

ERIC VAN LUSTBADER

DRAGONS ON THE SEA OF NIGHT

By Eric Lustbader

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Eric Lustbader

DRAGONS ON THE SEA OF NIGHT

THE FIFTH NOVEL IN THE SUNSET WARRIOR CYCLE

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This is for my father,

Who asked for more tales.

The world is more -

Once we understand there is

Only this, we have woken

From the Dark.

From the Tablets of the Iskamen

That which is known as Magic

Was once the progeny of ignorance.

Ancient Shinju saying

PREFIGURE

KILL RHYTHM

'He is coming!' Qaylinn, the chief Rosh'hi of the Bujun, gripped the wooden balustrade of the terrace that ran the entire length of the top floor of the temple of which he was the master. His old, lined face shone in the deep russet glow of the huge, oblate sun as it began to sink over the marshes where geese rose and alit as they had from time immemorial.

I told you he would come!

'Yes,' the voice said from behind him, 'but will he listen to what we have to say?'

Qaylinn, who had been trained since infancy to intuit intent from the nuances of the human voice, turned to face the other man - a tall, stately figure with a halo of steel-gray hair. Even so long from the battlefield, he is still the soldier inside, Qaylinn told himself. 'You are afraid,' he said quietly.

'Are you not?'

Qaylinn shook his head. 'You forget. I have met the Dai-San. I know him.'

The tall man shook his head. 'I, too, have met the Dai-San in the presence of the Kunshin, our sovereign, and my private opinion is that he is allowed too near the Dragon Throne,' he said. 'I think it is foolish to delude oneself into believing that he is knowable. Can one know a god? I think not.'

'Whatever he may be now, he was a man, once,' Qaylinn said steadily. 'And I assure you he has no designs on the Dragon Throne. He has bonded with the Kunshin; they are closer than brothers.' It was important to keep the minister's fear in check. Should it spread to the other members of the council... In any event, their faith in the Dai-San must not be shaken. His work was not yet done, and he was their only hope. 'From the womb of woman he came and so in his mind - whatever he has now become, whatever magic has been worked on him - he remains at his core a man.'

High Minister Ojime grunted. 'Would that I had your faith, sayann.' Sayann, a Bujun term for extreme respect, was not often used, and even less by Ojime. 'I, too, know that our fate -and the fate of the entire world of man - rests in the hands of the Dai-San.'

A wind was rising, unnatural and unsettling. It caused Qaylinn's deep saffron robe to swirl about his bare feet, ruffled Ojime's oiled cotton and cured leather coat which was the color of indigo, connoting his senior rank within the Sekkan, the council of Bujun.

Of course Ojime is frightened, Qaylinn thought. He is a political animal; he has been taught to fear and covet power that is greater than his own. It is how he came to don the cloth of indigo. Qaylinn wondered how many of the other high ministers feared and envied the Dai-San his godlike powers. His bald pate tingled. There was danger here, he knew, over and above the pressing reason he had summoned the Dai-San to Shinsei na-ke Temple in Haneda, Ama-no-mori's capital. It was a danger closer to home, the viper hidden in the breast of those who would have you believe they were friends. Ojime - and, indeed, all the high ministers - would need constant surveillance.

He looked to the west, where it seemed the lavender clouds were parting and, if he squinted, he could just make out a black speck near the horizon. The wind blew in his face and he felt the kind of electricity in the air one experiences during a lightning storm.

'I see him,' Ojime whispered from just behind Qaylinn. 'He answered your call, after all.'

'As I knew he would,' Qaylinn said without inflection. 'He is the Dai-San.'

'Even so,' Ojime said, 'he is not going to like what you have to tell him.'

'What the snow-hare's feet have told me!'

The Rosh'hi had whirled around, his voice uncharacteristically tense. 'When I speak to the Dai-San - when I tell him what I must - I will merely be a messenger of the kami, the spirits who reside in Ama-no-mori and protect it from harm.'

'Let us hope the Dai-San believes that, eh?' the high minister said darkly.

The wind whipped their cloaks around them with a fiery turbulence. The speck, illumined by the setting sun, was now an identifiable object. As he stared, Ojime's bowels threatened to turn to water, for he found that he was facing the great triple-horned head of a Kaer'n, one of the ancient beasts all Bujun warriors rode in the days of fire, ice and necromancy which, even for the Bujun, were becoming a thing of legend.

Where once they had been plentiful, living in harmony with the Bujun, the huge winged Kaer'n were now vastly reduced in number, living in a valley protected by the icy alpine regions of the northernmost of Ama-no-mori's three islands.

What I would give to get my hands on one of those beasts, the minister thought, shifting from one foot to the other. My power would increase tenfold if I was seen directing one of the legendary Kaer'n. My drive to become head of the Sekkan would be assured, and I could then begin my assault on the Kunshin himself. But, by the gods, this creature makes my knees weak!

Qaylinn's thoughts were also filled with the Kaer'n, but they were tinged with nostalgia and regret that the Bujun had somehow lost their abilities to nurture and interact with the Kaer'n. He looked upon the beast with awe and veneration.

The flapping of the Kaer'n's wings filled the men's ears just as it caused the curling and blowing of the cloud formations high above. There was a certain rhythm, a kind of pulsing that seemed to invade the entire body. It was said, though Ojime had never seen documentation, that when the Kaer'n killed, their wings beat the air with a rhythm that slowly aligned itself with the victim's heartbeat. When synchronicity was achieved, the victim somehow died.

Astride the beast was the last person on the planet able to control and speak to the Kaer'n - the Dai-San, the Sunset Warrior.

Qaylinn felt a fire on his face as the Kaer'n's golden talons extruded through flesh, horned and armored to grip the highest parapet of the temple. Its iridescent wings folded in upon themselves, its long scaled neck bent, the large-boned, trapezoidal head almost touching the stone flooring, the amber intelligent eyes impaling the minister and the Rosh'hi in their unwavering gaze.

The two men stood transfixed as the Dai-San dismounted over the arch of the Kaer'n's neck. He was impossibly tall, wrapped in a cape of an unidentifiable material the color of night. His high curious helm was studded with gems that gave off a lambent illumination not unlike starlight. His faceted armor was unlike anything Ojime had ever dreamed of. A veritable galaxy of mythical beasts was embossed into the metal with such consummate skill that they appeared to be alive. What unknown artisans had fashioned this fantastic second skin he had no idea, but he longed to touch it, to don it, to investigate for himself its efficacy, the heady sense of invulnerability it must surely engender. Oh, what he could do with such armor!

The Dai-San's face was human-like, but in a multitude of ways it was vastly different. For one thing, his hooded eyes were faceted. It was almost as if one were being scanned by a company of people all with different personalities, differing points of view. His prominent nose seemed sculpted out of granite, his

cheeks to have been scraped from the depths of the howling deserts. His mouth was like a dagger of ice, slashed horizontally across the lower half of his face. He was, in short, like no other creature either man had ever met.

'Dai-San,' Oaylinn said softly, with a small, ceremonial bow. 'It was good of you to come.'

The Dai-San's terrifying mouth split into what might, in others, have been a smile. 'It is good to see you again, my friend.'

Qaylinn lifted a hand briefly in Ojime's direction. 'May I introduce High Minister Ojime. He represents the lay portion of Bujun society.'

When the Dai-San fixed Ojime in the glare of those inhuman orbs, the minister blanched. He was adept at reading people; this was, after all, *a* talent that had served him well in his climb up the political ladder. But this was another story. He tried to fix his sights into the depths of those eerie eyes, because he knew that the soul of each man and woman was written in those individual depths. What he saw now appalled him. Rather than the blank wall he had imagined, he encountered *a* hall of mirrors which threw back on him the excesses and sins of his own soul, so that he felt a line of sweat creep down his spine and his stomach turned to ice. He bowed deeply, if only to free himself of the terrible images that had danced before his gaze. He felt sick to his stomach, but he hid his distaste deep down as Qaylinn ushered the Dai-San into the sanctuary of the temple. Through the Hall of Secrets they went with its peculiar curved walls and massive thousand-year cedar columns, down the Corridor of Remembrance where the scrolls of the founding Rosh'hi hung in hand-carved niches, until at length they came to the Chamber of Prayer.

The last dying rays of the sun touched the thick stone sill of the high narrow west windows so that slices of crimson stained the tea-green walls, illuminating in electric fashion the raised platform from which hung a vertical scroll in stark black and white. The running calligraphy upon it had been written by Qaylinn's greatgrandfather, who had founded this temple long ago.

'Please excuse us for not offering you hot tea, Dai-San,' Qaylinn said, bowing again, 'but our purpose is urgent and time is very short.' He went to the platform and, kneeling at the spot directly beneath the scroll, pressed two of the short wooden boards. Ojime, almost morbidly fascinated by the Dai-San, switched his gaze momentarily to the Rosh'hi. Lifting aside the boards, Qaylinn reached into the space beneath and, a moment later, lifted out an object swathed in layers of sueded leather. He rose, holding it away from him as if he would become contaminated by it. Without a word of explanation, he slowly unwrapped the cloth until all the layers had fallen away. He offered it up for the Dai-San's inspection.

Ojime caught the quick reaction in the Dai-San's face before he bent down, sniffing the thick gray object. To Ojime's surprise, the Dai-San's head jerked quickly back.

'It is fresh!' His voice, though a whisper, thundered in Ojime's ears.

'Fresh.' Qaylinn nodded. 'Yes.'

The Dai-San took a step backward. It happened so quickly that Ojime missed the motion. One instant, the Dai-San was in one place, the next he was in another. Astonishing!

With a whisper of polished leather and beaded silk, the Dai-San drew his enormous sword, *Aka-i-tsuchi*. Its long blue-green blade shone in the last of the day's light just as if it were noon outside instead of dusk. The Dai-San held the blade horizontally, the point almost touching the layers of sueded leather as they lay open like the petals of some alien flower. Slowly, the tip slid along the leather, then beneath the gray object until it rested on the blade. Then the Dai-San lifted it away. Was it his imagination, Ojime wondered, or did the Rosh'hi heave a sigh of relief?

The Dai-San regarded the thing with intense interest. 'It is the tongue of a Makkon.'

'A Makkon, yes.' Qaylinn nodded. 'One of the Chaos beasts that were the outriders for the Dolman.' The Dolman, ruler of the creatures of Chaos, had attempted to take control of the world some years ago. A pitched battle had been fought, culminating with the Kai-feng at the citadel of Kamado. The Dai-San was intimately familiar with the Dolman. They were linked in a curious and particular manner, since it had been the Dolman's decision to invade this world which led to the creation of the Dai-San, the savior of mankind, he who had defeated the Dolman.

