grew in the Stead. I remember how it was when Barin died. Tel was very young, Inkala yet to be born. He took up the burden of manhood early, and without the guidance of his own father. When Tel was last here, three Gatheringtimes past, it seemed as though his whole intent and purpose was directed towards the protection of his stay. His own needs were put aside, as if he saw the wish to journey, or to find happiness in love, a weakness. When you came that night and told us that he was in need of aid, I was greatly surprised, for I had not believed that he would come this way again. When I saw you together though, I understood.'

Chant shook her head unhappily. 'It is not as you think. There have been more arguments than affection in our time together.'

'It is often so in the beginning,' Turai said gently, 'it is a time of learning. When he discovered you had lied, he felt betrayed. But the loss of you to the Vulturi scoured it

from his thoughts.'

Chant flushed. 'I am not proud of that lie.'

Turai looked at her thoughtfully. 'No, but it served its purpose, did it not?'

The heat in Chant's face intensified. 'I am not free until I complete the task Siah has given me.'

'You will not be free until you have overcome your fear,' Turai retorted. Chant's head came up but it was Turai who spoke. 'Tel is not like the Vulturi or perhaps like others who have not returned your love.'

Chant scrambled to her feet. 'He is your kin, it is natural you should feel so about him.' Turai sighed, and gathering up the reed bundles, turned back along the path. Chant watched her go, loath to follow. What did Turai really know about Tel? They had been apart many Snowmelts, as she had said. She stared at the water blindly. And what did she know? Nothing, except that she was not free. She took a long steadying breath. She was *not* free, whatever Turai said.

They set off the next day, while the world was still dark. Septin and Dargil rowed them up the Sunwash, helped by the push of the incoming tide. Chant sat quietly next to Tel, thinking of the last time she had been thus. Then the movement of the frail wooden craft had terrified her, and Tel had lain more dead than living at her feet. The sun was high before they came to the edge of the Marshlands and Septin steered the boat to the shore. Dargil passed them their packs while Septin held the boat steady. They had enough dried fish and berrem to last them well until they came to the Meduin, even if they again lost their way in the Marshlands. She watched Septin embrace Tel before turning to her. His eyes moved over her and his thoughts turned to the first time he had seen her. He smiled.

'We part under happier circumstances than when we met,' he observed dryly. Chant smiled too. Then he kissed her on the cheek and handed her a small package. 'From Turai,' he said shortly, clambering back into the boat. Dargil waved cheerily and then worked expertly to bring the craft round. Chant stood watching them until they disappeared around the bend in the Sunwash and then looked down at the small parcel.

'Are you not going to open it?' She unwrapped the scrap of cloth. It was a bracelet of pinaret shells. Chant stared at it, remembering how Septin had once given it to Turai to mend an argument. 'It is very pretty,' Tel commented, to break the silence.

'It is the same colour as the azurin,' Chant said vaguely, her mind still pondering its significance.

'The azurin?'

Chant rolled the material carefully over it before stowing it in her pack. 'Small blue stones much admired by the Sceadu. There is not a Sceadu woman who is without a bracelet of it by the time she has left the Creshan Turrel.'

'Did you leave yours at your stay?' Tel asked, as they came to the first of the broad grassy tussocks.

'No,' Chant answered shortly.

Tel looked at her curiously. 'I have not seen you wear it,' he probed.

'I burnt it.'

He came to a halt. He was on a small island of turf among the glittering pools of marsh water and she on another. He remembered abruptly how she had burnt the gift he had rejected. 'Why?'

'It is the custom among the Sceadu to burn the things of the dead.'

The reply shocked him and for a moment he said nothing. 'But you are not dead.'

'When Siah gave me the task, I thought she was sending me to my death. It is well known among the Sceadu that there is no way over the mountains.' She had spoken of this before, but he still could not accept her willingness to die. 'There were other reasons I left,' she said gently, seeing the hardness of his expression.

'What other reasons could there be?' he demanded, stepping back to the tussock on which she stood. The tussock was small and they were forced to stand very close.

'We should go on if we are to clear the Marshlands before dusk,' she muttered, avoiding his eyes. What she said was true.

'Then we will speak of them later,' he said firmly. They lit a fire that night. Tel said that it was in celebration of passing through the Marshlands, Chant thought it was more likely in order to repel the stinging insects which hovered on its borders. Whatever the reasons, she was glad of it. The smoke was as aromatic as sweetstick, though the washwood they burned was not of that type. Chant sat watching the quiver of heat in the coals, enjoying the ripple of warmth over her skin. It was good to be through the mix of mud and water; Septin's knowing had served them well.

The stars appeared one by one and she peered up at them, giving each its Sceadu

name while Tel gave the Sunnen. After a time though, they both fell silent. Chant still turned to the stars but Tel now watched her. He was tired, but his mind could find no rest. He had long known that she was a hunter, but for the first time he began to consider what this might imply. Scedu hunters hunted alone. The knowing brought no comfort, yet, if she hunted alone, she would be well used to her own decisions and judgements. This gave some explanation perhaps, for her reluctance to commit to him, but not all. There was so much he did not know, he realised in exasperation, things which would shape what was to come. 'Why did you leave the Scedu Chant?' The words were out before he could recall them, shattering the starry intimacy which bound them.

'I have told you.' Her face was turned away, her voice suddenly reluctant.

'You have said that you were given a task, but that there were other reasons,' he prompted. There was a short uncomfortable silence.

Her leaving of the Scedu was the last thing she wanted to speak of; her lack of farewells and her bitter rejection of Siah still shamed her. 'The Sunnen know little of hunting, of the Willingness of the beast, of making Gift,' she began grudgingly. 'This, the Scedu call Talabraith.' There was a short pause. 'I wasted the Gift of the Willing beast, I broke that which binds hunter to hunted.'

'You went into the mountains, expecting to die, because of this thing ... Talabraith?' She nodded. 'But your life is worth more than an animal's!'

'The worth is the same.' He stared at her incredulously, biting back the words crowding on the edge of his tongue. What sort of people were the Scedu?

'Were there other reasons also?' he demanded. She was upset, but he must know this night.

'I do not want to speak of it.'

'Why?'

She turned on him violently. 'I have already told you once, why must I say it all again?'

'Told me?'

'Before the Marshlands.'

'I am sorry, I do not remember ...' He trailed off. That whole time was smudged over with the fever which came later. 'Will you not speak of it again?' he asked gently. He saw her swallow several times and even in the starshine, the colour in her cheeks was

intense.

She scrambled to her feet and took several swift strides away. She was being foolish, she knew. She had accepted Scead's love for Siah long ago, but her own blindness in the matter mortified her. 'There was a man ...' she muttered at last. Tel stilled, a wave of jealousy scouring his veins. Well he had asked, and he had been told. 'Scead.' she murmured so softly that he had to strain to hear her. 'I thought he loved me ... and that I loved him. I erred on both counts.'

'Chant?' His voice was tentative, his hands gentle upon her. 'It is not the same with us.' She shut her eyes, letting him turn her and take her into his arms. She stood stiffly enclosed, though she ached to cling to him, to have the warmth of his body comfort her as it had once before. His arms tightened and with infinite tenderness, his lips moved over her forehead and cheek. Sighing she raised her face to his. The kiss was long and deep, and she gave herself up to it, to its warmth and to its passion. 'I love you Chant.' The words pierced the warm miasma and she broke away. 'Why will you not believe me?'

'I do not doubt that you love me ... at this moment,' she said thickly. 'But I know that when you return to the stay, that you will not. And it is better so.'

'Why?'

'Do you not see? To be together one of us must always be on the wrong side of the mountains. Are you willing to live among the Sceadu Tel?'

'Yes, if that is where you would dwell.' He saw her amazement and her sudden doubt. 'When I realised you had been taken by the Vulturis, I pledged that if ever I was able to bring you back, we would not be parted again. I will not break that pledge.'

'You owe your own stay before me.'

'Duran will soon be a man.'

'Merala and Inkala have great need of you. I do not think that you will turn away.'

'That depends upon you.'

'That is unfair!'

'Perhaps. But I will not live the remainder of my life alone. Either you must be with me in the Stead, or I will come to the place of the Sceadu.'

Chapter 60

They came to the edge of the forest marking the crossing place, near the midpoint of the next day. 'You remember how we crossed the last time?' Tel questioned. Indeed she did; the sickening fear she had felt was still fresh in her mind. She had been forced to trust him all those days ago and he had proven worthy. Why then could she not trust him now? She watched him strip off his thin Sunnen shirt and breeches. His skin was smooth, his hair bleached to a dark honey by the sun. He turned toward the water, hoisting their packs onto his shoulder, his back muscles rippling like a scintion in flight.

Chant stood transfixed, the image of his flank filling her mind. She was a hunter and her hunting skills had served her well, even on this quest. Siah had named her Chant, and she would tell what she had found, but it had been her skin, and her nose, and her ears which had brought her through the drystreams and which would take her back. And Tel? Would they aid her with him too? He had reached the other side and she watched him place the packs down and re-enter the water. He loved her. Her hunter sense told her it was so. And she him. Yet to be with him, was to be no longer alone, risking only herself. She must open to him, to the joy and fear of love.

He came up the bank toward her, the water streaming from him, his eyes intent; wondering if she would go with him, she realised. She stood up, feeling strangely light-headed and let him lead her into the water. 'Do you remember what you must do?' She nodded, slipping her arms around his neck. The water swirled around them, tugging with soft eddies, mixing her hair with his. Sighing, she laid her cheek against him, feeling the pulse beneath the skin, taking the soft scent of his skin. The Tissan and Creshan Turrels held the young as they grew and the Great Turret sheltered the old and birthed the new. No one lived alone.

Tel found a foothold in the thick oozing mud and turned. It had been easier than he dared hope possible. Chant still grasped his neck, like she had the last time, but this time her face was not rigid with fear. Her eyes were tender but she did not speak. 'I would like to go on further before we eat,' he said carefully. 'Do you wish to change?' She nodded, releasing him reluctantly. They came out of the water and she dragged off

the wet dress. Tel started in surprise, then turned away. She had not sought to be alone, like she had before. He stared down at the river until she came to his side and then they moved off once more, travelling quickly, for he was eager to reach the Old Stead before nightfall. Chant walked slightly behind, relieved at not having to speak. She did not know the print of this new way of being, nor its odour, nor how it ran or reasoned. She was a hunter, she would learn, but for a while it was like being a Little Sister again.

In the early morning light, the Old Stead looked almost cheerful, not sinister as Chant remembered it. The air was quiet, carrying no scent of berian, but even so, they moved cautiously, Chant leading. To the side, the stones glowed softly, their mossed edges showing a brilliant green. They passed the place of ruined buildings where they had spent the first night and drew near the berian path. They halted there, to rest and to eat. The trill of birdsong flowed about her and the hum of flying creatures patterned the air. Even the sky seemed to throb with colour. 'It is so beautiful,' she murmured. Tel had stretched himself out on the grass beside her and did not answer. She glanced to him, his eyes were shut. Was he sleeping? She leaned over, peering at him intently, and with a smile he caught her to him. Her heart raced and then slowly and deliberately she brought her lips to his.

The kiss was long and gentle and Chant shut her eyes, luxuriating in it. She would have liked to lie there forever, caught between the clasp of his arms and the fragrant sun-filled air, but her hunter knowing stirred. 'It is not a good place to stay,' she said softly.

Tel sighed and sat up. It was the first time she had come to him and he wanted to savour the moment for as long as possible. 'You are right,' he murmured, letting his eyes travel over the soft curve of her beneath her dress. He saw her colour and he dragged his glance away. He must be patient, must give her time to want him in the way he wanted her. He scrambled to his feet and pulled her up also. 'We are nearing the bear path,' he began. 'Are we to go that way?' Chant was already staring up the slope, testing the air with nose and eyes before nodding shortly. They moved off and the tension increased. There was no need to speak of the necessity for silence or of the possibility of another grovelling retreat. They passed the place where the bear had appeared and started down the gentle slope which led back to the river. Tel began to breathe more easily.

Chant still moved forward in a hunting gait, and he forced his eyes to take in every thicket to the side, and his ears to search the air for sound. The shadows grew and the sunlight faded. At last the slope tapered, and the trees gave way to the sparser growth of the plain. Before them, the Sunwash glinted. 'We have done well,' Tel exclaimed in relief. He had not been looking forward to traversing the Old Stead, fearing what lurked there. 'If we go on, we can shorten our journey tomorrow, then we should come to the Meduin by the mid point of the day.' Chant nodded her agreement. She was heartily sick of travelling, of carrying the Scedu's burden. All she wanted now was to be free of it.

They journeyed until the purpling dusk gave way to darkness, then settled for the night on the edge of the Sunwash. They spoke little, for they were both weary from the long day, but when they had eaten they lay together under the biraq, comforted by each other's warmth. The dark had barely lifted before they were moving once more. A mist had crept in while they had slept and lay over them like a silent hand. Even the voice of the Sunwash seemed muted, and they were loath to break the quiet, speaking only in whispers. After a time, the dark spread of a massive tree loomed out of the greyness, followed swiftly by another. 'The Groves,' Tel murmured as they passed by. The Meduin Stead must be close and Chant began to think of the welcome they might receive there. She had made no farewells, she remembered uneasily, her feet slowing. 'What is it?'

'I was thinking of the way I left.' But that was not all. Her conversation with Kalia had come back to her also. Kalia's sight was as keen as Turai's, and soon she would be again under the old woman's shrewd gaze. The last of the Groves disappeared into the drift and the ground began to rise gently. Tel increased his pace, drawing slightly ahead. How eager he was! He was going to his sister, and to the man who was now his brother. It was a homecoming for him, while her home was still far distant.

The last shreds of mist dropped away and they were walking in the clear light of day. Chant was surprised at how late it was; the sun was almost overhead and before them lie the first stays of the Meduin Stead. They went on, skirting the corral fences, until they came to the most easterly of them. Tel was waiting for her and taking her hand, he stepped through into the corral. The gesture had been deliberate, designed to show those within his claim upon her. Chant resisted the urge to pull away; to lay enclosed by his warmth at night with the stars their only witness was one thing, to

publicly parade their attachment was quite another.

Tel seemed oblivious though. He strode across the corral, taking her with him and ducked through the flap into Kalia's stay. Tanalan was there and Kalia and Tarish. There was a moment of stunned silence and then Tanalan gave a cry of joy and flung her arms around Tel's neck. Tarish too was on his feet, smiling broadly. Over his shoulder Chant could see Kalia, her eyes flicking between them. Tanalan released her brother and abruptly Chant was enclosed in a hug. 'It is good to see you again,' she said, although Chant could see her uncertainty as she glanced back to her brother.