'But all the Makkon are dead,' the Dai-San said. 'There were four and they all died.'

Qaylinn shook his head. 'What you hold on your sword, Dai-San, is a Makkon's tongue. It is fresh, unpreserved. It is proof that either one Makkon lived somehow or...' His voice petered out, his words hanging in the air.

'Or there are more than four.'

'Yes.' The Rosh'hi refolded the layers of leather, set them aside. From the pocket of his robe he threw five small items across the floor. 'I have cast the foot bones of the snow-hare, Dai-San, and they tell of a new attempt by the forces of Chaos to enslave our world.'

'The Dolman-'

'Exists no more,' Qaylinn said. 'You made certain of that when you sundered it with your magic dai-katana. But Chaos did not die when the Dolman ceased to exist. It was thrown into disarray and torment, and we wished to assume that it would remain leaderless and, therefore, without threat to us. Now the bones of the snow-hare have told us the truth. There is a new leader in Chaos, and it means to succeed where the Dolman failed.'

'I knew my work was not yet done,' the Dai-San said.

'I wonder whether it ever will be, my friend,' Qaylinn said.

The Dai-San flipped the tongue into the air, caught it on the talons of the scaled, six-fingered glove, made from the hide of a Makkon. 'Where was this tongue found?'

'On a Kintai clipper during a routine inspection,' Ojime said, pleased that the tactical phase of the discussion had begun. Since the Dai-San's return to Ama-no-mori, the islands had been opened up to trade. 'A keen-eyed tariff assessor spotted a nervous crewman and ordered the ship searched from stem to stern. The tongue was found secreted within the crewman's sea-chest.'

'I would question this crewman,' the Dai-San said.

Even being asked questions by him was painful, and Ojime sucked in his breath before he said, 'I am afraid that is impossible. The crewman took his own life.'

'Are you certain this is the way it happened?' the Dai-San asked. 'Your men are still unused to outsiders. They are notorious for over-reacting.'

Ojime noticed the Dai-San's gaze meet Qaylinn's, and he found himself deeply envious of their relationship. 'Absolutely certain,' he said stiffly. 'There are half a dozen witnesses.'

'All men under the tariff assessor's command, I will warrant,' the Dai-San said.

'Why the Makkon's tongue was being brought here we have no idea,' Ojime said, desperately trying to deflect the Sunset Warrior's wrath. 'But we did discover where it came from: the Great Rift.'

'That is a long way from here,' the Dai-San said. 'Beyond the Mu'ad desert of Iskael, the country of my bond-brother, Moichi Annai-Nin.'

'Upon the summit of the sacred mountain of Sin'hai,' Ojime affirmed. 'We need you to beat back this new threat, Dai-San. We believe that something *or someone* is using the depths of the Great Rift to break through from the dimension of Chaos.'

The Dai-San nodded. 'Who knows, perhaps the Great Rift itself is the tunnel built by the new forces of Chaos. I will go there immediately.'

He turned to depart but Qaylinn's voice stopped him in his tracks. 'There is something else the snow-hare revealed.'

The Dai-San turned his baleful gaze upon the two men. 'Tell me.'

'Yes, Dai-San.' Qaylinn recognized an order as well as did the minister. 'There is an agent - a human agent whom the Chaos forces are using to help them gain a foothold in our world.'

'Have you a name?'

'Yes.' Now, to Ojime's astonishment, the Rosh'hi actually appeared to quail beneath the burden of his message. In the face of his cowardice, Ojime spoke.

'The bones of the snow-hare were cast and there can be no mistake,' he said quickly, before he, too, lost his nerve. 'The agent, the traitor, Dai-San, is your bond-brother, Moichi Annai-Nin.'

PART ONE

ISKAEL

ONE

SEA-CHANGE

The ship heeled over and Moichi Annai-Nin shouted, 'Haul away! By the Oruboros, haul away now, lads!' All the sheets were being struck, coming down in fluted columns as the howling wind tore at them in great clawing gusts. But the mainsail, larger than the others and therefore more vulnerable, was caught out of position. The carefully tied rigging gave way beneath the violent storm's startlingly sudden fist. It tore the fittings like corks out of a line of bottles: pop! pop! pop!, the highest end of the triangular sail a serpentine banner, slapping wetly against the rain-slick mast before shredding into ragged tongues.

Moichi, his great brawny dusky-skinned body fighting aft toward the terrified tillerman, felt rather than saw the heightened agitation of the sea. The diamond set into the flesh of his right nostril flashed blue light as he drew in the sharp, charged scents of the storm, and he thought, damn this Bujun vessel and its delicate construction - unless I can straighten our course we'll go under for sure. He unsheathed one of the pair of copper-handled dirks that were his trademark, cutting through ratlines that had broken free and were whipping about the halyard.

Outwardly, he grinned hugely as he urged his men on with his immense confidence. But inwardly he cursed each and every one of their grimy souls, for he recognized the panic that had gripped them all on

the *Tsubasa's* decks at the storm's initial onslaught. Well, he told himself resignedly as he went from group to group, hauling hawsers here, lashing down wildly swinging spars there, what can you expect from a crew dredged up from Sha'angh'sei's bituminous waterfront dens but drunken ex-sailors and drugged-out petty criminals whose dreams had been faded by time and evil incidence? He should never have allowed himself to cobble together such a crew, but the urge to return to his native Iskael with his love, Aufeya Seguillas y Oriwara, had been too much for him. He had been on dry land far too long.

This morning, six-and-a-half weeks out from Sha'angh'sei, the principal port on the southern face of the continent of man, he had been belowdeck with Aufeya, having already tested the wind thrice during the cormorant watch and learning nothing for his efforts. Or else he had been distracted by Aufeya. He had asked her to marry him when they reached his home in Iskael and she had accepted, her joy igniting the copper of her eyes.

A gray-green wave, opaque in its turbulence, sprang over the taffrail, soaking Moichi where he labored with a tangle of loose and shattered tackle. On his knees, he shouted a warning to those down below as the water roared across the mid-deck. It was then that Moichi felt the underlying power of the storm, and he knew that this was no ordinary tempest that periodically whirled through the eastern stretches of the Iskael Sea. For an instant, his mind seemed aware of something beyond the storm, yet quite a part of it, almost - and this was almost laughable - a kind of malevolent presence, as if the typhoon itself were alive. But that was quite impossible, he told himself, and went on with his frantic duties.

To make matters worse, the *Tsubasa* was no ordinary ship on which he had learned the art of navigation and sailing; it was a Bujun vessel - a gift from Moichi's bond-brother, the legendary Dai-San, who had saved the world of man from the Dolman and the invading forces of Chaos in the Kai-feng, the final cataclysmic battle that signaled the end of the Ages of Darkness and Necromancy.

The *Tsubasa* was like all things Bujun - that remote island chain the Dai-San had visited - delicate and mysterious as the mist that enshrouded its shores. The Bujun were reclusive, master warriors who preferred their own company. Many tales existed regarding the Bujun. One such insisted that they rode through the skies astride great horned and winged dragons called Kaer'n.

Though Moichi was a master navigator, he had yet to fully grasp the intricacies and peculiarities of this magnificent, superbly constructed Bujun vessel. As he rose, dizzy, blowing seawater from his nostrils, he cursed the impatience that had led him to set out for home too soon and with an improper crew. He staggered down the companionway to the mid-deck like an over-confident wrestler who, having stepped into the ring, was only now realizing the hidden reserves that lay behind the obvious strength of sinew of his opponent.

He risked a glance upward. There was no horizon. Instead, scudding clouds like angry bruises dipped to meet the rising sea, creating an almost seamless whole, a vast, writhing beast within whose belly the ship rocked and yawed dangerously. In every groan from the seasoned *kyoki-wood* timbers, from every pitch the ship took in the ever darkening swells, from the precarious bowing of the masts before the shrieking, gyring winds, his senses picked up the beginnings of the *Tsubasa's* death throes.

God bear witness, he berated himself, this would not have happened if I'd not been so involved belowdecks. Aufeya! Even now his thoughts betrayed him, straying to the silkiness of her creamy skin, the look of longing and love filling her copper eyes, the pleasure -sometimes gentle, other times fierce - of their nights together in the captain's cabin.

Dammit, no! Moichi had been born to be master of the seas: a navigator. And now, as captain of his own ship, he had at last achieved a lifelong dream. No storm, unnatural or no, would rip his new charge from beneath his bootsoles. Oh no, he vowed, gripping the railing to regain his balance. By the Oruboros, the

great sea spirit who guides all mariners, I will not allow it!

The roiling clouds above his head mangled the murky periwinkle daylight into patches of shifting, menacing shadow that raced across the ship's foundering flanks as if they were working in concert with the angry sea in trying to pull it under.

The fittings howled in protest and the *Tsubasa* again shipped water dangerously. On Moichi's shouted orders men ran, stumbling, toward the bilges, manning overworked emergency pumps. But the wind was rising, sudden violent gusts like the claws of some evil-tempered beast making the tying off of the sails almost impossible. Moichi tried to shout further instructions to his crew but the storm cried him down hysterically.

The ship canted over, almost capsizing, and Moichi turned, heading back aft to the tiller. He was halfway up the companionway when he heard a cracking from over his head like the sundering of a roofbeam. He did not have to look up to know that the mizzen mast - the thinnest of the clipper's three masts - had been bent past its breaking point and had splintered.

He launched himself up the companionway and raced across the shuddering deck. Unmindful of the treacherous footing, he shoved men out of the way of the hardwood as it came crashing down in a bird's nest of rigging and tackle. Nevertheless, one of the cross-trees struck the first mate across his face, his flesh gashed open as he reeled backward, arms flailing in a vain attempt to right himself.

Moichi lunged after him, stretching to his full limit, slipping, then catching himself. His powerful fingers encircled the mate's wrist as a combination of his own momentum and the violent motion of the ship sent the man arcing over the side rail.

With a shriek, he disappeared, and Moichi was dragged several heart-stopping feet after him across the deck. He fetched up against the side with a rib-jolting blow. Half-dazed he held on, gritting his teeth with the effort, his muscles bulging, veins popping in lightning streaks.

He peered over the side, his face filled with seafoam and rain. He saw the mate's mouth twisted in terror, his eyes staring wildly. Blood ran off him like pink rain.

'Hold on! I have you now!' Moichi shouted into the storm as he gathered his strength to bring the mate up onto the deck. But just then, the *Tsubasa* lurched sickeningly, sending the side they were on plummeting downward into the thrashing sea. My God, Moichi thought, it's dark down here. Like the underside of the world.

And with just an indifferent flick of its bulk the ocean took his mate from him, tearing his hand from Moichi's. The man's mouth opened in a silent shriek as the water in great black swirls lifted him into its embrace, up, up, and then, quite suddenly, sucking him into itself, down and away.

There had been absolutely no sensation of him slipping away, no intimation of what was to come. One moment Moichi had him firmly in tow, the next instant there was nothing to hold on to, just the chill wetness all around, moaning and pitching as if in agony.

God of my father, Moichi thought, I have never seen the sea like this.

His head came up and he squinted through the typhoon, thinking, No! By the Oruboros, this is too much!

But in truth his ears had not deceived him. They were picking up a vibration rather than a true sound - a horrid, bone-chilling rumbling that reverberated through his body and buzzed evilly in his brain.

With a bellow of rage, Moichi stormed the high poop deck and, shouting mingled instructions and

encouragements to the young, petrified tillerman, brought his own brawny weight to bear on the protesting steering mechanism. It would not budge.

He raced to the railing, leaped down onto the mid-deck, gesticulating as he picked himself up and ran for the mainmast. 'Raise the mains!' he cried. 'Raise the mains!'

No one reacted. The best of them knew only to trim all sail, batten down all hatches and tackle in order to ride out a storm. Raising sail in the face of foul weather was unthinkable. What their captain was asking of them was sheer madness.

'Move,' Moichi shouted, 'or we'll all be dead men, lying at the bottom of the sea and food for the big fish!'

As if to underscore his words all light left the world. In the unnatural blackness the men turned aft. There came a shriek among them; or perhaps it was the infernal typhoon itself, laughing at its height, at the puny creatures who dared ride its coruscating back.

No matter. They all saw it at once: the *tsunami*. The towering wavefront, black and purple, had risen up behind them, traveling at a fast rate, growing and curling with every split second until it had formed a massive fortress wall threatening to engulf them. The pressure drop was palpable, a great rushing in their ears, a pounding in the heads. The crew stood paralyzed, staring helplessly at the advent of their doom.

Only Moichi was in motion, striding among them, screaming in their ears, shoving them this way and that. And still the building *tsunami* transfixed them. Then one among them came to life, moving to the mainmast, hauling with all his slight weight, his dark almond eyes sliding from Moichi's face to the rapidly unfurling sheet. It was the lone Bujun among them, a man who had kept to himself so completely throughout the voyage that Moichi could not even recall his name.

'The Oruboros curse you!' Moichi shouted as he and the Bujun struggled with the mainsail. 'You'll do as I say or die!'

Perhaps they felt the proximity of their deaths or perhaps it was the example of the grim-faced Bujun hauling mightily on the rigging that galvanized them. In any event, they threw off their stupor and bent to their task, moving as one to deploy the flapping mainsail, which moaned in protest as it was raised into the brunt of the storm.

Now Moichi left the Bujun to work them, and he returned to the high poop deck, bounding toward the ashen-faced tillerman. 'Into the wind!' he shouted into the man's tense face. 'By God and all that's holy, we'll be swamped in a moment if you can't do it!'

Moichi would not turn around, but he could feel the approach of the *tsunami*, feeling its vibrations, dark and deadly, rushing closer as each precious second raced by.

Bug-eyed in terror, the tillerman cried, 'You're mad! You'll turn us right into the path of the wavefront! We'll be sucked down for sure!'

In desperation, Moichi threw the tillerman aside and, lifting his head, called for the Bujun. The mainsail was up and bowed, catching the lashing wind. If only the Bujun cloth would not rip in the typhoon's violence.

The small, almond-eyed man bounded up the companionway, and the instant his hands gripped the tiller, Moichi could feel the ship respond. He looked hard into the Bujun's eyes, saw only mute concentration as the man fought with him to turn the *Tsubasa* fully into the wind before the filled mainsail capsized them.

Behind them, the *tsunami* was rushing at them, building even higher, creaming and bubbling like a cauldron at its serpentine crest. Moichi risked a glance over his shoulder. The wavefront was the deepest black within the enormous cradle of its rising bulk.

Sweating like beasts of burden, digging their heels into the slick deck boards, Moichi and the slim Bujun dragged on the recalcitrant tiller. The violent sea had the *Tsubasa* and it did not want to give her up. Grunting with their effort, their lungs hot bellows, they heaved on the tiller, and slowly, agonizingly slowly the craft began to give grudging way, shifting through the water, fighting the wind, the wildly fluctuating cross-currents and the relentless tide. Turning to port, always to port, the two men struggled, their teeth ground together, their shoulder muscles bunched, their chests expanding like sails full out.

But now their world was filled with the rumble of the *tsunami* over and above the wail of the storm, and Moichi knew that it was possible they had left it too late, that the mainsail full out would not now provide enough extra speed to allow them to cleave the wavefront, that they would all go down, broken like the timbers that would splinter all around them. He did not want to end up like seaweed, adrift on the tides.

'By God, put your soul into it, lad!' he cried into the Bujun's ear. 'Everything you have now! Everything!'

The Bujun trembled with the vehemence of the typhoon and the words spat out by this great bearlike demon at his side. He had signed on to the *Tsubasa* to escape the endless gloom of Sha'angh'sei's narrow crooked streets, its double-dealing, lice-ridden merchants, its evil-eyed provocateurs, its sleazy arms dealers. It had been a mistake to leave his island home, to come to the seething continent of man. To sail a Bujun vessel had seemed the perfect escape from Sha'angh'sei's madness. Now he was trapped in this sea-drenched coffin! As he hauled on the tiller his white lips trembled in a prayer that had, until this moment, been only half-remembered.

But no prayer could dispel the terrible onrush of the *tsunami*. It rode triumphantly above the siren shriek of the typhoon, a sound out of all nature, a vibration rattling his clenched teeth, causing the short hairs to stand on the back of his neck, making his drenched flesh crawl. Still, his half-numbed brain registered the exhortations of his captain who stood side by side with him, who needed his strength to turn the ship fully into the wind. This sense of intimacy, of comradeship was new to the Bujun, and he felt it a pleasurable and compelling sensation. No one had ever needed him before, and he was bound and determined to deliver up his very soul to his captain if that were what was asked of him. Shoulder to the groaning tiller, he redoubled his efforts, grunting like a rutting animal.

The *tsunami* was a living being pursuing them like the hand of God, rolling and roaring like a giant in agony, an unstoppable mailed fist bent on demolishing them all.

Down on the mid-deck, men tying off the last of the mainsail's singing lines felt cold sweat snaking down their rigid spines. They fell to their knees where they were, vomiting and urinating without volition. Others cried or simply prayed to gods they no longer believed in, returning unconsciously to the ways of their forebears that they had once ridiculed for their piousness. They cried for succor, no longer believing in their innate power as men, pleading with these long-dead gods to deliver them by a miracle.

Above them, Moichi shouted, 'Now!' in the Bujun's ear. 'Now, now, now, by the Oruboros!' And they fought the tiller, fought the raging seas and gusting gale as Moichi willed them further to port, bending his mind as well as his muscles to the near impossible task.

Now that special bond between captain and ship was springing up between them, and he called upon the *Tsubasa*, his ship, speaking silently to her in the universal language of the sea. He cajoled her, cursed her, caressed her and beat her, threatening her with an eternity of rot at the bottom of the sea.

And all the while he could feel the presence of the onrushing *tsunami*, its crest widening, higher now than

the tallest buildings of his memory, even those great arcane pyramids he and the Dai-San, when he had been called Ronin, had ascended in the land of the Majapan.

I survived the horror of Xich Chich, Moichi thought, defeating gods more powerful than any one element. I fought in the Kai-feng, the war against Chaos's agent, the dreaded Dolman. I destroyed the monster Diablura in the land of the Opal Moon, resisted the deadly magical lure of the Firemask, I outfoxed the sorceress Sardonyx, defeating her at her own diabolical game. I survived it all. I will not die here, so close to home, in my own element! By God, I own the seas!

He raised his head to the lightning-flecked clouds. He felt the proximity of another spirit, the conjunction of their power, battling the howling elements all around them, and he grinned, loving the whip of the wind, the briny smell of the sea, and always the titanic struggle the ocean put to you in order to prove your ultimate worth.

His heart beat fast and strong, and his spirit expanded, directing itself along the sleek flanks of his new ship, pointing its sharp upswept prow toward the wall of water that was now almost upon them. And, for the first time, he appreciated the Bujun craft's design. His own ships would have wallowed in a wave trough but the *Tsubasa's* sleek shape sliced through the waves. The mainsail was almost full out and he could feel a corresponding quickening of their speed. They were almost there. But the wavefront had also picked up momentum as it drew strength from the heart of the typhoon, the flailing arms of the gale, the deepening surge of the sea itself deep down where light itself was forever banished.

The *tsunami* was all they could see now, their entire universe, and Moichi knew that the ship still had several meters to go. It had been a desperate gamble, trying to cleave through the wavefront on speed and nerve, a long-odds bet at best. They had run out of time.

The Bujun was trembling in fear and effort beside him. Moichi felt it almost as if it were his own, and he murmured, 'Come on, lad, don't fail me now! It's just the two of us and the *Tsubasa* against this leviathan!'

Inwardly, for just a moment as he stared into the heart of the *tsunami*, Moichi felt his resolve begin to crumble, for surely there was no way through this cyclopean madness. He had been a fool to attempt this run at it.

Then he felt movement beside him, heard the Bujun's call like a distant sea bird's in his ear, 'She's coming to, Captain. Helm's answering fully. The wind's directly aft!'

All doubts vanished. 'Double and redouble!' Moichi shouted, immensely grateful for the Bujun's courage and resolve. 'Keep the helm steady, mate! If we're blown off course even a few degrees we'll be lost! Our bow must strike the wavefront dead on!'

The sound of the *tsunami* was like the rending of the earth's mantle. It shuddered the decks, chattered the men's teeth, making them weep with fear and loathing.

'Bastard!' Moichi called at the curling black wall of water. 'I'll beat you yet! My time's not come and surely not by your evil hand!' And with immeasurable effort, the two men held the helm steady as they met the onrushing wavefront, towering over them to an impossible height so that even Moichi, his soul expanded to its limits, felt the chill tendrils of fear writhing in his belly. 'The time of truth's come, lad!'