'Well Tanalan, bring some bowls, Tarish, you had better carve more meat.' Chant settled next to Tel and watched Kalia organise the younger members of her stay. She looked even frailer than she remembered, though her eyes had certainly lost none of their sharpness. Chant took the meat and began to eat. She was hungry and it made a welcome change from dried fish and berrem. 'You look well, very well,' Kalia was saying, her eyes sweeping over them. 'And are we to be witness to another wedding?'

Both Tanalan and Tarish started in surprise and Tel's hand closed over hers reassuringly. 'Yes,' he said quietly, 'though whether there be Meduin or Sunnen witnesses I do not know. It may be that we will wed in the Sceadu lands.'

Talanan turned on him swiftly. 'You would leave the Stead?'

'If necessary.' She drew breath to reply, but appeared to think better of it. Her gaze on Chant though, was cold.

'And did you find Turai and her Okianos husband well?' Kalia questioned, intent on the news expected from returning travellers, seemingly oblivious to the mounting tension of the stay. Chant heard Tel begin to speak of the Okianos and let her eyes wander to Tanalan once more. The girl's animosity was plain. She was reminded of when she had first come to the Sunnen Stead. Then Tanalan's resentment had centred on her freedom to roam, now it seemed to stem from her perception that she was robbing the stay of its protector. 'Why do you not take Chant to wash away the dust of the journey?' It was Kalia again and Chant smiled at her gratefully. Her griminess had mattered little while she had been alone with Tel, but she was acutely aware of it now that she was with others.

'Kanan is well?' she asked politely, as they made their way across the yard.

Talanan smiled tenderly, some of her former warmth returning. 'Ah, yes. He is

working in the gardens and I must soon rejoin him. The whiteroot grows well, it will be a fine Gatheringtime.' They ducked into the stay Chant had once shared with her. The room had changed. Kanan's jacket lay across the bed and there was a second wooden storage chest. There were more fleeces adorning the walls also and several dybuck pelts scattered on the floor. Hanging from the smooth wooden bedhead was a bunch of herbs, their scent lending the air a spicy fragrance. Here they lived and loved together. Chant flushed and withdrew her gaze. 'There is water and a drying cloth,' Tanalan was saying, filling a large bowl. She set it ready and then turned back. 'Tel cannot leave the Stead. You know that, do you not?

'I have not asked him to leave it.'

'You may not have asked him, but we both know that he will follow you if you go.'

'He makes his own decisions,' Chant muttered uncomfortably.

Talanan snorted. 'He has not made his own decisions since he first set eyes on you. You can find a Sceadu man, but Merala and Inkala cannot find another who will care for them as he can.' Chant said nothing, but she could feel the fire in her face. Tanalan stepped closer, gentling her voice. 'You remember how young Inkala is, and how she loves him? Duran is still a boy, he cannot be as Tel is. Whereas you are strong, you do not need him. You hunt alone, you do not need anyone, least of all a gardener.'

Chant jerked away, snatching up her pack. How short Tanalan's memory was. But a little while ago she had risked all to come to Kanan. Did she not remember the ache of separation which had impelled the act? She made her way out of the stay and across the corral. She had no clear idea of where she was going, she just wanted to be away from the words which opened the wounds of her doubts once more. Her feet took her to the edge of the Sunwash and she came to a ragged halt. Was she to run from Tel again, from their love? Tanalan was wrong to think her strong, or feckless, but what she said was true. Tel had great love for his little sister, and Inkala for him also. And the child was in need of his care. She remembered well Duran's lack of patience and resolve in ensuring her safety. She smiled bitterly. Tanalan had placed her knife all too well.

It was nearly dusk before Tel completed his tale to Kalia and excused himself. He had half expected Chant and Tanalan to return; busy with women's talk, he concluded as the

made his way to her stay. His knock brought no response, and he peered in. A bathing bowl stood ready, but the water was unused. He glanced about. Chant's pack and weapons were not there either. He felt a prickle of apprehension. If she had gone to the gardens, she would not have taken her pack. He came back into the yard just as Tanalan and Kanan appeared. He greeted Kanan formally before turning to his sister. 'Is Chant not with you?' Tanalan shook her head, and Tel noted her discomfort. 'Where then is she?' he pursued calmly.

Talanan met his eyes only with difficulty. 'I have not seen her since shortly after we left you.' Tel's thoughts raced. He guessed that Tanalan had sought to dissuade her from the match, but he kept his anger to himself. She was no longer his sister, but the wife of his brother, and he stood now in his brother's stay. Nodding to Kanan, he strode away. She might be halfway to the Terecleft by now, but he would catch her even if he had to run all the way. He hastened along the path and came to the river. She was sitting hunched on its edge, staring into its depths. An immense feeling of relief washed over him.

'Chant?' She looked up and smiled, but even in the fading light he could see her unhappiness. He scrambled down the bank and settling beside her took her hand in his. 'I suppose Tanalan has taken the opportunity to outline to you exactly why you should not wed me?' Chant nodded, her eyes on the river. 'It seems strange to me that one who risked her life passing the Terecleft should now deem love to be so unimportant,' he observed.

'Much of what she said was true.'

Tel looked at her sharply. 'Such as?'

'Leaving the stay unprotected, leaving Inkala.'

Tel snorted. 'She forgets Duran.'

'She says that he is too young.'

'He is older than when I took on the task.' Tel's face contorted at the memory and a wave of tenderness engulfed her.

'Tel ...' She pulled him close, kissing his hair, and his face and lastly his lips. His mouth was soft, his skin warm to her touch. She felt his arms tighten around her and the urgency of his kisses increase. She was swept along with them, carried on a tide of longing so intense that it was no longer bearable. The grassy bank was sharp at her back

and the air chill on her skin, but the warmth of his love enclosed her, and as the first stars winked overhead, she gave herself up to it.

She roused as Tel laid his jacket gently over her. 'You are cold.'

'No,' she muttered drowsily, sitting up. It was completely dark, the river taken by the night, betrayed only by the occasional whispering ripple. His arm came round her and she nestled against him, drinking in his scent.

'We must go back to the stay,' he said after a while.

'I do not want to.'

Tel pulled her closer and his lips brushed her forehead. 'Just this night Chant. At the dawning we will go on. There is a stay we can share, you need not be with Tanalan.'

Chant glanced up at him. 'Will Kalia approve?'

Tel shrugged and even in the starlight she could see his quick sardonic smile. 'The Meduin are not as strict on these things as the Sunnen, and Kalia I think, has always approved. No, it is Tanalan who will be outraged, but I am afraid my little sister will just have to put up with it.'

Chapter 61

As it happened, Tanalan spoke little at their breakfast, leaving Kanan to carry the conversation. 'We have had no rain since you have been gone, so the Terecleft should be clear.' Chant smiled in relief. She remembered well the horror of the earlier trip and how Tanalan had aided her afterwards. They had been close for a time then, but not now. Tanalan's face was set and she would not meet her eyes. Even as they made their farewells, she spoke not, simply giving her a brief hug before stepping back to Kanan's side. Chant waited for Tel to complete his speech with Kanan and saw him turn to his sister.

'It pleases me to see you happy and settled.' Tanalan inclined her head slightly. 'I am sorry that you do not wish the same for me.' Chant saw Tanalan stiffen and her eyes move to her. It seemed that she was about to speak, but Tel kissed her formally on each cheek, and then nodding to Kanan, turned away. Chant could see his anger and she began to consider what her welcome might be back in the Sunnen Stead. Merala had already lost her husband to the mountains and would be loath to risk her son. She was not looking forward to that time.

The weather remained fair and they journeyed steadily, reaching the Terecleft at dusk on the second day. The path now lay well clear of the water, although Chant could see the stain high on the rock wall where it had been. They stood for a moment contemplating it. 'We do not have to pass it now. We can rest here and go on at the dawning,' Tel said.

'I do not think I will like it any better at daygrow,' she replied with a small smile. Giving her a quick kiss, Tel stepped onto the smooth sweep of stone. Chant followed, keeping as close as possible to the cleft's side, refusing to let her eyes wander to the water's dark swirl. She went steadily, forcing her mind to think only of the man in front, and of the fact that she would soon be through. Still, her dress was wet with sweat when she neared the end. Tel helped her the last of the way, then gathered her into his arms. He could feel the rapid beating of her heart as he held her close. Her extreme fear of water amazed him for she seemed to fear little else. 'I never want to see this place again!' she said after a time.

'I feel the same way about bears.'

'I am afraid I cannot ensure that is so,' she said gently, her mind going to the drystreams under Ashali. Tel thought of them also and was filled with foreboding. Yet he must go that way if they were to be together. They went on at dawn, along the path Tanalan and Chant had missed on their earlier westward journey. How much easier it was now. The trail was well marked and the skies clear. She took pleasure in the scents of the air, in the drowse of flying creatures near the river's edges, in the birdcall lacing the air. But most of all, she took pleasure in Tel's company. The talk between them was easy, and his eyes tender when he looked upon her. And at night they slept as one, the warmth of the biraq enclosing them, the stars brilliant overhead.

The snow-capped mountains came into view, and finally the edges of the Stead. They continued up the last of the slope, coming to Tel's stay as day waned. Chant hesitated at the corral gate, her eyes going to Ashali. On the far slopes, beyond the meltbright, the Sceadu lay. Beyond Ashali. She felt the fear grip her heart. She had no right to take Tel with her into the darkness. He was waiting for her and she could see his impatience.

Tel forced himself to still, seeing the shadow touch her face. 'We will rest here for a few days, before the last part of the journey. Come.' He swung open the gate and she followed him into the corral. Inkala was at play near the smokestay and she looked up with a shriek as Tel appeared. She came to him in a mad sprint and he hoisted her high into the air before hugging her intensely. Chant watched with a heavy heart. Inkala wriggled free then and leapt into Chant's arms.

'Chanty!' she cried and kissed her, then breaking away, went dancing across the corral. 'Tel's home, Tel's home,' she sang and abruptly the flap of the stay was thrust aside and Duran stood there. His face broke into an incredulous smile and he embraced his brother warmly. Then turning to Chant, he kissed her on the cheek.

'It is good to have you back.' Chant returned his smile, equally pleased. He seemed strangely altered, although she could not define how.

'Is Merala within?'

Duran dragged his eyes from her and back to Tel. 'She is in the gardens.' They followed him into the stay and settled about the fire. 'Your labour has been sorely missed, and also Tanalan's,' he said, passing them berrem and dried fruit. His eyes flicked between them speculatively. 'Talanan remains with the Meduin?' he asked at last.

Tel nodded. 'She married shortly after we arrived there and Chant and I went on to the Okianos. We have been there most of the days since.'

'You gave permission for her to marry Kanan?' Duran's face was incredulous.

Tel finished his berrem and reached for more. 'It was time that she married.'

Duran flicked a glance to Chant and she smiled warmly. 'She is well content, Duran. We have just come from there.'

'And how are the Okianos?'

'Septin is as always. I do not think he will change until he is in his grave.' The flap swung back and Merala entered. Tel rose and Chant watched them embrace, seeing the joy on his mother's face. Inkala jumped up and down impatiently and at last Merala released her grip on Tel and Inkala entered the circle of arms. Chant watched them, feeling increasingly uneasy. It was her fault that Tel was to leave them again, her fault that he might not return. She became aware of Duran's eyes upon her, his gaze measuring. He knew, she realised abruptly.

At last Merala settled beside her. 'You look well.' Her eyes swept over her. She did indeed look well. The sun had brought colour to her cheeks, and there was a softness which had been lacking earlier. She watched Tel bring his stool near and stilled. There was a familiarity in his closeness which went beyond friendship.

'We are to wed,' Tel said quietly. Merala nodded, it was as she had thought. She liked Chant well enough but it would have been better had he chosen a Sunnen wife. Chant was a hunter, and the stay needed another pair of hands in the gardens. 'We must go to the Sceadu lands first. We may not return.'

Every face in the room turned to Chant and she winced at the bluntness of his words. Even Inkala was staring. 'There is no way over the mountains.' Merala's voice was hoarse, her skin bleached in shock. Chant dropped her eyes to the fire and felt Tel's hand steal over hers.

'You are right,' he responded steadily. 'But there is a way through. It is the way Chant came here.'

'It is madness even to try,' Merala exploded at last, rising. 'Do you want to end up like your father?'

Tel also rose. 'My father wandered off without a clear idea of where he was going. I go knowing there is a path.'

'And what of Gatheringtime Tel? The stay needs you. Would you turn your back on us so easily?' Chant saw his eyes fire.

'I have cared for this stay since I was little older than Inkala. I have planned and worked, and thought always of the needs of those who live here. But I have at last found someone I love, and I do not intend to lose her in the way you lost Barin.'

Merala turned on him fiercely. 'Do not speak of that which you know nothing!'

Chant sprang to her feet. 'No more!' There was a short silence then Inkala began to weep. Chant took several deep breaths, struggling to control the rage of her blood. 'I am Sceadu, and I owe the Sceadu first. I must go there, at least for a time. I do not ask Tel to come. I understand that he owes the stay. It is right that he remains here.' She faltered, and dropped her eyes. 'It is right that he stays with you.' Inkala's hand had stolen into hers but she disengaged it carefully, and ducked under the flap into the cool night air. In the east, Ashali lay, pale as a scintion in the starshine. She had left the Sceadu with a heart full of bitterness. There was no bitterness now, just a gnawing grief.

The flap stirred and Duran was beside her. She turned away, not trusting herself to speak. 'Do you remember how we once argued over your weapons and you stormed out here?'

Chant smiled in spite of herself. 'It seems a long time ago now,' she said thickly.

Duran touched her lightly on the arm. 'One day this will seem the same way.'

'I do not want trouble in your stay.'

Duran snorted. 'There is always trouble, it is the way of people. For a long while, it was Tanalan with her incessant talk of Kanan and threats to run away. Now it is Tel, with his love for you.'

'He should remain here.'

'And be miserable? What is the point of that? No, Merala will come to see that he is serious, and she knows what it is to lose one greatly loved. As for the gardens, we can let one go for a Gatheringtime. There will be fewer mouths to feed in the stay anyway, and so less need of the labour.' He paused and his eyes followed hers to the dim outline of Anarkin. 'I hope you will return, though,' he said softly. 'I will miss Tel very much and I would greatly like to have you here as a sister.'

Chant felt her eyes fill with tears once more. 'I thank you Duran.'

Chapter 62

Tel watched the flap settle into place and brought his eyes back to his mother. 'I was wrong to speak of you and Barin, and for that I beg your pardon. I have no way of knowing how you felt, only of the way it is with me.'

Merala remained standing stiffly, but her eyes softened. 'And how is it with you?'

'It is as if the world is at last made whole.'

Merala sighed and sat down heavily. 'What is this path you speak of under the mountains?'

Tel drew his stool to the fire. 'When Chant came here, she did so through caves. I know nothing of their nature, except that they open onto the Sceadu side of Anarkin.'

'The way is well marked?'

Tel shook his head. 'From what Chant has said, there are no markings at all. Nor is there light. She found her way by following the bears.'

There was a short silence. 'And yet you would risk it?'

'I have no choice.'

'Why must Chant return? Surely if you are to wed, there is no longer a need?'

Tel smiled dryly. 'Chant was sent on quest by their foreteller. Her task was to find that which might bring them water. She will not abandon the task.' Merala stared at him in bewilderment. 'She sought *me*, though it took both of us until the Okianos to realise it. Had we not spent most of the journey in open warfare, we both might have seen it sooner, and saved ourselves the trip.' He laughed ruefully. 'And it has taken me a good part of the time since to convince her that my feelings are true, so poor have I been at knowing my own heart.' He paused and his face hardened. 'I have lost her once, I do not intend to lose her again. If we are to die beneath the mountains, so be it.'

In the firelight his eyes glittered intensely, and for a moment it was as if Barin stared back at her across the yawning emptiness of many, many Gatheringtimes. She took his hand in hers. 'At least stay for a few days and rest. Inkala has missed you much and Duran has need of a brother for a little.' Tel rose and kissed her gently on the cheek and Merala watched him disappear through the doorway. He sought Chant, and it was natural he should do so. Her welfare now replaced theirs as his main concern. She sighed. If only he had taken a Sunnen woman! Yet love rarely obeyed such rules. She

thought again of Barin and her face softened. She hoped with all her heart that Chant's hunter skills would bring them to the Sceadu lands and safely back again.

Tel slept in the stay he shared with Duran, and Chant with Inkala in the stay which had once been Tanalan's. She found it strange to sleep alone, to sleep with thatch as roof instead of the stars. She rose at daygrow, taking the track which led to the Silverwash. She wanted to bathe, and to think of the way they must soon go. The mist swathed the path and hid Ashali's face, but the day would be fine. She went easily, feeling curiously free without her pack. The scents of the foliage patterned the air and the starwings' call was of forests of ashin and fyr. She wondered what those others were doing now. Ket would no doubt have finished bathing; she was always up with the sun, and the Sceadu sun was earlier.

The water was cool and she slipped in quickly. Tel had said in the last night that Merala had accepted his need to go. She wondered if it was so, and whether indeed she should take him in any case. She stared down at her body, shadowy in the water's green depths. Had she not passed through its darkness? Had she not resolved to hunt alone no longer? She had forgotten a drying cloth, and so set off swiftly, allowing her speed to warm and dry her. Slashes of sunlight laced the trees, forming small tarns of intense green, and the fragrant air pulsed about her. Could she be happy here? The cry of the starwings was the same, the flash of ashin also. But there were no scintons to hunt and no murrow hidden within the earth. She pushed herself up the last of the slope and swung open the gate of the corral just as Tel emerged from his stay. His hair was tousled with sleep and his eyes soft in the early morning light. A wave of tenderness swept over her, pushing aside her earlier doubts.

'You have been bathing?'

She nodded. 'In the pools the Sunnen use, not the river,' she said quickly. He pulled her close and brought his lips to her cheek, drinking in her scent. He had missed her greatly in the last night, missed the quiet of her breathing and the sense of her next to him. He felt her soften and his lips sought her mouth, but at that moment Duran appeared and she jerked away.

Duran watched her go, and then turned back to Tel. His brother's face held an expression he had not seen before. 'When do you leave?'

'Not for a few dawns,' Tel replied, his eyes still fixed on the stay Chant had entered.

Duran smiled in relief. 'That is good, for we have much to speak of.'

Chant stood quietly on the steep bank of the Sunwash. Before her the clefted crown of Ashali rose, purple against the deeper black of the sky. Daygrow was still some way off. She waited for Tel to come level then they moved down toward the crossing place. The broad stones were wide enough to allow them to pass side by side, and Tel took her arm to steady her. Then, taking washwood to probe for traps, they went carefully up the slope towards the trees. Clearbark and cone, Tel had called them, when they had sat in the tur on that last night speaking of the way they must go, but to Chant they would always be ashin and fyr. They reached the soft carpet of leaves as the new sun lit Ashali's back, then struck southward, to the where the drystream opened into Ashali's heart. She could take no pleasure in the moment though.

Her thoughts were on Merala, and on their parting. Merala had wished her well, and they had embraced, but her eyes had been heavy with grief. Chant grimaced, feeling the cooler air on her skin. She wore her thick aperiion jacket, and her fur-lined boots, one neatly stitched where the trap had torn it, and Tel wore a hide shirt, and carried in his pack a fur cape which had once belonged to Barin. It would be Snowmelt in the Sceadu Place, Chant reminded herself, so less chill than when she had left. They carried the biraq, and enough food for perhaps ten days travel. She sighed. There was so much she did not know. She had slept twice in the drystreams, but she had stumbled into them high on Ashali. There must be other paths which the berian took, for they did not travel far into the whitelands. She knew nothing of these though, or where they might open. Tel had insisted on bringing flints and tinder, but she did not think they would be of aid. It had been her skin and her nose which had guided her westward, for the drystreams were like the berian nest Inkala played with; inextricably tangled to the eye.

The sun was high overhead before they came out of the trees. They must be very close now. She paused, scanning the rocky feet of the mountain, turning now and then to peer back towards the Sunwash. 'It was here that I first saw you,' Tel said softly. Chant nodded, struggling to shake off her sense of oppression. 'What did you first think?'

'That you were not a man.' She moved restlessly, peering up at Ashali. 'Only the

Little Sisters and Brothers are unpatterned among the Sceadu. I will not ask what you first thought of me.'

'That was long ago,' he said, kissing her gently. She smiled too, but he could see her unease. 'Can you not remember where the opening is?'

'I remember.'

'Then what troubles you?'

'I do not want to risk you.'

Tel sighed; he had thought this long resolved. 'We go together,' he said firmly.

'And if I lose my way?'

'We will take what comes.'

She turned her eyes to the mountain once more. 'Let us go then.'

Chapter 63

Tel forced his way through the narrow opening to where she waited. Before them a single tunnel stretched away, rising steeply. There was no doubt the way they must first go. Chant set off and he followed. He had led her to the ocean, now he must trust to her knowing. The light dimmed rapidly and the swing of her hair was swallowed by the blackness. 'Chant!' She stopped and turned. 'What if we lose each other in the darkness?'

'Do you not know my scent?' Tel stared at her, shrugging helplessly. He saw her smile.

'I know yours.' She turned and went on. He could hear her footfalls and the rhythm of her breathing, and he shut all else from his mind. They went steadily and the steepness of the cavern lessened. It was easier then, and her breathing quieter. He kept his pace even, not allowing her to draw too far in front. After a time, he began to feel thirsty and his hunger stirred. 'Do you think it is nearing night?'

Her footsteps stilled and he stopped also. 'Do you want to rest?'

Tel hesitated, not wanting to show weakness. 'I am thirsty.'

'We may as well eat then, and then we can go on until we are tired. I think it best we clear the drystreams as quickly as possible.'

He heard her settle on the floor and he did so also, fumbling in his pack for the berrem. 'Do you think there are bears here?'

'No, their scent is faint. I do not think they have come this way since the start of Snowmelt.' Tel's heart lurched. It was their scent which must guide them. He finished the berrem and drank from the waterskin. 'Are you ready?'

'Yes,' he answered, though the last thing he wanted to do was to go on. He set his mind once more to the sound of her feet and the pattern of her breathing. His muscles began to ache and the pack dragged at his shoulders. He wondered if it was night outside, or whether dawn was nearing. Abruptly the cavern wall gave way and his hand trailed into nothingness.

'We go straight onward,' her voice floated back.

Tel stumbled to a stop. 'Wait.' Her footfalls fell silent. 'How do you know we go onward?'

'The scent goes that way.'

'I want to see.'

He heard her sigh. 'Do you not trust me?'

His heart began a slow hammer, but he slid his pack from his back and fumbled for the flints. 'I must see,' he repeated. He struck the flints and the tinder flared, searing his eyes. In the brief glow he saw how the tunnel twinned; one jagged opening winding off to the left, that which they followed hewn straight. The tinder flickered out. 'Some one has worked the stone,' he said as he repacked the flints. He remembered how Chant had spoken of black men coming over the mountains and he wondered whether they had come this way. He heard her footsteps start once more and hastened after her. She said nothing, and now the silence between them was strained. He went on, feeling the draught of other openings, hearing her voice tersely instructing which they would follow. He did not question the way again, nor did he ask for rest. It was Chant who finally called a halt and settled on the hard floor of the cavern. It was chill when they stopped walking and Tel spread the biraq over them before pulling her close. She lay in his arms, stiff and silent.

'I trust you Chant.'

He heard her snort. 'Then why did you have to see?'

'I am not a hunter. The darkness tells me nothing, except that I might lose you.' He felt her relax a little against him and he tightened his grip. 'Do the caves open close to the Sceadu Place?' he asked after a while.

'I do not know.'

'But you came that way.'

'I was high on Ashali in the middle of stormsnow when I fell into the them.' Tel took a deep breath, remembering suddenly the injury to her shoulder. 'The berian would not come that way, for the opening is high above the floor, and they could not return. So there must be an opening elsewhere.'

'Yes,' he agreed, but he was filled with doubt. He did not know how long he slept before Chant roused him, but it did not seem enough. His eyes were gritty and his bones ached. They ate the dried fish and berrem before continuing. Tel forced his feet to follow hers and to shut out his doubts and fears. She went steadily, without pausing. She did not seem anxious. Was her confidence born of her hunter skills, or was she as blind as he?

His hunger grew but he made himself wait until she called a halt. He had long

noticed that her need of food was less than his, or perhaps it was that her control was greater. He sat so that his arm touched hers, for he hated the loneliness which the darkness brought. 'Do you think it is night or day outside?' he asked.

'Night again most probably.' He moved restlessly and felt her hand close over his. 'I slept twice on my journey to your Place, so we may be nearing the end.'

'Were you not frightened?' He felt the heat in his face and was glad the darkness hid it.

'Yes, until I remembered I was a hunter.' She would not speak of the she-berian who had guided her on the mountain, for he could have no understanding it. Instead she reached for him, feeling the softness of his lips. 'I was glad to come to the light again though,' she murmured at last. They slept as they had on the first night, waking to the darkness once more. Tel gritted his teeth as they set off, wondering if they would ever see the kindly light of day again. He wondered too if they still travelled east. Chant knew such things, he reassured himself, remembering how she had guided him in the Marshlands. So lost in his thoughts was he that he failed to notice her footsteps had stopped and cannoned into her.

'I am sorry,' he said hastily, steadying her. She did not reply. 'What is it?'

'I have lost the scent.'

Tel felt his skin prickle but he kept his voice calm. 'I will use the flint again. It may show us something.' The darkness dissipated and before them the cave honeycombed into a maze of openings. He glimpsed her large dark eyes and the flame flicked out. For a moment neither spoke.

'Not a happy sight,' she muttered.

'It must be time we ate anyway,' Tel said, pulling out berrem and dried fruit. His hand felt for hers and he pulled her down beside him. 'Eat,' he repeated gently. Chant took the food and swallowed. There was no scent. What else could aid her? She would give much for a berian at that moment, despite the sharpness of their teeth and claws. She forced the image from her mind. What did she know? They must be over half way through, for they were in their third day of travel. The path must soon descend, she reasoned, for the berian did not live in the whitelands. They must take a path which went down. If they followed for a while and it did not, then they must come back to this place and try another. And if none of them descended? She pushed the thought from her. They

must be nearing the eastern side of the mountain. She rose and heard Tel rise also.

'We need count our paces in case we must return,' she said tersely.

'What do you intend?' Chant hesitated. Her plan seemed a poor one now that she must give voice to it. Tel listened without interruption. 'I think you are right,' he said finally. Chant took a deep breath, and searching for the most easterly opening, set off once more. The way was smooth underfoot but she sensed the roof slowly closing in on her. After a time it was skimming her hair, and she was forced to walk hunched over.

'I do not think I have chosen well,' she grunted. She brought her hand to the cavern ceiling and gasped.

'What is it?'

'Berian fur.' Tel said nothing, for a moment grappling with the unfamiliar word. 'Bears,' Chant repeated, and Tel could hear her happiness. He smiled also and for a moment they gripped hands. The drystream roof remained low, but the air carried berian scent. It was stronger here, stronger than it had been earlier. She slowed her steps and drew her bow from her pack. 'We must take care. There might be berian.' Tel's heart sank. It seemed that the awful darkness was all but over; surely they would not now have to fight a bear to win through. Gradually the darkness began to fade. At first all he could see was her faint outline, then the lighter tone of her skin, then even the faint sheen of her hair. She carried the bow before her and went forward half crouched, as if on hunt. He tensed and his eyes searched the way ahead. The musky scent of bears was recognisable even to his own nostrils. They rounded a sharp curve and a slash of light tore the darkness. Tel threw up his hand, but Chant forced herself to meet it, searching for what might be there. The cavern floor was littered with dry branches and torn and scattered grass. 'A den,' she muttered incredulously as they edged past it. 'We have come back through a berian den.'

Chapter 64

Tel stood surveying the land about him. They were in a dense forest of clearbark and cone, the like of which he had not seen before. The air was bright and clean, heavy with the odour of cone, and beyond he glimpsed the brilliant white of snow. He watched Chant draw several deep breaths. She looked different suddenly, her white skin and intense black hair echoing the colours of the land. 'I have come this way many times, but never would I have thought this den led to the west.' She shook her head in wonder. 'We are not far from the edge of my Place, but we are on a berian path and so must take care.'

They began their downward trek, walking side by side where the trees allowed it. Chant carried her bow ready, but her eyes flicked to the branches above more often than to the way they went. The sun began to sink and the air to cool. 'I spent much time here, when I was growing,' she murmured after a while, and Tel caught an edge of sadness in her voice. They cleared the trees and came to a thickly grassed slope. Chant stooped to a small plant and offered him some berries. They reminded him of wildfruit.