The *Tsubasa* sliced into the wavefront. Walls of wind-whipped water rose above them until they seemed a part of the raging sky, replacing it altogether. They were within the *tsunami*, their fate now linked with its elemental and unpredictable power. Its energy was unendurable - it was like being inside a massive hive of bees stirred by an intruder to a frenzy. Then the sides of the wavebody seemed to glass over, to

deepen in color and depth. What was happening?

God of my father, Moichi prayed. This is truly the face of death. For within the *tsunami's* very heart he discerned what could only be termed a female face, elemental, to be sure, its features shifting like currents, sliding away into shadow and reappearing slightly altered as if each heartbeat, each moment in time brought it a new aspect.

It was like looking into the face of a god. It was dominated by great lidless eyes and a lipless mouth. It was a face of unmitigated rage, so shocking in its intensity that Moichi felt the breath sucked from him as if all the air had been withdrawn from this place. He also had the impression of immeasurable age, so that for the first time in his life the concept of eternity was given form and substance.

Then he felt the bosom of the sea buck and judder beneath their tortured keel as if a gigantic hand from the depths had risen and grasped it. The ship, as if possessed, shot forward, as the howling winds filled the mainsail to bursting. The *Tsubasa's* high bow lifted upward to meet the creaming crest of the wavefront now beginning to tumble over them with an ominous tearing sound. Moichi and the Bujun almost had their arms torn out of their sockets as the helm tried to pull this way and that. But the two men held the *Tsubasa* fast to its course, and with an astonishing burst of speed, the Bujun craft continued to slice through the whirling maelstrom before them.

Moichi felt rather than heard the Bujun praying as the clipper, trembling, dipped precipitously into the trough of terrifying depth. For long breathless moments their world was stark green and obsidian black, the curve of the vast wavebody filled their ears, their heads and bodies with an alien din.

Gargantuan shapes slid through the depths on either side of them, far from the surface high above, moving and twisting in a silent display none had ever seen before or could even have imagined.

How long they plowed through the aqueous gorge was impossible to judge, and at last, directly ahead of them, the first patch of deep blue appeared, so small at first that many took it to be a part of the roaring sea. Gradually, it widened, seeming to bring them out of their watery tomb, and at length they felt the ship rising to meet it, as if in concert with the changing tide below them.

Grinning hugely, Moichi spared an instant to clap the Bujun on the back. Then he swiftly returned both hands to the helm as the *Tsubasa* wavered a bit in the still treacherous cross-currents, the aftermath of the ferocious typhoon.

'Softly, now,' Moichi whispered in the Bujun's ear, 'the *tsunami's* behind us but this gale can still do us in.' Between them they kept a tight rein on the ship's course. 'Listen to the wind in the sheets and take care to read the pattern of its changes. If we get broadside to it with the mains'l filled, we'll go down like a stone.'

The Bujun's grip on the helm remained firm, his knuckles white with the pressure. He concentrated on the job given him, tracking the gusty wind expertly, making incremental course corrections as needed. In no time at all, he was nearly anticipating the gale.

Seeing this, Moichi nodded to himself. That Bujun had more guts in the crunch than all of the scurvy crew combined. Glancing upward, he noticed that the blue sky was gone. In its place, thick glowering thunderheads, dark with rain, rippled across the clogged sky, dipping down to meet the gray-green ocean. Lightning forked and licked, yellow-pink, blinding him momentarily.

With that the downpour began anew. Moichi glanced around. The *Tsubasa* was already lying low in the water, her scuppers blocked with twisted masses of sea grape and wrack.

'What do you think,' he asked the Bujun, 'if I ask for all sail to be set will this ship take it?'

The Bujun looked into his face and nodded. 'She'll take anything you put her to, Captain. Of that you can be assured.'

Moichi nodded and, turning toward the crew on the deck below, called for all sail to be set. They needed all speed now in order not to ship more water and risk a high wave pulling them under.

One of the mates, a glum-faced giant with an oily drooping mustache and some years' sea experience, mounted the companionway.

'You're not thinkin' o' fillin' the yards in this foul weather, Cap'n,' he growled. It was not a question.

'We'll go under if we don't raise the sails,' Moichi said, not bothering to look at the mate as he directed the crew to clear the last of the debris over the side.

'You're wrong, Cap'n. We'll surely go under if we do set sail.' He was close enough now to smell the rum on his breath. 'That god-rotting demon wave was an omen. We'll do nothing now but ride out the storm.'

Moichi swung at him. 'Look at how low we sit. With this heavy rain and the scuppers clogged we'll be sunk inside a watch. You'll follow my orders, by God!'

'I warn you,' the mate said, 'do not tempt the gods further.'

'I said set all sail,' Moichi said in a menacing tone.

The mate did not back down, but pulled agitatedly at his oily mustache. He nodded his head in the Bujun's direction. 'It's he who gave the order, isn't it? That Bujun bastard. I heard stories of how they sail their damned ships.' The mate spat, a heavy yellow gob of saliva. 'This is no time t'be takin' the advice of a rotting Bujun.'

'I am the captain of this vessel,' Moichi said, knowing he had to restore his sovereignty immediately, 'and you will obey my orders.'

'But why should I, Cap'n?' The mate raised his arms wide. 'Why should any of us? You saw it as well as anyone, I reckon.'

'Shut up!' Moichi thundered. 'Or I'll give your job to the Bujun!'

The big mate spat again and tried to laugh; it came out as a moan. 'Well, who cares a whit now, eh? This is a damned voyage and you've murdered us all, in any case.' Unable to tolerate the heat from Moichi's glare, he turned to the men, his voice raised in a hoarse shout. 'Ye all saw it plain as day, I'll warrant. The face in the wave. All gods curse the day I set foot on this miserable alien ship!'

'I told you to shut your yap!' Moichi shouted, hauling the big man all the way up the companionway.

'Too late, Cap'n, it's happened. The moment all seafaring men dread. We've all looked into Miira's Mirror! We're all dead men now! You can't deny the legend! We're doomed!'

Moichi slammed his huge fist into the mate's greasy face, sending him reeling down the companionway, tumbling head over heels. He was about to descend after him when he saw that the door to his cabin was open. Aufeya had emerged. Unused to the rigors of the sea, she should have been white-faced and weak, but she seemed to have weathered the typhoon without ill effect. How long had she been standing there? Moichi wondered. Long enough to have heard the rantings of the mate? By God, he prayed not. She looked at him, making the sign of the Palliate. She was Daluzan - a people whose culture, like Moichi's, was intimately bound up with their religion.

'Set all sail!' Moichi bellowed. 'Snap to it, mates! All those thinking otherwise will find a watery grave, this I swear, for I'll tolerate no mutiny aboard the *Tsubasal*!' The crew snapped to, breaking out the sheets as quickly as they could. But while all about him was frenzied activity, Aufeya stood her ground, her long red hair whipping her shoulders and cheeks, her copper-colored eyes glancing back and forth from the supine mate to Moichi's stern gaze.

He could see the curiosity in her face, and the fear. Aufeya came from a people who were overly superstitious. And she had witnessed her own demon - the Diablura - come to vivid and terrifying life, almost destroying her. To her, the world of sorcery and devils had not entirely passed into oblivion. Moichi knew now that she had overheard the mate's warning regarding Miira's Mirror, and he cursed the man all over again.

He was descending toward her, when a sudden burst of rain obscured his vision. The wind howled and the ship heeled dizzily to port. Moichi was knocked over the railing of the stair, crashing to the mid-deck. He was up on his feet in an instant, shaking off the sparks behind his eyes, the pain in his shoulder and hip. He shouted instructions to the men tying down the mainsail. It was then that he realized he did not see Aufeya.

He broke off his tirade, rushing to the port rail. He could just see a hand, small and pale, the white knuckles gripping hard the lower wooden railing. He reached down, saw Aufeya's face, pinched with fear, her eyes wide and staring, her long copper hair whipping around her face and neck.

'Aufeya! Hold on, I have you!'

As his fingers closed over her wrist, the ship lurched again to port and the angry sea rose up as if it were a beast with a will of its own. It smashed against the hull of the Bujun ship, inundating Aufeya completely.

At that instant, Moichi felt a tugging, an added weight that almost pulled his arm from its socket. He knew that it was impossible, but it was as if something from the deep was trying to pull Aufeya under.

Then the ship rose upward on the breast of a swell and the wave receded, bringing Aufeya back to him. She was drenched and gasping, her thick hair clinging to her like sea grape. She coughed, spewing seawater, and reaching down with his other hand, he began to haul her upward.

The ship dove down again into a trough, the rain beating at them like hail and it was as if a kind of shadow fell over them as the sea rose up her hips, chest and shoulders until it appeared to tower over them. It was then that some inner tingling caused Moichi to look up into the blue-gray underside of the wave. In its shifting depths he saw again the eerie primordial face, filled with rage. The slash of a mouth appeared to open and he heard a rumbling as of distant thunder.

He shook his head as if to clear his ears of water, but it did no good. He heard the rumbling again, breaking apart and re-forming into what could only be construed as words:

I WANT HER. I MUST HAVE HER.

What, he thought wildly, am I hearing?

IT IS MIIRA'S WISH.

Miira!

DEFY ME AT YOUR PERIL!

The water was rising, lapping up over Aufeya's mouth and nose. She was struggling now, clearly terrified.

And with good reason. In a moment, she would drown.

With an extreme effort of will, Moichi looked away from the sorcerous face, concentrating on the task at hand. He was Aufeya's only chance at life, and he had only moments within which to act. Already a larger wave was forming, heading toward them. The ship was beginning to climb the next crest and Moichi knew this was his last shot at saving Aufeya from a watery grave.

He pressed his knees against the side timbers, hauled upwards, using all the strength in his legs, back and arms. Muscles popped, corded tendons pulled his skin this way and that. He could feel Miira dragging against him, fierce in her determination. But Moichi was more determined. He called upon the strength of his bond-brother, the Dai-San, and slowly, painfully slowly, he drew Aufeya toward him, until as the ship crested the wave, he brought her, gasping and shivering over the rail to his side.

He had one last glimpse of that rage-stained face in the sea, then it broke apart into ten thousand shards, the wave crashed harmlessly against the hull of the ship, and was gone in white plumes along the ship's wake.