'Sherenberries,' she said with a smile, then stiffened. Turning swiftly, she readied the bow. Tel half crouched too, cursing his lack of weapon. Chant remained absolutely still, staring ahead, though he saw how she tested the air. Nothing stirred and he began to feel faintly foolish. Then a man appeared on the slope below, walking slowly, intent on the growth to either side of the track. Chant stepped back, putting herself between him and the stranger. Even as she did so, the other looked up and came to an abrupt halt. He was about his own height and strength, Tel judged, his hair as black as Chant's, his face marked with three lines. For a moment no one moved and then his face broke into an incredulous smile.

He came up, stopping a length from them, his eyes flicking between them. 'Chant. I did not think to see you again.'

'Nor I you Scead.' Tel sucked in his breath; the man Chant had loved, the one married to Siah. He finished his intense appraisal and became aware that the Sceadu's gaze was equally measuring. Chant had lowered her bow and had come to his side once more. 'I bring with me a man of the Sunnen ... from the west.' Tel detected a slight note of triumph in her voice, and he was gratified that she had at least called him a man. Scead returned his nod and Tel saw him bring his eyes back to Chant. He seemed genuinely

pleased to see her.

'You go now to the Great Turret?'

Chant shook her head. 'This night we spend in Talith's tur. We will come at daygrow, to meet with the Council and Siah.' Scead nodded, his eyes once more on Tel. Chant moved off then and Tel with her, feeling the other man's eyes follow. It was long before they spoke again, and Tel wondered if the wounds of that earlier love remained. Chant's face showed little though.

'Is Talith a friend of yours?' he asked at last, more to break the silence than anything.

'No.'

'Chant ...'

'We must collect wood,' she said shortly, 'we are close now.' Tel bit back his questions and began to gather the windfall as she did. It was almost dark, and he could barely see her face. Her tension though was obvious. A small stay came into view, its walls constructed of dense fibrous wood, bound together. Chant pushed open the door and he followed her in. It was as black as the caverns, but she went to the far end and in a short time a small lamp flared. Tel glanced about. There was little to see. A fireplace near where Chant stood, a shelf, a thick scatter of grass mats on the floor, some rugs stacked in one corner. It did not look like it had been slept in for many days. 'Talith was my mother. The tur is now mine until the first child comes.'

Tel remained staring at her. The strangeness of their way of doing came to him afresh, and he felt his stomach tighten. 'I will build the fire.' His hands placed the wood as they had so many times before, but his mind struggled with all that was new. He reminded himself that Chant had endured far more in the Stead, but it brought him little comfort. They warmed themselves as they ate the berrem and fish from the stay. There was no food in the tur, and Chant made no move to seek any. Nor did she speak, but sat with her eyes turned to the flames. 'Scead seemed happy to see you.' Chant nodded. 'And were you happy to see him?' Tel probed.

Chant remained staring at the fire, and for a moment he wondered whether she had heard him, then she shrugged. 'We must speak of the Council.' Tel took a deep breath, steadying his thoughts. He had felt sure of her in the caverns, but now she seemed to be slipping away from him. He forced himself to listen while she described

each of the Council members and their task within the Sceadu. They sounded much as the Sunnen elders, though the Sceadu Council held women as well. The fire was low when at last she fell silent. Tel was weary, and he could see the exhaustion mirrored in her own face. She rose, dragged the rugs from the corner and handed him one. 'It is best to sleep near the fire,' she said, pulling the heavy fleece round her. Tel did likewise, though his need of her was great. If she chose to sleep alone then he too must relinquish the comfort of her nearness.

He woke to the soft click of the tur door. Chant came back to the fire, her arms laden with wood. 'You should have woken me,' he muttered, watching her rebuild the fire. Her hands were reddened with cold and her breath clouded the air.

'I needed time alone,' she said quietly, intent on her task. 'There was no need to rouse you, it is not yet daygrow.' She held her hands to the flame, feeling the tingle of returning blood. She had not been so cold for many days. The sweetstick kindled, sending spicy smoke curling into the air. The scent was familiar, yet strange. She had climbed high into the redlands, had sat and listened to the ariet's call, had looked down upon the Great Turrel as it slumbered in the darkness. She wanted it all to be as it had been before, but it was not. Even the meeting with Scead had not drawn her back. She sighed. Tel would think her feckless if she were to speak of these doubts. She dragged her eyes from the fire and to him, seeing the anxiety in his face. Her mind was in such turmoil though, that she did not speak of these thoughts. 'Did you sleep well?' she asked instead. He nodded, his eyes still intent upon her. 'The Council will assemble at daygrow, we should eat.'

'What?' he asked dryly.

'We have berrem and fish from your Place,' she answered calmly, 'and I have gathered some more sherenberries. If there is meat in the Great Turrel, some will be given when it is known we have returned. Otherwise, I will go on hunt.' They ate quickly and made their way out into the crisp morning. Tel pulled his cape close. The dawn came sooner here than in the Stead, but it did not seem to bring much warmth. The path led downward, through scattered stands of clearbark and cone. As they went, Chant pointed out the plants which the Sceadu ate, or used to heal, and where the creatures of the night had been. Tel found it increasingly hard to attend to her words however, for he was

troubled by what he must say to the Council. Would they accept the need to build drystreams, to set gardens? It was colder here, the earth less kind, still, there were parts which could be planted. Would they choose that way? Or would they cleave to the older ways, despite their hunger? If he could not convince them of the necessity of change and Chant chose to stay ...? He grimaced. He must then spend his life grubbing for food in the way that they now did. He looked at the woman beside him; he did not want her to endure such hardship.

The sound of children's voices floated on the air and the broad sweeping walls of a large building appeared. The Great Turrel, he surmised. Abruptly a child issued from the low entrance way and came to a jagged stop. She looked at him in wide-eyed amazement, then gaped at Chant, before launching herself into her arms. Tel watched them hug, saw the child bury her face into Chant's hair. She wore one line upon her face - the first naming Tel recalled. She was about Inkala's age and he felt a sudden stab of longing. 'What are you earthnamed?' Chant asked her softly.

'Ariet.'

'It is well done.'

The child gripped her hand, unwilling to let her pass on. 'You are not going to go away again, are you Chant?'

Tel saw the flicker of pain on Chant's face. 'Perhaps, Ariet.' She disengaged herself gently and stooped through the entrance and he followed. The last time he had seen so many people in one place had been among the Vulturis, but that was where the similarity ended. There was a contentment about this gathering; a comfortable mixing of old and young. Even as he stood, allowing his eyes to shift to the dimness of the room, an old woman stepped forward. Her hair was more grey than black, her face deeply lined, yet she moved with surprising speed. For a moment Ket and Chant contemplated each other, and then Ket drew her into her arms. Tel stood uncomfortably by, aware suddenly that Chant was weeping. He had seen her cry rarely, and it surprised him that she did so now. After a time, Ket kissed her on each cheek and Chant stepped back, drawing her sleeve across her face.

Then reaching for his hand, she led him across the crowded space of the Turrel. It was only as they neared the back wall that Tel realised that it curved round, concealing another room. Ket disappeared round it and they followed. He felt Chant's grip on his

hand tighten, and the skin of his neck shifted. There were many others there. The man they had met in the last night, a young woman, and older Sceadu like Ket. Chant's hand brought him to a halt. Then she stepped forward. 'I greet you Siah.' Tel saw the young woman incline her head, though she spoke not. Tel felt his anger stir. Chant had risked all and she lacked even the grace to thank her. He flicked his eyes to Scead, and had an uncomfortable feeling that the other man knew his thoughts. Schooling his face to calmness, he waited. 'I have crossed the mountains, I have journeyed to the tarn in the far west, I have brought that which might give the Sceadu water.'

'The Sceadu thank you.' He watched Chant bow, turn and walk past him back to the main room. She did not look at him, and he had to force his eyes not to follow her. There was a shuffle of movement around him and he watched those gathered there sit. He sat also. Siah brought her eyes to him and abruptly he was caught in their piercing gaze. 'Let us begin,' she said quietly.

Chapter 65

Tel came the last of the way up the slope to Talith's tur, surprised that the sun was overhead. Somehow he had expected it to be lower in the sky, so long did it seem since he had last walked here. In the Great Turrel he had spoken of the manner of Sunnen life, of the stonestreams, and of the gardens, and he had been questioned intensely about everything he had said. He sighed, feeling the ache in his shoulders. It was not just the questioning which made him feel as though he had journeyed for many days, but the unremitting scrutiny of Siah's eyes. He had felt discomfited before in the presence of Sekwana, but this young woman ... At least he now understood a little more clearly what had prompted Chant to set off into the mountains. He pushed the tur door open.

'Chant?' She was not there. He glanced around. Her pack and weapons were propped against one wall. He turned back, scanning the slope and dense wood before him. She could be anywhere in this valley, he realised in frustration. He had great need to speak with her, to have the reassurance of her love. He pulled the door shut and prowled irritably around the room. It was chill even within this shelter. He might as well do something useful and build the fire. He glanced toward the fireplace and paused. There was a large water pot there, and on the shelf above, a small joint of meat. He stood contemplating it, struck again by the strangeness of their way of life. He would have given much at that moment to be back in the safe familiarity of the Stead.

It was almost dark before he at last heard footsteps at the door. He threw it open; it was not Chant but the one called Ket. 'I thought you were Chant,' he muttered, stepping aside so she might enter. The look of happy expectation on the Sunnen's face comforted Ket greatly. If Chant was to leave, it would at least be with one who loved her.

'She will return soon,' she said quietly, settling herself on the floor. She waited while he lowered himself to the mat next to her. 'The Council thanks you for your difficult journey here, and for your generosity in sharing your ways. We have spent much time in discussion, and we have thought much on the path we should now tread.' She paused, grimacing as she eased her bones on the floor. 'We have also sought the dreams of Siah.' Her dark eyes looked upon him gravely. 'The Sceadu live by what the land chooses to give, by what the whitelands and redlands offer. We go to the creshans to

quench our thirst, we do not ask that the creshans come to us. To do other, would not to be Sceadu.'

Tel's sense of frustration grew. 'You will not set stonestreams and gardens?'

Ket contemplated him thoughtfully for a while before replying. 'We do not know all things. We are younger than the berian in our time here, and they are but cubs to the age of the mountains. What has been taken may one day return.'

'And if it does not?'

'You have given us your knowing of other ways to live. We will not forget them.' Tel watched her struggle to her feet. 'If you choose to stay amongst us, you will be welcomed. But if you choose to go, I ask that you let Chant be as she is. She can no more plant and reap than you can hunt.' He saw her face gentle. 'I have cared for her for many Snowmelts, as Little Sister and as Fleet, and I would that she be happy.'

'I love her,' Tel replied, angered by her words.

'I do not doubt that, only that you might not remember what she is.' Her dark eyes were fixed upon him with an intensity which reminded him of Chant.

'I will not forget.' She nodded then, and he watched her move away into the thickening dusk.

It was not till the evening of the following day that Chant returned. He had spent his time in gathering windfall for the fire, in searching the scrubby slope for sherenberries and in pacing round the tur. He dared not stray far for he feared the bears and whatever else the Sceadu lands held. He had finally given up fretting and was sitting on the tur's step, peering up at the sweeping snow-capped back of Anarkin when she appeared out of the gloom. She came slowly with her head bowed and was almost to him before she looked up. Seared across her face was an angry red line. He stared at it in shock, and then the realisation came to him; the third of the patternings, the marriage line. 'I have missed you,' he muttered. She came to his arms and stayed there a long time, nestled against him. Tel felt his doubts drift away, as insubstantial as the mist among the cone trees. Whatever was to come, they would face together. They went inside and settled next to the warmth of the fire. 'Your people have refused my help.'

'I know, I have spoken with Ket.'

'They seem to prefer going hungry to seeking new ways,' Tel went on bitterly.

Chant's hand closed over his. 'In the place of the Okianos, the water was taken by She and then returned. I have thought that perhaps it is the same here. One day, She will send it back.'

Tel snorted in disgust. 'That's what Ket said.' He took several steadying breaths. 'It may be a long, long time, Chant,' he added more quietly.

Chant nodded. 'A hunter is patient.'

He turned her face gently to him. 'I do not want you to suffer.'

A strange expression came into her eyes. 'I have made my farewells.'

His heart quickened. 'You will come to the Stead?'

She nodded. 'At least for a time.' She sighed deeply. 'When Siah gave me the task, I did not think that I could cross the mountains. But her seeing was true. I went to the far west and I came here again as she told. But it is not the same.' She scrambled to her feet. 'I am not the same!' She turned from him and he had to strain to hear her next words. 'I no longer belong here.'

He rose and drew her into his arms. 'You will not have to live as the Sunnen do Chant. You will still be able to hunt. There are prin and perhaps other things Duran knows of, and there are forests of ashin and fyr on our side of the mountains too. I will try to make it well for you in the Stead,' he finished tenderly.

She raised her eyes to his. 'I know.'

Chant roused in the dark before daygrow. The fire had crumbled to a glow of red, bright in the darkness of the tur. She was deliciously warm, curled in Tel's arms under the heavy fold of the sleeping rug. Soon they must rise, take their meal, and gather their packs. Then they would tread the berian path up to the groves of ashin and fyr, and along the mountain's back to the berian den. In two nights and they would be far from here, in the place of the Sunnen. Her skin flashed fire and she rose and went to the window, thrusting the shutters wide. The mountains soared upward, blacker than the night, and above them, She rode the sky. Chant drew the white pulsing air deep into her lungs, feeling its ice burn her flesh.

'She shines on both sides of the mountains.' Tel said gently, coming to her. He brought his arms around her and she felt the warmth of his skin against hers. 'The way we have travelled we will travel again, for we now know the way between your Place

and mine.' Chant nodded, intent on the crowns of fyr and ashin. The first rays of the sun were sliding towards them, catching them in a net of gold.

'Yes,' she said, turning to him, 'we know the way.'

Commentary

The masculine orientation of Campbell's monomyth has been noted in the *Introduction* (p.6), and his claim that it serves the same initiatory purposes for both men and women, discussed. Alternative notions of the hero journey and the nature of heroism, proposed by Biallas (1989), Pratt (1982) and others, suggest that Campbell's contention is supportable, if the parameters of heroism are expanded beyond the prevailing patriarchal model. The purpose of the narrative *Snowmelt* has been to test whether indeed this is so.

While *Snowmelt* is fantasy, the mythic structure identified by Campbell is equally applicable to mimetic narratives, having been identified by Robinson (1994) in such films as *The Piano* and *Lorenzo's Oil*, and formulated as a general guide for narrative artists in *The Writer's Journey* (Vogler 1992). *Snowmelt* was constructed as a fantasy for a number of reasons. Fantasy's ability to create an 'apatriarchal space' (Blum 1988, p.7), in which alternative models of male/female behaviour can be postulated, allows the masculine nature of the hero quest to be highlighted and questioned. The fantastic secondary world also permits a stripping away of the banality and trivia which characterise daily life, focusing attention clearly on the natural and human forces affecting the protagonists.

During the quest journey - a classic motif of fantasy - the protagonists move through a landscape both physical and psychological. The exigencies of the journey highlight and then scour away the veneer of social conventions, forcing the travellers into a new form of honesty with each other and with themselves. As well as providing Campbell's trials and victories of initiation necessary to psychological growth, these hardships contribute to a rich layer of symbolism. Within fantasy, this symbolism may incorporate archetypal figures or it may be composed of motifs relevant to the nature and condition of the protagonists. *Snowmelt* contains both. For instance, mentor archetypes - such as older wise women - are represented by Merala, Kalia and Turai, who, each in her own way, aids and advises Chant. And it is the lack of a wise old man in Tel's formative years, which inhibits his growth towards an adult persona.

A second motif of particular importance in the narrative, is that of shadow. In *Snowmelt* it assumes two aspects: the Jungian shadow and the rain shadow. In broad terms, the Jungian shadow consists of aspects of the conscious self which have been repressed into the unconscious. O'Connor (1992) describes it thus:

It is the necessary consequence of the clash between society and the individual, the product of the split that comes about through establishing a sense of identity at the ego-consciousness level ... the shadow is made up of negatives of the ego's positives (p.135).

Thus as a member of a society which values the 'rational', Tel suppresses his instinctual yearnings into a part of his unconscious - the shadow. The Jungian shadow serves a number of functions within the narrative. In a general sense, the Sceadu people represent the shadow of the Sunnen, with Chant representing the shadow elements of Tel. The Sceadu values include a strong sense of community, where connection is illustrated by communal living and sharing. Chant's natural propensity toward solitariness is socially acceptable in her role as a hunter, but unacceptable when expressed as disobedience to the unifying philosophy of Siah. It is the violent eruption of her own shadow, symbolised by the burning of the scintion pelt (the breaking of Talabraith), which is the catalyst for her starting the journey to adulthood. This is the aspect of the shadow which shows up as the 'impulsive or inadvertent act' noted by Von Franz (1978), where 'before one has time to think, the evil remark pops out, the plot is hatched, the wrong decision is made, and one is confronted with results that were never intended or consciously wanted' (pp.174-175).

The stirring of Tel's shadow manifests itself both in disturbing dreams and restless feelings of unworthiness, and its emergence into his conscious mind is complete when Chant (and the shadow elements she represents) is thrust into his life. As von Franz (1978) points out:

The actual process of individuation - the conscious coming-to-terms with one's own inner center ... generally begins with a wounding of the personality and the suffering that accompanies it. This initial shock amounts to a sort of 'call', although it is not often recognised as such (p.169).

Chant and Tel are both reluctant travellers along the path towards adulthood. It is the journey, and all that it entails, which allows them to arrive at the stage of acceptance outlined by von Franz (1978): 'The ego must be able to listen attentively and to give itself, without any further design or purpose, to that inner urge toward growth' (p.164).

The second aspect of shadow important to the narrative is that of the rain shadow. A rain shadow occurs when warm, moisture-laden air is forced to rise over a mountain barrier. Rising air cools, and cooling air has a reduced capacity to hold moisture, thus precipitation (either as rain or snow) occurs. As the air crosses then descends on the other side of the mountains, it warms once more. At this point it is drier (having shed moisture as precipitation) and the warming caused by its descent now means that its capacity to hold moisture is increased. The result of this phenomena is that the windward side of a mountain range has greater precipitation than the leeward side. In the geography of *Snowmelt* (loosely modelled on the west coast of North America), the winds travel across the coastal plains of the Okianos and Vulturis before rising to cross the Anarkin/Ashali mountain range, shedding most of their moisture on the western Sunnen side. Although climatic change has resulted in a reduction of rainfall on both sides of the mountains, the effect on the Scedu is more severe because of the presence of the rain shadow and because of their reliance on hunting and gathering. In contrast, the Sunnen's development of irrigation has allowed them to better utilise a diminishing resource.

The rainshadow motif highlights, through the Sunnen and Scedu landscapes of sunlight and shadow, the notion of duality and the necessity of reconciliation. It also suggests the presence of natural forces beyond human control, their omnipotence providing a further unifying element. And lastly, it provides the imperative which both sends Chant away and binds her to the Scedu, allowing her to achieve her quest for womanhood.

The use of symbols drawing on archetypes, is another characteristic of myth, allowing it to move beyond story to a narrative of universal significance. As Campbell (1993a) notes in discussing archetypes, 'in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar

troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind' (p.19).

The shadow motifs in *Snowmelt* are part of the dichotomous Western world view, a duality noted in the *Introduction* (p.18). The rain-washed slope and the shadowed one, the Sunnen (sun) and the Sceadu (Anglo Saxon *shadow*), rationality and intuition, man and woman, manipulation of Nature (irrigation, cultivation) and harmony with Nature (hunting, gathering), consciousness and unconsciousness, all represent opposite aspects of single entities. Intrinsic to this duality is a yearning towards reconciliation and wholeness. This is Jung's 'conscious coming-to-terms with one's own inner center' (von Franz, 1978, p.169) noted earlier. Thus it is Tel's and Chant's task not only to integrate the material of their own shadows - the unconscious with the conscious - but to accept their sexual opposites. This coupling is a prerequisite of adulthood, for adulthood requires the creation of stable family units, necessary for the sustenance and continuation of the established society.

Snowmelt draws on both the actual and the imagined in creating its secondary worlds. The linking of the feminine aspect to the moon and the masculine to the sun, 'consigning the lunar-masculine principle to impotence and oblivion' (Teich 1992, p.97) is characteristic of the Western view of the male psyche, a tradition continued in the narrative. Similarly, Talabraith draws closely on the belief systems of the Waswanipi Cree of the Canadian Sub-Arctic and the Chewong of Malaysia (Knudtson and Suzuki 1994, pp.87-92). There are other elements though, which contradict documented cultural practices. For instance, research into the emergence of hunting and cultivating societies (Campbell 1985) aligns patriarchal systems with hunting, and matriarchal systems with cultivation. As Campbell (1985) notes:

realizing that it was possible to cultivate, as well as to gather, vegetables, they (women) had made the earth valuable and they became, consequently, its possessors (p.320).

The reversal of this norm in the Sceadu and Sunnen societies, challenges the masculine hero quest on a fundamental level, giving to the female hero the power and autonomy of

the hunt (and thus, significantly, the freedom to roam), and relegating the male hero to the sheltered confines of the gardens.

These differing social structures contribute to the couple's early hostility but also allow a further questioning of the conventional hero quest. Chant's hunter ways and trust in foretelling are incomprehensible to Tel, while his authoritarianism is the antithesis of Scedu ways. While neither mode of social organisation is presented as perfect - the Sunnen must labour long and hard in their gardens, the Scedu sometimes go hungry - they are both portrayed as valid. The shamanic, intuitive way of knowing (more usually associated with women/primitives) is not subjugated to the rational way of knowing (more usually associated with men/moderns). And though the refusal of the Scedu to immediately abandon their way of life suggests an uncertain future, the fate of the Sunnen is also left open. The ruins of the once great Old Stead attest to the fact that nothing is certain; neither the way of the hunter nor that of the gardener, and that the climatic rhythms which have withdrawn the rain, may one day return it.

The depiction and validation of different ways of doing which fantasy allows, prompt readers to consider the nature of their own social systems and their place within them. In this way, the narrative not only highlights the universality of their own struggles but broadens the range of possible solutions. Fantasy's capacity to do so makes it particularly suited to adolescent readers. As Stone (1988) observes:

the genre (science fiction and fantasy) permits readers to see themselves at the centre of a world which has limitless possibilities for exploration and discovery ... the young, by stepping into the shoes of heroes and heroines, who have overcome obstacles, to find a place in the world, can, through these roles explore their own hopes and aspirations (p.98).

The concept of 'adolescent egocentrism' is also of relevance. Elkind (1985) defines it as a belief that, 'no one has ever loved as deeply, hurt as badly, or seen others' motivations with such clarity' (p.349), while Clarke-Stewart et. al (1988) suggest that it causes adolescents to 'imagine a personal fable for themselves' in which they feel 'unique and indestructible' and where 'their thoughts and feelings are understood by no one' (p.403).

The focus on extremes in landscape and emotions within a quest structure, where the hero must overcome barriers both physical and psychological, provides an excellent vehicle for such feelings. Thus Ged must battle the bitter seas in pursuit of the demon his youthful pride and arrogance has unleashed (Le Guin 1976, *Wizard of Earthsea*), and Sabriel endure the icy realm of Death in search of her father (Nix 1995, *Sabriel*).

The need for such a vehicle though, goes far beyond notions of enjoyment, important as these might be. Research by Mackay (1989) and Hutchinson (1993) suggests that many young Australians have extremely negative views of the future and lack any coherent strategy for dealing with it. Eckersley (1994) echoes this view:

the greatest wrong we are doing to our children is not the fracturing of families or the scarcity of jobs (damaging those these are), but the creation of a culture that gives them nothing greater than themselves to believe in, no clear moral framework and no cause for hope or optimism (p.37).

The potential of the hero quest structure to provide both, is reflected in the following comment by a fourteen year old reader of Le Guin's *Wizard of Earthsea* (first published 1968):

There are things you don't understand that you have to think about, but even while you're not understanding you have a feeling that what she is saying is true, and right, and not simple (Thomson 1992, p.218).

Although the focus of this investigation is the quest of the female hero for adulthood, the narrative includes a parallel male rite of passage. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the characteristics of the female hero are highlighted when contrasted with those of the male hero; and secondly, as mature sexual love is part of adulthood, the female hero requires a partner. This second aspect - love and/or romance - has the potential to increase the narrative's appeal and relevance to the intended audience, namely adolescent females. Astill (1992) points out that 'reading surveys, both in Australia and overseas, consistently have shown that adolescent girls rank romance reading as their first choice' (p.18) and studies by Nilsen and Donelsen (1985, p.133) show that romantic stories are 'well matched to the particular (adolescent female) stage of development' (p.18). What

needs to be considered though, is whether a narrative such as *Snowmelt* could be viewed as 'romantic'.

Australian research by Niewenhuizen (1994) found that a 'significant number of girls looked for romance and stories that tell them about others like themselves and "real life" as they perceive this' (p.20). This focus on 'real life' is confirmed by Thomson (1992), whose studies found that girls' preference for romance extended beyond reading habits to television viewing (pp.20-21). Television romance is in turn characterised by mimetic rather than fantastic story lines. This raises the question as to whether 'real life' equates to 'modern life' only?

An extensive research project on readers of romance undertaken by Janice Radway (1987) in the United States, suggests that it may not. While her sample group were not adolescent, 36% reported beginning to read romances between the ages of ten and nineteen (p.56), and furthermore, of the books currently being read, 'the overwhelming preference of the group (48%) was for historicals' (p.56). As Radway comments:

because historicals typically include more explicit sex ... and also tend to portray more independent and defiant heroines, we might expect that this particular subgenre would draw younger readers who are less offended by changing standards of gender behaviour (p.56).

Thus, despite lacking 'explicit sex', *Snowmelt's* 'defiant' heroine may well conform to adolescent readers' notions of romance. Radway's research also explored the importance of particular plot characteristics for readers. Her research participants were asked to rank eleven elements as being the most important, second most important, or third most important in a narrative. 'A happy ending' was judged to be the single most important element by an overwhelming number of the subjects, followed by 'A slowly but consistently developing love between hero and heroine'. In terms of total responses (where one of the eleven elements was ranked as either first, second or third most important), the ranking was the same, the third most popular element being 'Some detail about heroine and hero after they've gotten together' (1987, p.67). While *Snowmelt*

contains all three elements, it does not conform to the romance discourses criticised by researchers such as Gilbert and Taylor (1991), McRobbie (1991) and Treacher (1988).

In Gilbert and Taylor's words:

Romance ideology ... is a discourse which locks women into passive and submissive response rather than independent action; a discourse which cannot construct a future for women without men; a discourse which necessitates the humiliating and crippling inscription of the body (p.103).

Instead, in challenging the masculine domination of the hero quest, *Snowmelt* provides a female hero who is autonomous and powerful, and who is willing to turn aside from the male hero in order to accomplish what she has set out to do. While the narrative does contain a love story, it is the male hero's actions which are most affected. It is his acceptance of the female hero - for what she is - which allows him the psychological growth necessary for the acquisition of adulthood. In addition, Tel's acknowledgement of love as a strength, rather than as a weakness, has the potential to provide aid to male readers in their journeys to adulthood.

While the rites of passage of both the female and male heroes are central to the narrative, the majority of myths Campbell draws upon, feature a male hero; and although he expressly states the relevance of the monomyth for both sexes (1993a, p.121), his exploration of the substages of the monomyth are undertaken in largely male terms. As Biallas (1989) notes, 'if the hero has a thousand faces, the heroine has scarcely a dozen' (p.187). The possible reasons for such an ill-balanced representation of females in the world body of myths have been canvassed earlier, but Campbell's own reliance on male heroes to illustrate his monomyth exacerbates the problem. The consequence of this bias is that the characteristics of the female hero do not emerge as strongly as those of her male counterpart, requiring a shift in orientation to become clear. What they are and how they differ from those of the male hero, will now be discussed in the context of the monomyth.

The monomyth's three broad sections of *Separation or Departure*, *Trials of Initiation* and *Return* are composed of a number of substages or motifs, some or all of which might occur in any particular myth.

The *Separation or Departure* stage of *Snowmelt* incorporates all five detailed by Campbell:

- a. the call to adventure
- b. refusal of the call
- c. supernatural aid
- d. the crossing of the first threshold
- e. the belly of the whale.