TWO

MIIRA'S MIRROR

Of course, Aufeya had heard the voice. And, of course, he had to tell her about Miira's Mirror, He had no choice. They had come too close to Miira or something that called itself Miira - for him to be able to do otherwise.

He had spent several hours seeing to the ship, but in truth the magnificent prowess of the Bujun ensured that what damage had occurred was minor. Again, he marveled that such a slight-looking vessel could so courageously weather such an evil storm, and he thanked the Dai-San all over again for his gift, for he was certain that no ordinary ship would have survived.

In the end, he left what remained to be done to the tillerman, whose name was Arasomu, and who he had now elevated to first mate. He climbed the crosstrees of the mainmast like a monkey. At its tip, he tested the wind and tasted the sweet smell of the ocean's marker that meant fair winds. Back on deck, he broke out his navigator's instruments and, fixing on the shining constellations of the stars, calculated their position. He relayed all this information and his instructions to Arasomu. Confident that the weather had turned for good and that within hours they would be back on course for Iskael, he went belowdeck to his cabin, where Aufeya was waiting for him.

He told her the legend of Miira's Mirror as she lay in their berth, swathed in warming blankets, while the *Tsubasa* rode a tranquil sea and lightly gusting trade winds beneath a star-filled night sky toward Iskael. Just her nose and eyes peeped out from beneath the blankets and she seemed, with her wild hair and copper eyes, to be no more than a small child readying herself to hear a night-time tale before sleep.

Miira, it is said by seamen the world over, was a woman of exceeding grace and beauty (Moichi began). She lived in Syrinx, a land far, far away on the other side of the Mountain Sin'hai, on the edge, it is said, of a stony abyss that plunged into the very heart of this planet. Her people, I think, must have died out long ago.

These people were political animals. Power meant everything, and intrigue was second nature to them. Miira's husband was a vice-minister in a government rife with internecine warfare.

At the time of the birth of Miira's son, her husband, Bnak, was engaged in a potentially explosive power struggle with the leader of the main opposition movement. He was a staunch loyalist, and had dedicated

himself to battling those who sought to overthrow the reform-minded regime.

Again and again Bnak would uncover plots against the highest government officials and he would take measures to thwart them because his sources were numerous and he was as exceedingly clever as Miira was beautiful.

Now you may well ask, if Bnak was so clever and possessed of so much power in a power-oriented society why had he not risen to full ministerial rank? The answer is as simple as it is distressing.

Miira was Shinju.

The Shinju were the indigenous people of this land. Centuries before, Bnak's people had swept across a vast, turbulent ocean on a mission of expansion. They found the Shinju's land and had straightaway sought to colonize it. In the process, they decimated the Shinju, driving what was left of them into the bleak, desolate highlands. There Bnak's people left them, to die of starvation and the elements, or so they thought. The Shinju were as tough as they were resourceful and they survived like the sure-footed mountain goats, whose thick winter coats they sheared, processed and wove into fantastic garments that were as light as air and as warm as a blazing fire.

As a young man Bnak had a penchant for anthropology and he spent two years in the highlands among the Shinju conducting his studies. It was here that he met Miira and fell in love with her. Her people would never have allowed her to court him, let alone marry outside her race had they not come to know Bnak and to appreciate his special qualities. For his part, Bnak had never shared nor even understood his people's abiding antipathy and scorn for the Shinju. He knew they were not inferior. Quite the contrary, in fact. He discovered that in many ways his own people would never fathom, the Shinju possessed far more knowledge and wisdom. They were simply not a warlike race.

Though it would have been far easier for Bnak to have stayed with Miira among the Shinju, he was no coward. He chose to return to the capital and to work from within to change the laws regarding the Shinju, to help educate his people about Miira's people. The reformers were his best hope. No other faction would even have given him a minor post. And Miira, at her intuitive best, agreed to help him in any way she could.

That Miira was beautiful beyond compare or as graceful as a lark descending from the heart of the sun, that she was cleverer than most men, meant nothing to the ministers who ruled the land; in their minds, Miira and all her people were inferior. Though they readily admitted Bnak's cleverness and exploited it and all his assets to their benefit, yet they mocked him behind his back, made disparaging remarks about Miira and refused every promotion that was his due. In short, they made pretense of listening to his impassioned treatises on the Shinju and then dismissed them as if they were the ravings of a lunatic.

Still, Bnak, loyal to the end, continued on their behalf.

As for Miira, she went about her life as if the scorn of these men and their high-born wives meant nothing to her. That is, on the outside. On the inside, (here Moichi shrugged) who can say? Though she was by no means a vain woman, Miira used her Shinju mirror to make up her face each morning. Now, it was her husband's habit to sit with her and watch her at it. The very early morning was their quiet time, and because Bnak often did not return from his work until midnight or later it was here that the peace of those deeply and truly in love descended over them.

'You are the most beautiful,' Bnak would tell Miira in a voice filled with wonder. 'Each morning you grow more so. And do you know that your reflection is beautiful... and different. There is, somehow, a purity of image I can see that comes from the deepest part of you. It is as if when I stare at you in the mirror I see you as a young girl, untouched and unmarked by time, care or worry.'

Bnak would tell her this so often that quite soon it had become a ritual. But no matter how often he said it Miira made no reply. She would merely smile the soft and dreamy smile she allowed only him to see, the smile he had seen while he was on his sojourn among the Shinju.

Three months after a son was born to Miira, Bnak's enemies invaded their villa in the gray and dismal hour before dawn. They slew the guards Bnak had posted and stole the infant from his crib in the small room adjacent to where his parents slept.

They offered Bnak a choice. Either he could resign his post and leave the capital with his son safe in his arms or he could have the infant delivered blue-faced and lifeless at his doorstep.

Now Bnak knew what would happen to the government should he be forced to flee the city. The plots would multiply until those who sought to take his place would be overwhelmed. The governmental leaders would be slain, the city - the entire nation for that matter - would be thrown into turmoil and confusion. Rivers of blood would run through the capital and the gods only knew where or when they would stop.

To stay and fight for reform or to flee and see all that he had worked for crumble to dust and blood. This was no decision that he could make on his own. So he did what he always did with questions knotty and of high import: he consulted Miira.

Though she was beside herself with grief, still she counseled him to follow the dictates of his heart. ('I often wonder,' Moichi said, interrupting the tale briefly, 'whether she was intuitive enough to have known that Bnak's goal of a united country was but an unattainable dream of a man of good heart and soul.') 'My heart and your heart are one, Miira,' Bnak said with tears in his eyes. 'Tell me what I should do.'

'What does your heart say?' she asked, holding his hands. She looked deep into his eyes now with that purity he had come to know so well. The truth now.'

'Loyalty is everything to me. That's the truth of it, beloved,' he said. 'If I betray them, if I betray my loyalty, then I am no man. I am nothing.'

Miira was unsurprised. This purity of purpose was what she loved best about him, what reminded her most of the best of her own people. 'Do as you will, husband,' she said with a voice like the tolling of a bell, 'for I fear either way our son is lost to us for ever.'

She meant, of course, that their son's abductors had no intention of letting him live. They were desperate men, desiring power above all else. What was the life of one infant - especially a half-breed - to them? Less than nothing. They would, Miira feared, simply take pleasure in his death.

Bnak clapped his fists over his ears but it was too late - the bitter truth was branded into his brain and he could do naught else but to follow Miira's advice and do what he would. He had to forget his son ever existed, wipe all the precious memories away. Start over.

Could he carry out such a heinous but requisite task?

He knew he must.

He defied his enemies, the enemies of the state. He remained loyal, he remained a man. But at what price?

The next morning, as they had threatened, their son appeared at the gateway to their villa, strangled with a blue cord.

After the requisite three day mourning period, Bnak returned to his duties at the ministry. He pulled in all the favors he had been hoarding for years and the directive went out across the length and breadth of the capital: find the abductors, the murderers.

But on his way home that night he was ambushed, his guards slain, and he was brutally murdered. At almost the same instant life was seeping out of him, men invaded his villa, looking for Miira. They found only empty rooms.

In another quarter of the capital, the chief ministers were assaulted in their bed chambers. Blood flowed in the streets, as Bnak had feared. Chaos reigned as the old was destroyed and the new sought to solidify its power in the corridors of the ministry and in the streets. Thousands died; the capital was turned into an abattoir as the loyalists battled the insurgents.

During those dark weeks of brutal warfare and death, Miira rose each morning in the cave at the northernmost outskirts of the city to tend to the wounded men and the women who had been beaten and raped. She no longer had the time nor the desire to make up her face, and yet, out of habit, she continued to look at her reflection in her Shinju mirror. She did this mainly to keep the memory of Bnak alive. In the moment just before he was ambushed, she had been pulled out of sleep by a harsh shriek that, upon awakening, she knew existed only in her Shinju mind. In that shriek was carried the crosstown assault and imminent death of her husband. Also, the hastening bootsoles on the street along which their villa was set. She had leapt out of bed, grabbed clothes, money and her mirror and had fled the villa by a secret passage just moments before it was invaded by those sent to kill her.

Now, in the cave of war, she looked daily upon her reflection. It was a wholly different image that greeted her. It had been frequently said that there was a kind of magic running through the Shinju. Rumors still surfaced, now and again, but no civilized man believed them, of course. Why would they? If the Shinju actually possessed magical powers would Bnak's people have been able to invade their land, slaughter them, take what had once been theirs?

And yet had anyone else been present to gaze into Miira's mirror they might have had grave second thoughts. For her reflection no longer bore the imprimatur of her husband's love. Bnak was dead; their son, as well. Miira's heart was cold, gray ash. Her normally calm and flexible spirit had become the dark adamant jewel of fury-Even as she tended the wounded and dying, counseled the psychologically battered, she burned for vengeance. And, staring into her mirror at what was reflected there, she knew what she must do to dissolve that dark jewel, though she had vowed never to do so and to break the vow meant certainly that she must die.

As Bnak's enemies had done so cleverly before her, Miira now made a comprehensive diary of the new regime's comings and goings. She listed all the key ministers and, after their names, the times of the day when they were inside the ministry building.

After a month of this diligent detective work, she sat down to evaluate her copious notes. By this time the worst of the fighting had subsided to sporadic outbreaks among the last remnants of the die-hard loyalists. The stranglehold of the new regime was all but complete. There was, she discovered, the hour of midnight when all the ministers met in council. Midnight, she thought, putting aside her diary. The hour of Bnak's death.