The incorporation of these substages, and of the substages of the other major sections of mythic structure in *Snowmelt*, was not planned, the intention being to construct a narrative around the broad elements of *Separation*, *Trials of Initiation* and *Return* only. Many of the substages of *Separation* though, follow logically from such a narrative structure. For instance, an adventure/quest relies on the hero setting out, thus a reason for leaving is necessary (*call to adventure*). What form does this reason take? How strong is the imperative? Can it be denied - is there a possibility of *refusal of the call*? At what point does the adventure really begin? (*crossing the threshold*) Who/what helps or hinders? (*supernatural aid*)

This logical connection is inherent in the last section also, that of *Return*, but far less so in *Trials of Initiation*, and yet these substages are also represented in the narrative. The elements Campbell identifies in his composite hero tale (or monomyth), are drawn from many mythic sources (1993a p.36), which makes their appearance in a single narrative all the more remarkable. George Miller, one of the producers of the Mad Max film trilogy, notes a similar phenomenon and suggests reasons for it:

The movies (Mad Max) had tapped into the universal hero myth and I was given a taste of what Carl Jung was on about when he described the collective unconscious. Here it was, first hand. And I, despite my creative vanities, was its unwitting servant (1996, pp.1 and 3).

Campbell (1993a) also refers to it when he comments that 'the symbols of mythology are not manufactured ... they are spontaneous productions of the psyche' (p.4) going onto ask, 'why is mythology everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume ... and what does it teach?' (p.4). It is the latter question - in the context of the female hero's journey - which will now be addressed.

The call to adventure is an event which marks the beginning of the hero's quest. It may be minor or of momentous proportions. Whatever the case, 'the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration - a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and rebirth' (Campbell 1993a, p.51) For Chant, the call is the breaking of Talabraith, the moment when trance - like, she burns the scintion pelt. The funeral rite she intones, 'at an ending ...' (chpt. 5, p.46) is both her mother's and her own; her old self is dying, and she must begin the journey to birth the new.

In Tel's case, the call takes the form of dreams. These are incomprehensible to him, but deeply disturbing. Like the burning of the scintion pelt, they prevent him from being as he was before. As Campbell (1993a) comments, 'the familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand.' (p.51). At this point in the narrative, Chant and Tel are both psychologically ill-prepared to assume their places in adult society even though Chant perceives herself as able, and Tel's adult status has been socially sanctioned. In fact, Tel's psychic state fits exactly Jung's notion of the early stage of individuation (the conscious coming-to-terms with one's own inner centre): 'everything seems outwardly all right, but beneath the surface a person is suffering from a deadly boredom that makes everything seem meaningless and empty' (von Franz 1979, pp.169-170).

The hero is always free to *refuse the call* (the second substage), although the refusal, if maintained 'converts the adventure into its negative' (Campbell 1993a, p.59). The casting aside of the known and the journeying into the unknown is a fearful prospect and both Chant and Tel initially resist it. Chant publicly challenges Siah (and so the path set before her), and it is only the withdrawal of the support of Ket (her mother figure) which forces

her compliance. As Ket later ponders, 'to have allowed Fleet to break the Naming would be to leave her in a place more desolate than the whitelands, neither of the Creshan Turrel nor woman, and never to be fully Scedu' (chpt. 6, p.49). Tel too attempts to ignore his dreams, and without the forceful eruption of his shadow (in the form of Chant), may well have succeeded. But what is the reward for such 'success'? Campbell (1993a) suggests that the hero's 'flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life ... meaningless' (p.59). In Tel's case, his authority-oriented notion of adult masculinity might well have degenerated into a dictatorial repressiveness.

For those who have not refused the call, the third substage in the initial part of the hero myth, begins with an encounter with a protective figure. This figure provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass (Campbell 1993a, p.69). This '*manifestation of supernatural aid*' springs from the unconscious, and often takes animal shape, as it is 'representing our instinctive nature and its connectedness with one's surroundings' (von Franz 1978, p.220). For the female hero Chant, the berian (bears) fulfil this function. They are old, older than the undifferentiated Self (the stage before consciousness and unconsciousness have been delineated - Henderson 1978, p.120), their paths graven into the very land itself. They represent not just the unconscious, but the primitive life forces of the earth. It is a great she-bear which saves Chant in the mountains, plunging her into her unconscious (the subterranean cavern), so that she may reconnect with her instinctual elements (the scent of bears) and through these, be led to safety. The bears though cannot survive the onslaught of ego-consciousness, and succumb to the traps the rational Sunnen lay, in the same way the instinctual Fleet does. Yet it is necessary for her to emerge once more into consciousness, for the quest of the hero is not the abandonment of either the unconscious or conscious states, but their integration.

The helpful function of the bears is reminiscent of Pratt's (1982) 'green world' tokens and guides discussed earlier. They bring Chant to safety and their appearance at the Old Stead forcibly reminds Tel of the omnipotence of the natural world, and through this, of his instinctual self. Later too, it is the memory of how she must deal with the bears,

which aids Chant in her encounter with the Vulturis. Thus she bows before them, waiting her moment of escape.

In Tel's hero quest, Duran assumes the role of the helpful protective figure. He is closer to the natural world than Tel is, a characteristic Tel considers unmanly and one he hopes his brother will outgrow. It is Duran's attraction to bears which brings about the initial meeting with Chant, and his insistence on investigating the content of the traps, which underpins the compulsion of Tel's dream. Duran's helpfulness extends to Chant also. He values her hunting skills (thus validating her instinctual self) and the friendship he offers affirms her sexual attractiveness, and in so doing, begins healing the wounds of Sced's rejection.

Campbell's fourth substage is *the crossing of the first threshold*: 'the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the "threshold guardian" at the entrance to the zone of magnified power' (Campbell 1993a, p.77). He adds: 'the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades' (p.82). For Chant, these 'threshold guardians' take the form of water. The motif of water is multifaceted in the narrative. The lack of it sets Chant on her quest; its chameleon nature - liquid, solid, tarn, tissan, creshan, mirian, benevolent, malevolent - mirrors the fluidity of Self. Water is the separation between ego consciousness and the shadow elements of the unconscious, the deliverer and withholder of the integrated, adult self.

Her first crossing of the Sunwash, which both 'attracted and repelled' her (chpt. 11, p.66), is unwilling, and occurs after an initial wounding by her (rational) shadow elements (the trap, originally set by Tel). She is carried over by Tel ie the rational forces momentarily overpower the intuitive. The second time she enters water, she does so willingly, after re-affirming her place within the hunter/hunted nexus (Talabraith) by killing the seresnake and accepting its Gift appropriately. The water embraces then releases her ie she moves between the two spheres of Self, easily and painlessly.

Her third encounter with water is violent and dangerous. In flight from Tel (and what he represents) she forces passage through the churning Terecleft. Her uncontrolled plunge into the unconscious (the surging, muddy water) results in illness, and it is Tel who brings her to the safety of the Meduin. The Meduin have achieved a balance (integration) between hunting (unconsciousness) and gardening (consciousness). Chant recovers there, and is able to return in an orderly way (through hunting - Talabraith) to her instinctual mode of being. Chant's movement toward adulthood, though erratic, is inexorable. Her agreement to travel with Tel - to shorten her journey - (which it does on both a physical and psychological level) brings her to the second, crucial crossing of the Sunwash. In this she must at last surrender herself to Tel. He brings her safely across, and for a moment, she embraces him (the new self she has at last willingly experienced), before pulling away. This initial attraction to/acceptance of Tel (and what he represents) strengthens further during their time in the Marshlands.

The Marshlands are a place where the stability of the earth is diluted by the fluidity of water, both elements losing their integrity. This confusion is mirrored in both Tel and Chant. Tel becomes ill (a point I will return to), while Chant relinquishes the instinctual for the rational. This abandonment of her former state though does not constitute integration, but another form of imbalance. In addition, the struggle of her instinctual elements to resume control contributes to her difficulties in assuming an adult identity: 'In the east, the sky was slit with a slash of fierce white light, but she kept her eyes on Tel, refusing Her summons. The light grew, throbbing in the air about them and at last she was forced to raise her eyes' (chpt. 47, p.216).

This conflict between elements of Self, consciousness and unconsciousness, renders her impotent. The boat carries her without volition upon the river's unbroken skin, the Vulturi force her away along a trail untouched by ocean waves. It is not until Tel guides her back through the touch of spume and spray, and brings the sting of salted water to her mouth, that her passivity dissipates. The fight with Tel is a fight for her old self, and the surging wave the final assault on that immature state. Her willingness to at last change, to 'be reborn' (chpt. 57, p.271), allows the integration of Self, necessary for

adulthood. So it is, that the water crossings on the return journey pass without threat or incident.

For Tel, the 'threshold guardians' which stand for 'the limits of the hero's present sphere' (Campbell 1993a, p.77) are represented by man-made structures. It is the traps (laid to repel the bear's assault on the orderly gardens and orchards) which originally prevent him going east, and it is in the ruins of the Old Stead, where the order of stones and lintels has been destroyed, that his need of Chant becomes overt. The Marshlands, with their blending of boundaries, mirror the lack of order caused by Tel's conflicting desires; a psychic weakness manifesting itself in physical illness. Chant (and the instinctual elements she represents) save him, but his old rational self reasserts itself, seizing upon the lie of marriage in order to do so.

The final substage of the first part of the hero journey, is that of *the belly of the whale*. 'The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died' (Campbell 1993a, p.90). Inherent in this notion of death, is that of renewal: 'the hero goes inward, to be born again' (Campbell 1993a, p.91). The metaphors of death and rebirth are central to the purpose of hero myth, that of procuring the 'death' or transcendence of the old self (through integration) and the birth of the new adult persona. The motif occurs a number of times in Chant's quest. Her plunge into the cavern as Fleet, and her coming to the Sunnen as Chant, underpin the first of these renewals. The shape of the cavern too, is strongly reminiscent of the 'sphere of rebirth' symbolised in many myths as a whale's belly (Campbell 1993a, p.90). Her submergence and re-emergence from the river after killing the seresnake is another. The final and most powerful though is her descent into Tarchanjan, the Sceadu place between death and life. It is here that she at last becomes willing to be reborn, that is, to accept an adult persona, and all that it implies.

The motif is less obvious in Tel's quest but just as important. He enters the alien and dangerous world of the Vulturis and, in order to secure Chant's release, trades his father's knife. The knife is his treasured link to the past and to his old life of the Stead. It is this act which most powerfully differentiates the returning Tel from the one who set out.

Chant and Tel's quests reflect closely the substages within *Separation* and *Departure*, and the psychological changes necessary for each are the same (the integration of the shadow elements of the unconscious into the conscious). However, there are fundamental differences between their quests. Tel had already acquired social recognition of manhood, but Chant cannot become a full Sceadu adult unless she follows the path set by Siah. It is Tel's choice to pursue Tanalan and later to continue to the Okianos, whereas Chant's rupture from her kin is outside her control. There is no point where she is at liberty to turn back, even after her readmittance to Talabraith; she still 'owes' the Sceadu. Chant therefore, is constrained in a way that Tel is not. Tel's social autonomy bestows on him a large measure of individual freedom. While it does not affect the *nature* of the psychological changes he must undergo to become an adult, it does allow him greater control over the *way* these changes occur. The constraints imposed on identity formation by feminine attachment have already been noted by Gilligan (1982, p.8), and the dangers in females not including themselves in their network of responsibilities, by Blum (1988, p.6). Chant is vulnerable in both respects.

The loss of her connection to Ket and the rejection of the guiding principle of Siah, result in her exposing herself to severe risks, risks which might have been minimised by seeking advice from Sceadu elders. It is good fortune not skill which allows her to survive her plunge into the caverns, and later, she is only saved from her life-denying seeking of death by the delusion that she is back among the Sceadu. In fact, the entire journey - with all its inherent dangers - is prompted by her responsibilities to the Sceadu, responsibilities in many ways, oppositional to self interest.

In what ways then, does the first part of mythic structure (within the narrative) challenge the masculine domination of the hero myth? Firstly, the protagonist is a non-stereotypical female hero - a hunter. She is a physically strong, highly skilled, valued member of a community. Secondly, the community's most powerful individuals are both female, but very different: the young Siah, with her psychic powers guiding the whole society, and Ket, the matriarchal hunter, provider of meat, mentor to Chant. Thirdly, her society is highly cooperative and nurturing, with nurturing being equated with strength, not weakness. Fourthly, the instinctual world view is validated. Chant - the skilful hunter -

knows with her skin, and ears and eyes, more so than with her intellect, and the Sceadu's reliance on shamanic rather than rational guidance, is vindicated when Siah's utterances prove to be true.

Feminine strength in concert with feminine connection; it is through these devices, that the potentialities of the hero myth are expanded. Nor is there anything simplistic about the created world of *Snowmelt*. This is no feminine utopia, bereft of concerns and conflict. The rains have failed and the Sceadu hunger. Chant's self-centredness blinds her to her real relationship with Sced, and when she is thwarted in her desires by his marriage to Siah, she breaks her most sacred code in a moment of childish petulance.

Chant is at war with herself, an emotional state highly recognisable to the adolescent reader. In fact, Chant's simplistic view of the world (demonstrated by her belief that Siah seeks her death, Ket has abandoned her and she must atone for the breaking of Talabraith with her life), is also characteristic of adolescence (Elkind 1985; Clark Stewart et al. 1988). Her eventual heroic triumph (the attainment of happiness/adulthood) after a lengthy and painful period of testing, serves the purposes of the monomyth by offering the same hope to the reader.

The nature of the ordeals both she and Tel endure in order to bring about this change - the *Trials and Victories of Initiation* - form the second part of Campbell's monomyth. This has six subsections:

- a. the road of trials
- b. the meeting with the goddess
- c. woman as the temptress
- d. atonement with the father
- e. apotheosis
- f. the ultimate boon

The purpose of the central part of the quest is to bring about the psychological changes necessary to the acquisition of adulthood. The tools of these changes are most commonly

a series of tests - *the road of trials*. Chant must survive the rigours of the whitelands and the darkness of the caverns, the wounding of the traps and the exquisite revelatory pain of her true relationship with Scead, before she can accept the dream prophecies of Siah. And then she must still traverse the river and Marshlands, enduring the horror of the Vulturis before finally assuming an adult persona. Tel too must overcome his fear of commitment, the Marshland induced fever, and the violence of the Vulturis in order to ready himself for adulthood.