How she slipped past the phalanxes of guards is anyone's guess. In any event, no one saw her enter the ministry; no one saw her inside until she appeared within the central chamber of state and by then it was too late.

She passed around the great oval table at which her enemies sat, sleek and self-satisfied. Those

murderers. There was still time to turn back, to forego vengeance. But her mind was filled with memories of Bnak and of her baby. And she broke her sacred vow.

She used her power; the power of the Shinju, for all the rumors were quite correct. As she passed behind each minister, she placed her mirror before them, and each had no choice but to look at his image reflected there.

What they saw no man, perhaps, can say. But I suspect it was different for each of them. One by one, they clawed the air as if phantasms were assailing them. Their faces twisted grotesquely in horror and dread. They fouled themselves abysmally; some wept uncontrollably in their death throes.

And when the last of the ministers had died, Miira too, looked deep into her mirror and, it is said, died on the spot (Moichi concluded).

Aufeya, who had been sitting up in the berth for some time now, her own aches and fears forgotten as she became more and more enthralled with the tale, said, 'Is this story true? It is so fantastic. Terrible and fantastic.'

'Aye, it is that, but though it makes a gripping tale I doubt its veracity.'

Aufeya seemed lost in thought for some time. Then she threw the bedclothes off and, padding about the cabin, began to dress. 'I want to go on deck,' she said. 'I'm stifling in here and dawn is breaking over the water. I want to see it. It has been a long, fearful night.'

Even in this early hour there was much activity on deck. Arasomu checked in briefly with Moichi. He had made two slight course corrections during his watch. According to the information that Moichi had provided him he believed they would sight the shore of Iskael before noon. The skies were fair, with scattered ribbons of high wispy cloud, and the wind was freshening out of the northwest quarter. It was ideal weather.

'I find it curious,' Aufeya said when they were alone, 'that you hold no truck with superstition yet you are a mariner and mariners are a powerfully superstitious lot.' She tossed her head, glad to be abovedeck in fine weather. 'In fact, I've heard you call upon the Oruboros even though you believe in the One God.'

Moichi shook his head. 'I call upon him, no. I curse him on occasion because one does not speak of the God of my people in that way. Just as one does not call upon Him to change the wind or ensure success in business. He is not like the tiny gods of smoke and stone other people kneel before. He is the universe; he is everything. He lives; He provides for His people. But He does not grant petty favors like some desert jinn out of legend.'

Aufeya smiled. 'And the Oruboros does.'

He noted the mocking tone in her voice. 'The Oruboros, the great ancient sea serpent, once lived, Aufeya. In another time his power was great, indeed.'

'You talk about him as if he no longer exists.'

Moichi looked down at her, not knowing whether this was some game she was playing, needling him with her disbelief. Not for the first time, he was struck by how little he really knew her. 'Ronin slew the Oruboros when he was transformed into the Dai-San.'

At the mention of Moichi's bond-brother Aufeya dropped her amused look. She knew full well how important this already mythical figure was to him. 'But I don't really understand who - or what - the Dai-San is,' she said.

Now Moichi smiled. 'Does anyone, really?' His tawny eyes were misty with remembrance. 'Ah, Aufeya, what adventures we two shared.' His eyes cleared as he tried to explain the unexplainable. 'He was once a man, not unlike me, perhaps. But his fate lay in another direction. On Ama-no-mori, he was transformed by ancient Bujun sorcery that was part of a grand design. Pulled apart, then reassembled, he was compelled to ride the back of the Oruboros, to slay this venerable creature who he held dear so that he might be reborn as the Dai-San.'

'Dai-San,' Aufeya repeated. 'That name is of a language unfamiliar to me.'

'As it is to most. It is Bujun.'

'But the Dai-San is not Bujun.'

Moichi shrugged. 'Ama-no-mori has become his adoptive country. It was there that his transformation began.'

Aufeya's eyes were huge. 'Is he really more than mortal man?'

'In the time of magic from which he was born anything is possible.'

'Even the legend of Miira's Mirror?'

She had him and he knew it. For a moment his brows knit darkly, then he burst out into deep, booming laughter. 'Perhaps. But I believe the age of magic died when the Dai-San defeated the Dolman. This is the age of mankind.'

'And what of Sardonyx?' Aufeya demanded. 'Was she not the most powerful sorceress?'

Moichi considered this highly charged topic carefully, as he always did with her. Sardonyx, who had been born Adenese, had been sold into slavery. Eventually, she had killed her master and had been thrown into jail for her crime. Eventually, she managed to escape, bribing her way out with her body. The rest of her history was a mystery - he was not even certain of the veracity of what she had told him. She was a consummate liar; she actually enjoyed spinning tales, changing personalities as readily and effortlessly as others breathed air.

Sardonyx had become fixated on Aufeya, and when Moichi had prevented her from getting her, she had returned to Daluzia from her castle in the land of the Opal Moon and had murdered Aufeya's mother Tsuki by somehow using Aufeya's body, thus wreaking a diabolical revenge on mother and daughter both. One was dead and the other could never forgive herself for what her body had done.

'As far as Sardonyx is concerned,' Moichi said, keeping one eye on the wind and the other on Aufeya's face, 'it is my considered opinion that she was more prestidigitator than thauma-turgist. To put it in its simplest terms she was a highly accomplished illusionist.'

'Then everything that happened to us in the land of the Opal Moon was a hallucination?'

'Ah, no. You know it was not. But the Firemask, the artifact of power, that Sardonyx so desired, was real enough. And it was from the time of magic; its power was awesome.' Seeing her shudder and make the sign of the Palliate, he put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. 'I think we'd both do best in forgetting all about Sardonyx. After I took the Firemask from her, her only thought was to avenge herself on your mother. Having, unhappily, accomplished that, she is now, I have no doubt, far away from here, back in her castle in the land of the Opal Moon.'

Together, they went to the rail, stared out at the rising sun.

Aufeya turned to Moichi. 'You miss him, don't you?'

'Who?'

'Your love for the Dai-San runs very deep.'

'He is my bond-brother.'

'He's much more, I warrant.'

Moichi was silent for some time, as if he were wrestling with a thorny problem. 'In some unfathomable way we are one. I cannot explain it further. He was created to defeat the Dolman and the forces of Chaos who threatened to claim this world and to put an end to the races of man for all time. My fate was to be at his side. He is the greatest warrior of all time; together we journeyed to the Kai-feng, the last great battle of mankind.'

'Yet you were not with him in Ama-no-mori for the beginning of his transformation.'

He sighed. 'Ah, Aufeya, all journeys have an end. My fate dictated that I return to Sha'angh'sei. I had my own role to play.' He chuckled. 'And lucky for me that I did. I never would have met you otherwise.'

'Or come to grips with Sardonyx.'

'I am no longer interested in her or the land of the Opal Moon. They belong to our past, nothing more.'

'Speaking of the moon,' Aufeya said excitedly as she pointed overhead, 'it is out here during the day! Look, Moichi! Look!'

THREE

THE HOUSE OF ANNAI-NIN

The pure white buildings of Ala'arat glowed in the tropical sunlight. The city was strategically situated on a series of nine clawlike hills which rose around the sweeping crescent of a generous and sheltering bay. In all ways, the city was the direct opposite of Sha'angh'sei, the main port of the continent of man. Beyond the bustling quays, the streets, avenues and alleyways of Ala'arat radiated out in a precise star-shaped pattern. Instead of a massive jumble of hodgepodge shapes, the buildings were neat squares or rectangles, or as the city rose up the slopes to where, inevitably, the wealthy and politically connected families lived, other more complex but no less methodical geometric shapes.

Standing on deck as the *Tsubasa* hove to and, with all sails furled, dropped anchor, Aufeya clapped her hands delightedly, crying, 'How beautiful! The city looks like it was made of sugar cubes!'

Moichi, standing beside her with his arm around her slender waist, found his eyes wet with tears. How marvelous his home looked to him after long years traveling to the far ends of the earth with the Sunset Warrior.

But his joy was short-lived. A well-armed lighter rode the gentle waves out to meet them as he was ordering a boat into the water so that he could pay a call on the harbor-master and secure a mooring license. Even though he could see that the port was far too busy to allow him a berth at one of the quays, which were full of massive four-masted freighters loading and off-loading all manner of fruits, vegetables and grains, bolts of hand-dyed silks, voile cottons, tightly-woven linen, and raw materials such as cypress, ebony, precious marble and glossy obsidian, he had no doubt he could buy a mooring further out on either side of the main channel.

He was surprised to see a contingent of Iskamen navalmen boarding his ship. The leader was a very young man, bald but for a long tongue of thick hair growing from the top of his head. He swaggered across the deck, calling for the captain. When Moichi stepped forward, he was momentarily taken aback to see a fellow Iskaman.

'Where are you from?' the officer asked, and when Moichi told him, he nodded, adding, 'You make any stops along the way? Were you boarded at sea or did you make a rendezvous with any other vessel?'

'No on all counts,' Moichi said, somewhat bewildered. 'Is there a problem?'

'Not if you've told the truth,' the officer said, eyeing Aufeya. 'What is your business here?'

'I am coming home,' Moichi said. 'I intend to marry.'

The officer watched him for some time. 'Your vessel will have to be searched.'

'What for?'

The officer took a step forward, his eyes narrowed. 'Have you anything to hide?'

'Certainly not,' Moichi said. 'But I must have an explanation for this extraordinary action.'

'In fact it is quite ordinary,' the officer said. 'You are Iskaman, but I see you have been away from Iskael for a long time. Much has changed in your absence. For some time now our intelligence sources have reported... disturbances in the desert settlements. Deaths and... disappearances under mysterious and suspicious circumstances. Enemy spies have been discovered in Ala'arat. How are they delivered here? They die before they will tell us, so now all vessels seeking to moor must be searched.' He waited a beat. 'Now may we begin, *Captain*?'

Moichi nodded, abruptly uneasy. 'Do what you must. I want Ala'arat as secure as you do.' As the officer turned away to instruct his men, Moichi said, 'This almost feels like war footing.'

The officer turned back to him and, despite his youth, Moichi could see the bleakness of premature age in his eyes. 'A most astute assessment, Captain,' he said.

The villa of the Annai-Nin was as he remembered it: white-washed stucco walls drenched in brilliant sunlight, jade-green glazed tile roofs glinting like faceted jewels at every angle.