The psychological changes the *road of trials* engender have specific implications for the female hero. Tests of courage and resolve form the most recognisable stage of mythic structure, repeated time after time in male hero quests. The power of the image of the male hero, however, presents certain difficulties in understanding the nature of the female hero. As Heller (1990) points out in discussing traditional hero quests, 'women's roles remain significant only in relation to the heroes whose identities they strengthen' (p.4).

In many ways, Chant begins her journey in the male hero mould. She is physically strong, highly focused and very determined. What occurs during the quest though is the loss of her main motivating factors - the wish to spite Siah by doing the impossible (surviving the mountains), the need to reclaim Scead, and atonement for the breaking of Talabraith. What remains, and indeed strengthens, is her need to fulfil her obligations to the Scedu; to find that which will bring water.

This sense of duty, the 'feminine connection' noted earlier, seems to rob her of volition when compared to the male hero. The rituals of 'closure, aggression, exclusion, and individuation' characterising masculine myths (Heller 1990, p.13) focus primarily on the hero's obligation to self. These throw into sharp relief what Heller describes as 'the central paradox of the female version of the form', namely 'the forming of nurturant, reciprocal bonds with others' (p.13). Thus Chant's selflessness is incomprehensible to Tel, whose own quest conforms more obviously to the tradition of separation and autonomy.

Both quests though, can be viewed from a different perspective, where a much greater valuation is placed upon connection. It is Chant's refusal to sever her connection to the Sceadu which hardens her resolve and which in turn enables her to endure the psychological changes necessary for adulthood. Likewise, Tel's struggle can be seen as a struggle to build connection with Chant, and his triumph as a refusal to break connection with her, thus allowing his passage to adulthood. Chant therefore, 'allows' Tel's rite of passage, as well as acquiring the boon of water-bringing skills for the Sceadu, while in turn, the Sceadu's need of/connection with her, pushes her along the path towards initiation.

The second subsection - *the meeting with the goddess* - is 'the ultimate adventure' commonly depicted as a 'mystical marriage' between the 'triumphal hero-soul' and the 'Queen Goddess of the World' (Campbell 1993a, p.109). In myth, the hero must look beyond the exterior and perceive the true nature of the goddess, for, as Campbell notes (1993a), 'she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding' (p.116). What exactly is the goddess, and what is her relevance for the female hero? Again, the masculine context makes it easier to discern the relevance of the goddess for Tel than for Chant.

For Tel, the marriage with the goddess (his feminine attributes represented by Chant) is allowed when he discards all outer and inner dissembling and openly admits his love for her (chpt. 56, p.260). In Jungian terms, these female attributes constitute the anima, the 'personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man's psyche' (von Franz 1978, p.186). In Tel's terms, the anima consists of all those parts of himself which he deems unmanly or un-Sunnen, and which he has repressed into the shadow part of the unconscious. Thus, his father's wanderlust, which deprives his mother of her lover, the stay of its protector and he of his father and childhood, have caused him to despise his own restless longings and to fear the vulnerability which love brings. It is only when he 'marries the goddess', that is, recognises and accepts these parts of himself, that he becomes whole, and thus able to form adult sexual relationships.

The notion of the anima suggests the significance of the goddess motif for Chant. Campbell notes that when the hero is female, 'she is the one who, by her qualities, her

beauty, or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed' (1993a, p.119). Chant's mystical marriage is the acceptance and integration of the masculine tendencies of her psyche ('the heavenly husband'), that is, her animus. Unlike Tel's climactic admission, Chant's is a gradual process. It begins with the recognition of her true relationship with Scead:

What was Scead like? What were his fears, his desires? She did not know. She did not know because they had never been close. There had been no love between them (chpt. 30, p.139)

and is followed by her realisation of the truth of Siah's words.

Her acceptance of her masculine other, in a sexual sense, is also gradual. It is Duran who first affirms her sexual attractiveness, and raises the possibility in her mind of a mate other than Scead. He is no real threat to her solitary self-containment though, it is Tel who she finds most disturbing. The lie of marriage, though spoken without premeditation in anger, is an unconscious shoring up of her psychic status quo. It is the old matriarchal match-maker Kalia who correctly divines its purpose, and it is confirmed shortly afterwards when Chant flees from the pairing with Tel in the marriage dance.

It is not until she is forced to enter the waters of the Sunwash (symbolic of the unconscious), that she begins to know and accept the animus elements Tel represents: 'Her eyes watched the water or the land they passed, but her whole intent was now focused on him. She scarcely questioned the nature of this change' (chpt. 45, p.205). Her final capitulation to these psychic forces occurs after her rescue from the Vulturis. The Vulturis represent the violent repressive aspects of the animus; Tel, their redeeming parts. Her lack of conscious ability to differentiate the two, is resolved when she is plunged into the unconscious (through the breaking ocean wave). It is in this place of waiting before rebirth (Tarchanjan) that she finally accepts and integrates her shadow elements.

While 'the mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life' (Campbell 1993a, p.120), there are moments

in the journey of self discovery where 'there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, becomes intolerable' (Campbell 1993a, p.122). This third substage - *woman as the temptress* - is similar to the refusal of the call discussed earlier. It is a turning away from the dark fecund forces of the unconscious, in favour of the high puissant elements of consciousness, it is the 'disgust ... to the grossness of procreative nature', noted previously by Paglia (1995, p.17). There are several occasions in the narrative where Tel rejects the unfettered life forces Chant represents. Her wild and unruly hair, the blood-stained clothes she wears after hunting, her refusal to conform to his notions of orderly authority, all repel him. And yet she draws him on, and it is his final willingness to follow which allows him to complete his quest.

Campbell makes no mention of the implications of *woman as the temptress* for the female hero, but there is a parallel. Chant refuses to acknowledge Scead's feelings for Siah, even after he expressly communicates them, and her struggle against Tel, and what he represents, is long and bitter. These constitute rejections of life - not as a female persona - but as creative forces of continuity. There is a major difference though, between how Tel and Chant are affected by such rejection. Her turning away from the male aspect does not inhibit his rite of passage; Tel still seeks her despite moments of repulsion. His vacillation however, between accepting and rejecting her, causes Chant to doubt her own insights, and to devalue her way of knowing:

It was wrong, all wrong, and she was wrong ... Ket and Scead and Siah. They had all been right, and she wrong. And now Tel. Why could she not think as these others, be as these others, know as these others (chpt. 52, p.240)

and the resulting lack of sureness impedes her rite of passage.

The fourth subsection is *atonement with the father*. 'When the child outgrows the popular idyl [sic] of the mother breast and turns to face the world of specialized adult action, it passes, spiritually, into the sphere of the father' (Campbell 1993a, p.136). The father is 'the initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger

world' (Campbell 1993a, p.136). Once the young person has been initiated, he or she is competent to become the initiator (Campbell 1993a, p.137).

The initiating priest works on both social and psychic levels. Socially, the child passes from the care of the mother (traditionally representing the enclosed, nurturing world of the home), to the wider sphere of adult action, traditionally the domain of the father. Thus Chant moves from the Creshan Turrel - a place of shared learning under the watchful eyes of the Aunts - to the time of air-naming and marriage, and so entry into the adult Scedu community. Tel's passage to socially sanctioned adulthood is abrupt, resulting from the death of his father. As the oldest male in the stay, he assumes its leadership automatically. He goes from parental obedience to holding social authority over his mother.

The second level on which the 'initiating priest' functions is to bring about the psychic changes which serve to differentiate a juvenile from an adult. This involves a transcendence of the childish state, 'a purg(ing) of all inappropriate infantile cathexes' (Campbell 1993a, p.136), so that the neophyte may know and accept his or her place in the father's world, and in so doing, become as the father.

In Chant's quest, Siah represents the initiating priest/father, and it is her edicts that Chant must come to believe and accept if she is to enter the adult world. To do so she must first conquer what Campbell (1993a) has called the 'self-generated double monster - the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id)' (p.130). Thus Chant must cast aside notions of righteousness, jealousy, revenge, anger and guilt, in order to perceive the truth of Siah's dream, and to place herself at its mercy. In so doing, she becomes competent to instruct others (causing Tel to abandon his fears and embrace adult sexuality), thus achieving at-one-ment with the father (Siah).

The similarity of Chant and Siah is an underlying theme in the narrative. Both suffer extended periods of childhood illness, the classic precursor to shamanism (Eliade 1975, p.79; Biallas 1989, p.144), and while only Siah has the Sight, Chant carries the same seed. It is Sekwana who recognises it, noting that 'She might not read the air, but she

would later tell it' (chpt. 32, p.147). In a sense, they carry the same burden, though each shoulders a different aspect - the vision of what must be done (Siah), and its doing (Chant). This dichotomy extends to the Sceadu community. Siah sustains the Sceadu spiritually, Chant physically; Siah hunts the amorphous air, Chant the earth. Both seek the same mate.

Similarly, Tel shares many characteristics with his father, and his rejection of him is as bitter as Chant's rupture with Siah. It is part of his task to accept him, through accepting the same qualities within himself (Campbell's 'double monster'), but unlike Chant, Tel is lacking in guidance, either spiritual or of the flesh. His father is dead, the importance of Sekwana reduced to remnant spiritual practices, at best only partly understood by the Sunnen, and scorned by Tel. It is Kanan, and later Septin who take on the roles of the initiating priest, and who teach him the rewards of opening himself to love, and in so doing, guide him towards adulthood. Tel's at-one-ment with his father is achieved when he accepts what his father was, and the validity of what Kanan and Septin offer. His need to travel is no longer shameful, nor is his need of Chant. His willingness to journey through the caves and live his life among the Sceadu, epitomises this change, and points the way to other Sunnen.

Apotheosis, the fifth substage, describes the reconciliation of opposites characteristic of ascendancy to a god-like state. As Campbell (1993a) comments, 'the reconnection of the two' (dual aspects), occurs at 'the conclusion of the hero-task, at the moment when the wall of Paradise is dissolved, the divine form found and recollected, and wisdom regained' (p.154). Chant and Tel do not achieve the god-like state of bliss Campbell illustrates through many divine mythic examples, but they do achieve the reconciliation of opposites necessary to an integrated adult self. For Tel, it occurs when he publicly admits his love for Chant. This acknowledgment and acceptance of his own, non-rational (emotional) needs, free him from self-interest, and allow him to carry out the selfless act of rescuing Chant. As he later says, when Septin comments on her apparent lack of gratitude: 'She is safe. That is reward enough' (chpt. 58, p.273). Chant descends into the void of Tarchanjan and for a brief and crucial moment, 'ceased her struggle and gave herself up to the utter darkness' (chpt.57, p. 271). Thus she transcends the dichotomies

which bind her in the everyday world. This is really the key to the transcendence Campbell describes; a letting go for a moment, or as T.S. Eliot (1972) puts it: 'A condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)' (p.59).

The final substage in the initiatory section of the quest, is *the ultimate boon*. This is the point at which the longed for goal is finally gained. The boon motif can assume a number of forms. In creationist myths it can be represented as fire; in the Christian story, as everlasting life. However it is made manifest, the purpose of the boon is the same; not merely to satisfy the selfish needs of the hero, but to serve the greater needs of the community. In *Snowmelt*, the ultimate boon for both Chant and Tel is the integration of the conscious and the unconscious, resulting in the acquisition of mature, sexual adulthood. This is the state necessary to the continuation of both of their communities; thus the gift or boon they offer is regeneration, sustenance and life. Chant's quest, however, extends beyond the building of an adult identity, vital though this is. She must bring back to the Sceadu that which will unlock the Snowcome ice. She must bring water.

Some of the constraints this obligation imposes on her have already been discussed. The conflict between her own needs and those of the Sceadu intensifies once she recognises the nature of the boon. Her love for Tel makes her reluctant to expose him to the dangers of the caverns, and her understanding of his responsibilities to his own stay are in direct opposition to the Sceadu's need of him. Yet to be fully Sceadu she must complete her task. Such are the dilemmas of the female hero, the 'fusion of identity and intimacy, noted repeatedly in women's development' (Gilligan 1982, p.159). In contrast to the entanglements Chant finds herself struggling with, Tel is freed by his new adult persona. He separates from his obligations to Stead and stay, pursuing his own desire to be with Chant. As Gilligan (1982) notes:

From the different dynamics of separation and attachment in their gender identity formation through the divergence of identity and intimacy that marks their experience in the adolescent years, male and female voices typically speak of the importance of different truths, the former of the role of separation as it defines and empowers the self, the latter of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community (p.156).

Yet the differing paths gender imposes on individuals are not always as clear cut as Gilligan suggests, for it is Tel who allows Chant to fulfil the last part of her quest, by accompanying her through the caverns to the Scedu lands. It is the 'agony of breaking through personal limitations' (Campbell 1993a, p.190) which enables Tel to maintain that linkage with the parts of his psyche Chant represents, and in so doing, to transcend his socially prescriptive role. This, in turn, liberates Chant. Thus, the transcendence of their gender roles allows them to assume a complementary rather than an adversarial relationship, and the female hero Chant, to maintain her autonomy within the quest.

The last part of the monomyth, the *Return*, has six subsections:

- a. refusal of return
- b. the magic flight
- c. rescue from without
- d. the crossing of the return threshold
- e. master of two worlds
- f. freedom to live

Once the ultimate boon has been acquired, the triumphant hero must return with it to his community, a task Campbell points out, which is frequently refused (1993a, p.193). The consequences of Tel's decision to bestow his water management skills on the Scedu, is a refusal to bestow his gift of mature adulthood on the Sunnen. While Campbell (1993a) might illustrate this refusal with more divine examples ('heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being' p.193), the result of Tel's refusal to give up the elements of his psyche Chant represents, is essentially the same. Chant too is hampered in her return by her fears for Tel's safety, ie fears for the psychic elements he represents. She must, after all, return through the caverns, symbolically the instinctual domain, an area hostile to the newly incorporated rational parts of Self. The manner of this return forms Campbell's second substage: *the magic flight*.

If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir ... the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. On the other hand, if the trophy has been attained against the opposition of its guardian ... then the last stage of the mythological round becomes [sic] a lively, often comical, pursuit (Campbell 1993a, pp. 196-197).

Chant's return to the Scedu, is (in Campbell's terms) blessed. The threshold guardians of her quest (water), allow her to pass without incident, and even the caverns, repository of the instinctual, give safe transit, birthing the true Chant back into the Scedu lands through a bear's den. In contrast, Tel's return is problematic. He is, after all, denying his gift (of full adulthood) to his community. He is attacked by both Tanalan (through Chant) and Merala for his desertion, and in the dark confines of the caverns, struggles with the need to see (his rational elements). It is a measure of his new found strength that he is able to finally surrender himself to Chant (and to what she represents) and that in the Scedu lands, he is willing to at last wait for what might come.