In a land filled with fragrant cedar groves and thickly fruited date palms, it was perhaps surprising to see the great slabs of tiger-grain oak intricately carved and handsomely worked which opened inward, on clever hinges, the imposing front doors to the compound. But Moichi explained that his forefathers had been world merchants even when it had been dangerous and inadvisable to seek trade with the continent of man, and they had fallen in love with many of the foreign products for which they hammered out long-term deals.

The villa was situated atop the highest of the nine hills that overlooked the great curving bay that was one of Iskael's few natural assets. Far below them, the crescent city of Ala'arat spread like the frond of a date palm. It had taken them all day to file the necessary papers with the harbor authorities. For a bustling port, Ala'arat was crawling with security in the unwieldy guise of bureaucratic red tape. Now, in the twilight, the city shone like a jewel, lights twinkling, changing colors in the twists of smoke rising from myriad cooking fires. The air was perfumed by the sounds, distant and haunting, of voices raised in ululating prayer. The cobbled streets of the city's vast markets, choked since dawn, were almost deserted as the sacred hour of chaat, the weekly holy evening approached. Moichi hoped to reach his villa before the beginning of the ritual feast.

'Once, many years ago, all of Ala'arat was as bare and bleached as desert bones,' he told Aufeya as they walked up the snaking drive. 'In the space of a generation, the Iskamen made lush landscape out of rock and wind-blown sand.'

'Why did you settle here, if it was so inhospitable?'

Moichi paused, pointing over the roofs of the villa. 'Out there is the Mu'ad, the Great Desert. The Iskamen traveled half a year in the Mu'ad wastes. Any other people wandering in the Mu'ad for so long would have died of thirst or exposure. But God was with us. He showed us that we had no choice - the Mu'ad was our destiny.' They began to walk again, toward the villa's great oaken gates. 'You see, Aufeya, the Iskamen had spent eight generations enslaved by a race called the Adenese, who live on the far side of the Mu'ad. God spoke to the Iskamen elders. He told them they would be safest across the Great Desert.'

'But even though your people are free, Moichi, there are so many armed guards, so many suspicious eyes at the port and in the streets.'

'Old fears die hard, and the bitter truth is that the persecution of the Iskamen has never really ceased.'

She cocked her head quizzically. 'You knew this, and yet you chose to turn your back on it.'

'I chose to become a navigator.'

'To take to the seas. To leave your homeland and your people's fight far behind.'

He rounded on her angrily. 'Are you questioning my courage?'

She felt the searing heat from his eyes and put her hand gently on his arm, feeling the muscles tense and rippling. 'Not your courage, Moichi, never that. I owe you my life - more than I could ever know how to repay in one lifetime.' Her voice softened as she kissed him passionately. 'And I love you as I've loved no other man. It's your commitment to the ancient struggle of your people I'm talking of.'

Moichi was silent for some time. The swirling palm fronds seemed to bend the last of the sunlight, making of it something living and aqueous, like a creature from the sea-bottom slithering out of its coral den. A kestrel cried suddenly, a predator from the desert.

"Man the ramparts, the Adenese are coming!" That was my brother's battle cry. It was the rationale for the entire Fe'edjinn, our virulently militant sect. Freedom fighters, they called themselves, but in my mind they were no more than assassins, bent on circumventing the laws of Iskael to achieve power and their fanatical objective: a holy war of retribution against the Adenese. His *commitment* to the cause was more than enough for one family.'

'Do you really believe that your brother is an assassin?' Aufeya asked.

'Jesah is...' Moichi bit his lip and turned partially away from her. In a softer voice, he said, 'I would believe anything of Jesah Annai-Nin.'

'Moichi-'

'No, no!' He swung around, his face afire with anger. 'You would not understand.'

Aufeya opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it. Instead, she said, 'At least you must be looking forward to seeing your sister Sanda. You have spoken of her often.'

'Sanda, yes.' They were almost at the gates. In contrast to the bustle of the packed streets and alleys below, the courtyard of the villa was still and deserted. But there were lights on within the main building itself. 'I miss her very much. If there was a pain in my heart over leaving Ala'arat, it was that I would not see her for a very long time.' He turned his face to the lights of the villa as he pushed open the gates. 'How long it's been! How much has happened in her life! When I left she was just a young girl.'

They crossed the courtyard, their bootsoles crackling against the bed of crushed sea shells. As they climbed the enormous steps to the front door, Moichi was aware of a bittersweet swirl of mixed emotions, dragging up memories - some of which he would have preferred not to re-examine.

He was thinking of his father and painful feasts of chaats past when the great doors opened inward and they stepped across the threshold of the villa of the Annai-Nin.

Torches were thrust in their faces and strong fingers gripped their biceps and forearms. Moichi smelled strong body odors, the stench of fear and long waiting.

'Moichi!'

He took a step toward her, but a sword-blade at his throat stopped him. Through the blinding torchlight he could see bits and pieces of rugged faces creased by wind and weapon. Then a flash of a uniform sleeve set his mind to racing. 'I am Moichi Annai-Nin, eldest son of Jud'ae Annai-Nin. Who dares hold me hostage in my own house?'

'Your house?' The voice was sharp, as quick as the flick of a whip. 'Make way!'

The uniformed men moved aside, but kept their grip firmly on Moichi and Aufeya. In the shifting light Moichi made out a tall, rangy figure, impeccably dressed in a finely woven uniform of silk and cloth-of-gold. 'If you are the eldest son of the patriarch Jud'ae you had better be able to prove it. You've been gone a long time.'

The tall officer had thick black hair and a full curling beard. His coffee-colored eyes were deep-set in a hawk-nosed face the color of burnt almonds. It was a face that gave away nothing but which saw everything.

All of these things Moichi absorbed in the space of a split second and they would have gone toward defining the man had he not spotted something that made his stomach turn to ice. Around the officer's neck and over the top of his head he wore the green and brown striped cowl of the Fe'edjinn.

'I don't understand. Are you state militia or Fe'edjinn?' Moichi asked in a hoarse voice.

The tall officer smiled. 'I see that you *have* been away a long time. The Fe'edjinn *are* the state militia of Iskael.'

'But how is this possible?' Moichi asked. 'The state cannot sponsor murderers and assassins.'

One of the men delivered a heavy blow to the side of his head. 'Hold your tongue, lout!' he growled. 'Or I'll cut it out!'

The tall officer cocked his head to one side, said nothing while blood seeped from a cut opened on Moichi's cheek. 'Bitch of a homecoming,' he said at last.

'What are you doing in my home?' Moichi said.

The same man lifted a fist to strike Moichi again but the officer signed to him. 'If you, indeed, are the

eldest son of the Annai-Nin then you have a legitimate right to know.'

'Shall I take you through the villa?' Moichi asked. 'Shall I show you where my brother Jesah and I hid when we were eight and our father was blind with rage at what we had done? Shall I show you where I found my sister Sanda sitting and crying over a bone she broke in her left wrist? Shall I show you the spot where my mother is buried? And my father?'

The tall officer nodded. 'All this and more you shall show me. As much as I ask of you.'

'Let us go, then, so we may walk unbound through the villa of my family.'

After a moment, the officer nodded. 'This much I can do. But my men will accompany us with weapons drawn.'

'It is a sacrilege to draw weapons on chaat.'

The officer shrugged, held out a hand to indicate that Moichi should lead the way.

They went slowly through the villa of the Annai-Nin, and at every turn shadows and ghosts assailed Moichi. Memories, long buried beneath carefully woven cobwebs, reappeared, thrusting their snouts rudely into his consciousness. He saw himself again as a child, the dour, lanky Jesah, the beautiful blue-eyed Sanda, and everywhere the world of the Annai-Nin as it had been - his father's world, full of prestige and accolades, riches beyond a child's limited scope of understanding. The parade of dinner guests from the worlds of politics, philosophy and religion had been endless, then, with lavish, glittering parties each week welcoming the most famous into the sumptuous villa of the Annai-Nin. It was a world against which Jesah had chosen to rebel. The great successes of their father in business meant nothing to him, the contacts Jud'ae had managed to forge, the respect he had labored to build with the peoples of the continent of man across the sea, had no meaning for him. He had early come under the spell of the fanatic Fe'edjinn, finding in their strict interpretation of the Tablets of the Iskamen, their obsession to avenge themselves on the Adenese, a lightning rod for his own inner rage.

Had he and Moichi ever found reason to offer one another a kind word or even the most rudimentary sign of affection? Hadn't they hidden together in this spot behind the larder that Moichi was now showing to the Fe'edjinn officer? And hadn't they fought each other bloody in the blackness of the hidey-hole?

Better by far to recall Sanda and how she'd cling to his waist, how he protected her from the bullies at school, how he taught her the fundamentals of religion - how to interpret the sacred scriptures writ on the Tablets that had been brought down from the summit of that holiest place of the Iskamen, the Mountain Sin'hai.

But it was impossible to get away from Jesah's treachery for long. Dark, snakelike memories continued to intrude into his consciousness. Hadn't it been Jesah who had abandoned the family, leaving for the Fe'edjinn boot camps in the wilds of the sere Mu'ad wastes? Yes, but it had been Moichi who had been berated by Jud'ae and Sanda for taking to the seas, for forsaking not only the Annai-Nin but all of Iskael.

'For my part, I can never forgive you,' Jud'ae had said only months before his death. 'As eldest, you have a sacred responsibility to me and to the family. Who will run the business after I am gone? Jesah? He has only blood-lust in his eyes. Sanda? She is a woman.

Soon she will marry, yes, but I will not take a stranger into my confidence. Blood is blood, Moichi. You of all people must know this and abide by the covenants.'

What Sanda thought of all this Moichi did not know. She had been witness to his humiliation, but her

silence had been absolute.

It had been dark two hours by the time Moichi completed his tour to the satisfaction of the Fe'edjinn officer. At that point, the officer dismissed his men to other parts of the villa, nodded almost imperceptibly. 'Moichi Annai-Nin, I, Tamuk, First Darman of the Fe'edjinn, welcome you home.' He did not extend his wrist to be grasped in the Iskamen manner and Moichi marked this well.

'Where is everyone?' Moichi asked. 'And why are you here?'

Tamuk offered a hand. 'Please sit down.'

Aufeya sat, nervously glancing at Moichi, who remained standing. His eyes had never left those of the Fe'edjinn officer. They were in Jud'ae's study, a smallish room in the rear of the villa, filled with scrolls and books and the mementoes of a lifetime. The air was thick with imaginings of what might have been. Moichi had brought them here to show Tamuk the hidden recess that held his father's most precious possession: a hand-writ copy of the Tablets of the Iskamen which had taken five years to create. Oil lamps had been lit, their perfume triggering yet more memories.