The third of the substages in the last part of the monomyth, is the *rescue from without*.

The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without ... for the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favour of the self-scattering of the wakened state (Campbell 1993a, p.207).

Chant returns to the Scedu of her own volition, however her new found persona does not allow her to stay. This is Pratt's (1982) notion of 'women's rebirth journeys', where the 'transformed, androgynous, and powerful human personalities' created, are more often punished 'for succeeding in ... perilous, revolutionary journey(s)' (p.142). There is no punishment from the Scedu, rather there is joy at her return; it is Chant who recognises her transformation, and its consequences. Tel too, rejects a return to his old role and status within the Stead. His refusal to be parted from Chant (indicative of his new state), necessitates his journey away. It is only her decision to leave the Scedu which grants him the freedom to return to the Sunnen. Even so, it is apparent from the commitment he makes to her, 'I will try to make it well for you in the Stead' (chpt. 65, p.311) that he no longer sees with Sunnen eyes.

The difficulties both Tel and Chant encounter in their return to their respective societies, are typical of those described by Campbell in the fourth substage - *the crossing of the return threshold*. The hero has moved from his everyday world, to one which is alien, and on his return, must reconcile what he brings back (the boon in its multifarious forms) with the mundane realities of daily existence. As Campbell (1993a) asks: 'How [sic] render back into light-world language the speech-defying pronouncements of the dark?' (p.218) Thus Tel struggles to explain to his mother why he must follow Chant into the mountain's heart, possibly to his death, and the message of hope that the chantress (Chant through Tel) offers the Sceadu, is not immediately acted upon. And yet this final threshold crossing is as necessary as the first. As Campbell (1993a) notes: 'the returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world' (p.226). Both Tel and Chant do so by recognising the importance of their newly discovered 'other', and by refusing to relinquish this new state.

The fifth of Campbell's substages is the *master of the two worlds*. This is the

freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back - not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other (Campbell 1993a, p.229).

This movement between 'worlds' occurs on two levels within the narrative: psychically and physically. Firstly, Tel's realisation that the Sceadu's rejection of his skills must result in them dwindling along with the rains, does not lessen his resolve to remain, while Chant's final acceptance of him as her husband, is marked upon her face in the Sceadu way. The accommodation of the intuitive and rational, which both achieve is, in Campbell's (1993a) words, a 'knit(ing) together' of 'two worlds' (p.228), and a requirement of the hero. On a physical level, the linkage is complete with the successful transit of the caverns. As Tel says, at the narrative's end, 'we now know the way between your Place and mine' (chpt. 65, pp.311-312). Thus the possibility of passage between the two states remains open, not just for them, but for others who might later tread the hero path. As Campbell (1993a) notes: 'the boon brought from the transcendent deep becomes

quickly rationalized into non-entity, and the need becomes great for another hero to refresh the word' (p.218).

The final of Campbell's substages is the *freedom to live*. This is the myth's key objective, to achieve a 'reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will' (Campbell 1993a, p.238), by bringing together the mundane trivia of daily living with the 'imperishable life that lives and dies in all of us' (Campbell 1993a, p.238). The hero's willingness to let go of his or her former state, to suffer its death (actual or as transmutation) is a release from that fear of death, a release from the things which constrain us to the earthly condition. It brings a knowing of a larger Self, a Self which 'cannot be cut nor burnt nor wetted nor withered' (Nikhilanandra 1944, pp. 22-24). It is Eliot's (1972) 'still point of the turning world' (p.15), the achievement of a condition which allows Chant to turn away from the frigid, ice-locked valleys of the Scedu, and Tel to transcend the narrow confines of the corrals.

Departure, initiation and return; the hero journey is complete. But what of the tasks of the female and male heroes? Campbell's monomyth provides both with a means of attaining adulthood, but as has been noted previously, their journeys are not the same. Of the two, Tel's sits more comfortably within the substages delineated by Campbell, in part because of Campbell's reliance on male mythic heroes. Chant's quest must be viewed through different eyes, 'the very concept of heroism need(ing) to be critically scrutinized and redefined for a feminized age' (Heller 1990, p.13). It is Biallas (1989) who first starts along this new path, alerting us to the other hero, a *gentle* hero, and to the notion of the quest taking an inward path (p.185). While Chant's hero quest conforms to the tradition of an outer arduous and testing journey, it is Biallas' questioning of the *nature* of heroism which is of most relevance.

The Western world's conceptualisation of heroism as patriarchal has already been discussed and its implications for the interpretation of Chant's hero journey in particular, and the female quest for adulthood in general, explored. While the narrative provides only one example of a female hero quest, two other female heroes, noted earlier, demonstrate similar characteristics. These are Eowyn (Tolkien *The Lord of the Rings* -

first published in 1954), and Princess Leia (Lucas *Star Wars* film trilogy - 1977, 1980, 1983). Although modern works, they conform closely to the structure of the monomyth, as well as incorporating a rich array of archetypal symbolism.

In common with prevailing hero myths, both women receive less attention than the male heroes of the narrative, and in consequence, the nature of their difference is often overlooked. In the first, Eowyn disguises herself as a man to take up arms, and defeats the Lord of the Nazgul, one of the chief evils. The deed is heroic, in the patriarchal sense, but the injuries she suffers during the fight, and her unrequited love for Aragorn, compound to render her emotionally wounded. It is not until Faramir offers her love, and she turns away from the (male) combative role that she is healed, and her quest for 'human wholeness' is complete: 'then the heart of Eowyn changed, or else at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her' (*The Return of the King* 1973, p.243).

Princess Leia is one of three heroes in the *Star Wars* film trilogy. The films focus on the relationship between Luke Skywalker and his antagonist Darth Vader, set against the greater struggle of the Rebels to destroy the Empire's domination of space. Attracting lesser attention, but of greater relevance to the task of this project, is the relationship between the remaining heroes; Princess Leia and Han Solo. Significantly, Leia's femaleness is never denied in the film. She is not simply a 'hero in drag' as female heroes are sometimes dubbed, that is, male in everything except sex. We first see her dressed in a long flowing white gown, her hair demurely coiled over her ears, and at regular intervals, she dresses in very feminine, sometimes sexy clothing. While her actions are as 'brave' as any male hero's, she differs from Han Solo in her strong commitment (connection) to the Rebels. Han Solo, as his name suggests, suffers no such bonds. The tension between Leia and Han stems from his lack of commitment to a 'just' cause, and the reluctance of both to admit their growing attachment. It is only when Han's death seems imminent that Leia confesses her feelings. Han does not reciprocate.

The patriarchal reading of this scene is that Leia's confession is feminine weakness, and Han's self containment, masculine strength. An alternative view, (pertinent to the female

hero) is that Leia has achieved completeness - an acknowledgment of the rightness of her human needs - and Han has not. It is only in the final scenes of the last film that he is able to make such a commitment.

Despite the difficulties of Eowyn and Faramir, Leia and Han, Chant and Tel, female and male hero quests are in fact complementary, not antagonistic. Neither Chant nor Tel can achieve an adult identity without the other. This is Biallas' (1989) 'synthesis of ... two models', the balancing of 'efforts to get ahead and to win respect' with 'attempts to nurture creativity and equality in personal relationships' (pp.186-187), noted earlier. However, because the body of world myths handed down to us (and their more modern forms) are skewed toward the masculine, the quest of the female hero is devalued. The task therefore, of the female hero within a mythic narrative, is to address this imbalance, to present the full range of human emotions, and to raise to heroic proportions (in the prevailing patriarchal sense) those traits traditionally considered feminine. Only in this way will a reassessment and re-evaluation of such elements take place (by both sexes), necessary for the acquisition by the female hero, and through her, the female reader, of mature adulthood. The narrative of *Snowmelt* demonstrates that the accomplishment of such a task is possible.

In concluding, it is fruitful to spend some time in discussion on the *process* of constructing a traditional quest with a female hero, for this in turn, sheds further light on the difficulties of breaking the masculine domination of this genre. The main difficulty of such a task lies in the very nature of the quest, that is, in its masculine orientation. How is a female hero to be created who is not a feminised version of Hercules, or Rambo, or Skywalker; but something new and different? And how is a straight role reversal to be avoided; for her task is not to confine the male hero to her formerly subservient position, but to work in concert with him.

The first strategy which was employed was to use fantasy to create a world where patriarchal constraints could be broken. The Sceadu social system of assigning tasks on the basis of ability not sex, and communal child rearing, liberated Chant from many of the constraints which have historically limited female action. Thus she was free to journey,

and her natural athleticism and learned hunting skill made it safe for her to do so. The Scedu social system also presents a legitimate alternative to those of the industrialised West (represented by the Sunnen). This legitimacy is strengthened by the construction of a number of other societies (Meduin, Okianos, Vulturi), which broaden the range of possibilities and avoids a direct oppositional choice (by the reader) between the Western way and that of the Scedu. An acceptance of the Scedu society and what it represents (the traditionally feminine qualities of communal responsibility and obligation) not only validates these qualities, but also their embodiment, the female hero Chant. Thus Chant is endowed with heroic strengths which are different to (but not necessarily superior to) those of a conventional (male) hero.

A possible problem with this first strategy is that the Scedu's lifestyle does make them vulnerable to climatic change. However the purpose of the Old Stead is to demonstrate that no social system, whatever its level of sophistication, is immune from such threats. In this sense, the Sunnen's confidence in their ability to control the environment - as epitomised by Tel - becomes a weakness, giving further support to alternative systems and values, especially those of the Scedu/Chant, who yield to Natural rhythms. Again valuation of one system over another is avoided because the omnipotence of climate change touches them all.

A second strategy adopted to avoid dominance by either hero was to match the two physically and psychically. The fact that Chant is as tall and strong as Tel is a reoccurring motif, but their psychic complementariness is less explicit. Tel is designated a man socially, yet feels unworthy; Chant is still deemed a girl by the Scedu, but is confident of her ability to assume womanhood. Tel fears romantic love because its irrationality makes it impossible to control consciously; Chant fears love because she lacks confidence in her ability to correctly recognise it. Tel's rite of passage to adulthood must involve him breaking free of the Sunnen shackles of conscious control; Chant's must involve her maintaining her broad connection to the Scedu (for their needs define her hero path), and transferring her romantic attachment to a mate who is willing to reciprocate. Chant's cleaving to the Scedu draws Tel after her, thus allowing him to take on those elements

necessary to adulthood. In so doing, he permits Chant's passage to womanhood to be completed.

Chant's physical prowess is an important part of her persona, and yet she is not invulnerable, and it is this which prevents her from becoming the 'hero in drag' noted earlier. The nexus of hunter and hunted emphasises a broader web of life and death to which all life forms must ultimately submit. Chant must run before the whitewolves, bow before the bear and endure the brutality of the Vulturis. She has no broad sword or magic talisman of a mythical male hero to protect herself with, merely the attributes of a young athletic woman, unencumbered by the demands of child birth and rearing.

Despite these strategies, there are points in the narrative where the traditional hero structure does seek to reimpose itself. Chant's quest journey was initially motivated by a wish for revenge and a need to atone for the breaking of Talabraith. These things serve her well until atonement has been achieved and the truth of Siah's foretelling becomes apparent. The stripping away of these motivational forces severely weakens her volition and the 'strong' male hero takes control, leading her on the next part of the journey, both psychically, and physically. It is not until the encounter with the bear that her intuitive (designated feminine) traits rouse, and her passivity dissipates. Even during this period of 'weakness' though, she continues her journey westward, her commitment to the Sceadu holding her to her quest.

The second time the traditional structure attempts to reassert itself is during Chant's rescue from the Vulturis. This is the classic motif of a male hero quest, the 'damsel in distress' being aided by the brave warrior. There are in fact two rescues in the narrative, the other being when Chant brings help to Tel in the Marshlands. These rescues are intrinsically the same, though they appear quite differently if viewed in the context of a male hero quest. Both need the aid of Septin in order to be accomplished (either his physical presence or his advice), and both rely on feminine skills. It is Chant's link with the natural world which allows her to find her way to Septin and to bring him back, and her connection to Tel which prevents her from abandoning him. Likewise, it is the development of a bond with Chant, transcending physical desire (he moves from wanting

her sexually : chpt. 41, p.191 ; to needing her safe: chpt. 56, p.258) which motivates Tel to set out after her. It is important to note how they survive their time with the Vulturis. Both are physically out-numbered and so warrior skills are of no use. Chant plots her escape quietly, forcing herself to 'be calm and wait, as she did on hunt' (chpt. 56, p.261), while Tel uses the 'trickery and subversion' of the weak, noted in the *Introduction* by Paul (1987, p.151). The manner of both rescues again serves to fortify the persona of the female hero, allowing her to break the conventional structure of the hero quest.

The third intrusion of the traditional hero quest structure is the point at which Tel and Chant have made their escape from the Vulturis. A conventional heroine would at this stage submit to the male hero, forgoing her own quest to settle in his kingdom, thereby becoming part of the bounty that he wins. In contrast, rather than falling into Tel's arms, Chant delivers him a stinging blow to the face. This violent outburst is both a rebuttal of the treatment she has received from a strongly patriarchal society (the Vulturis) and a confirmation of her continuing connection to the Sceadu. The descent into Tarchanjan (via the wave) is the final step in her long road to adulthood, but her ensuing acceptance of Tel as a mate is not an acceptance of an inferior place. Her connection and allegiance to the Sceadu remain strong, but this strength contributes to her understanding of Tel's obligation to his own people, undermining her ability to be with him.

This in turn contributes to the final area of conflict between a conventional hero quest and one with a female hero. The question Chant asks: 'Are you willing to live among the Sceadu Tel?' (chpt. 59, p.284) would not occur in a traditional quest, for the right of the male hero to determine both his own and his mate's future is an assumption rarely recognised, and even more rarely challenged. Nor is Tel's willingness to live among the Sceadu a sign of his submission to the female hero, for in the end, the choice of where both may dwell is left open. It is Tel who says, 'we now know the way between your Place and mine' (chpt. 65, pp. 311-312).

The breaking of the masculine domination of the hero quest, by its very nature requires an unconventional narrative; one which challenges the orientation of the reader by casting new light on the potentialities of the hero's actions. Within the confines of the

monomyth this is not only possible but desirable. For as Campbell (1993a) says in the conclusion of his treatise (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*): 'it is not society who is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse' (p.391).

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