Tamuk sighed. 'You are making this more difficult for yourself.'

'I have done nothing, First Darman, but come home for chaat.'

Tamuk remained silent for some time. The only sound came from the whip of the palm fronds beyond the windows and a slow drip of water from the scullery nearby. Tamuk took a breath, laced his fingers together and said, 'First, it is my duty to tell you that your sister is dead.'

'Sanda!'

Aufeya gave a tiny cry as Moichi staggered backward just as if Tamuk had driven a blade through his chest. She rose and held him as he stood, trembling.

'What... How?'

'She was murdered most brutally. It happened three nights ago as she lay sleeping in her bed.'

Moichi's head came up. 'You said brutally.'

'I beg you not to make me detail it,' Tamuk said, glancing at Aufeya.

'Tell me!' Moichi almost screamed it.

'All right.' Tamuk sighed. 'The front of her torso was - well, for lack of a better word - shredded. All her ribs were shattered, as if pulled outward, and her intestines had been ripped from her abdomen.'

'Oh, Lord!' Aufeya clutched Moichi's arm. A cold chill was creeping down his spine, but he stopped it, admonishing himself. It cannot be true, he thought. There must be some other explanation.

Tamuk gave him a withering look before continuing, 'Her husband-'

'Husband?'

Tamuk raised his black eyebrows. 'Yes, your sister married last year. Did you not know?'

Moichi's mind seemed frozen. There was the past, when Sanda had been alive, and then there was the present, when she was not. A sharp and evil demarcation separated the two like a pane of glass. Moichi

saw himself locked on the wrong side of that glass.

'Who...?' His mouth was dry. All of a sudden he was overcome with guilt. If only he had not abandoned his family for the lure of the sea. If only he had been here...

Aufeya left his side long enough to pour out a dark, thick liquor from a glass decanter. She handed him a metal cup, half filled. Moichi looked at it blankly. The cup was inscribed with runes from the Tablets. It was the ritual cup his father had always used for the toast to usher in the chaat feast. He found that his knuckles were white and, in a convulsive gesture, he knocked back the date wine. His eyes watered slightly as he licked his lips. Then his eyes once again focused on the Fe'edjinn officer and he said, 'Who did Sanda marry?'

'A merchant from the near slopes of the Mountain Sin'hai. A man named Yesquz.'

'What is known about him?'

'Almost nothing at all. He deals in the spices, herbs and medicinal roots found only at the foot of the Mountain Sin'hai. He apparently makes quite a good living of it - he has cornered the market. Your sister did not want for money.'

'He was not... murdered too?'

'He is not at this time in Ala'arat. Nor was he on the night your sister was murdered. He travels often.'

'Where is he?'

'In the Mu'ad. Trading his goods.'

'Bring him back,' Moichi said. 'I want to question him.'

Tamuk looked at him curiously. 'That was our thought, as well. Your brother, Hamaan, has departed with a detachment to do just that.'

'Hamaan? My brother's name is Jesah.'

Tamuk waited a moment before adding, 'No more. He is Qa'tach now, one of the five leaders of the Fe'edjinn, and as such he has taken a Qa'tach name.'

'I had no idea,' Moichi said after a time.

Tamuk seemed disgusted.

'Why are my other sisters not here?' Moichi asked.

'They moved with their families to the Mu'ad settlements,' Tamuk said, 'when their husbands joined the Fe'edjinn.'

'God of my fathers,' Moichi whispered.

'Much has changed here since you left,' Tamuk said, echoing the words of the naval officer who had boarded his ship. 'This murder, terrible as it is, is far from the first. But your sister is different. She was an Annai-Nin, and her death has galvanized the people. Even the peace party has been silenced, and now all Iskamen are of one mind.'

'One mind?' Moichi echoed.

'It is war, man,' Tamuk said. 'The holy war against Aden.'

'But how can this be?' Moichi was stunned. 'Thousands, perhaps millions will die. We are speaking now not merely of war but of genocide.'

'You had better get used to it. This is the reality you have come home to. Now, if there are no more questions to answer...' Tamuk glanced briefly at Aufeya. 'So ends my night.' He gave a perfunctory bow that seemed to exclude Moichi. 'I regret your homecoming is under such tragic circumstances. I will post two men at the front gates.'

'That won't be necessary, First Darman,' Moichi said.

Tamuk smiled thinly. 'I am afraid it is. Security policy. The excruciating and inhuman nature of your sister's murder makes it all too likely that the Adenese were responsible. A blow to the Qa'tach, a personal sort of revenge. A typical Adenese message of terrorism.'

Moichi thought of his conversation with the young naval officer. 'So at last there are Adenese in Ala'arat.'

Tamuk nodded. 'Agents of their Al Rifaar, their infiltration and assassination organization. They have been quite active of late.' His grin was lupine and mirthless. 'You see now the necessity of the Fe'edjinn's rise to power. Perhaps you will despise us a little less now. Iskael needs our mailed fist more than ever these days.' He turned to Aufeya. 'Good evening, madam.' Then he left them without another word.

FOUR

SHADOWS

In the half-darkened villa, Aufeya made them dinner. It was very late. The calls to prayer were long gone and, down the steep slope of the hill, the lights of Ala'arat flickered and died - all but brightly lit sentry posts where the fanatic guards of the Fe'edjinn patrolled in ceaseless vigilance. Still, violence and murder had visited itself upon the capital city and no one slept easily.

Placing the food upon the long elaborately carved Macassar ebony table, Aufeya called to Moichi then, hearing no reply, went in search of him. She heard noises as of a fight echoing down the hall, and she flew down it, calling his name over and over. Her heart was in her mouth. What if the murderer had returned to the scene of the crime as Tamuk and his Fe'edjinn obviously suspected?

'Moichi!' she cried.

And, rounding a corner, found him in his father's vast library, overturning furniture, using his dirks to smash everything in sight. He was alone and in a fury. She shuddered, making the sign of the Palliate, but as was becoming usual these days it did nothing to calm her.

She stood in the doorway, watching the wanton destruction, knowing that she must not stop him, must not interfere in any way, but let the blood madness run its course. She well knew what was ailing him now.

At last it was done, the destruction of his father's carefully mapped-out library complete. He stood in the middle, panting and sweating, his eyes wide and staring like a mad animal. At length, his breathing slowed, his head swung around and his eyes came back into focus.

'How long have you been standing there?'

'Does that matter? You haven't eaten since early in the day. Food is on the table.'

The return to the mundane snapped him out of it completely. He nodded, then taking her hand, said, 'I want to show you something.'

He took her into a room filled with fabrics, brocaded and woven of bright desert colors, all obviously by the same fine hand. He crouched beside the wooden-posted bed, its linens thrown back and crumpled as if the occupant had left in some haste. He lit a single thick candle, setting it atop the bed in its waxy porcelain dish.

He moved aside and she saw the dark irregular stain upon the floor. So this was where Sanda had been slain. There had been no one left in the villa to clean it up or, just as likely, Tamuk and his Fe'edjinn had not allowed anyone in here during their investigation.

'I miss her and that is so ironic for me, the wanderer, to feel.' She heard the bitterness in his voice. 'I could have saved her, Aufeya.'

Her heart went out to him. 'Oh, Moichi, how can you say that?'

'Because I know,' he said fiercely. 'Her husband left her here, alone, unprotected.'

'But this is Ala'arat.'

He shook away her words. 'If I had been here instead of on the seas...'

'Your life - *our* lives - would be very different, yes.' She caressed him. 'But that is a dream, nothing more. She's dead my darling, but I promise you, you are not to blame.'

He looked down at her, then kissed her forehead. Time, she thought. It will take time.

As she went to the door, he said, 'There is something I have to do here. No. Please stay.'

He knelt by the side of the bed. His fingertips brushed the dark stain, then lifted away. In a moment, she could hear his voice chanting softly in what she knew to be the Iskamen prayer for the dead. His head was covered by a small piece of fabric and his massive shoulders were hunched as if he carried upon them an enormous burden.

He completed his prayer, and still she waited patiently, her head bowed. At last, she took a step forward and, placing her hand gently upon his shoulder, said, 'You must eat something now. Then we will sleep. It has been a very long day.'

But after the meal there was to be no sleep for them. Moichi, silent while they ate, went out onto the veranda. A moment later, Aufeya followed him. She knew he had heard her because he said, 'On the sea these hours just before dawn are my favorites, because they are always the most peaceful. A single frigate bird or gull, perhaps, is the only creature stirring. Even the lookout high in his nest is often dozing lightly. On deck, I can feel...' He threw out his arms wide. 'It is as if my entire being has been attuned to the world, the slow spin, the cosmic clock whirring unheard, unseen, but felt now by me alone.'

'Can you feel it now?' Aufeya asked softly. 'It is the time.'

'I don't know.' He shook his head. 'Feel like a fish out of water.'

'On land?'

'No, here in Iskael I am a stranger... nothing is as I remember it.'

She came and stood by him, her hand on his forearm. 'Then you should remember that you are not the

same, either. Nothing remains, like a fly stuck in amber. Everything is mutable, and change is inevitable.'

'But war is coming, Aufeya. Oh, not merely war. Now the Iskamen and the Adenese will have at each other until only one race is left alive. It is a nightmare, perhaps the very one that led me to sail the seas. Yet, as you see, I have not escaped. I have returned home on the eve of the holy war. Perhaps, then, it is my fate. And now I am faced with the question I have lived with all my life: how does one stop the inevitable?'

A bird rustled in the underbrush. All around them, the date palms rattled and clattered in the dawn wind that had just begun rising. 'When I was young, I never came out here on my own. I was too busy down at the port, watching the seamen tramping up and down the quays, and looking out to sea to catch a glimpse of my destiny. Or so I thought. Now I think I did it simply because my father had forbidden it to me. Always with him it was a question of the law and of obeying.'

'The sea is a harsh master,' Aufeya said. 'Perhaps you only traded one for the other.'

'But it was *my* choice,' he said harshly. 'Not his.' Then he put his head down and gripped her hand in his own. 'How Sanda wept when I left. She ran all the way down to the port in order to beg me to stay. "I shall die without you," she said, and I kissed her and laughed at such childish sentiments.'

Aufeya turned and gently kissed away the tears on his cheeks. 'Perhaps one day,' she whispered, 'you will realize that you miss your father as much as you now miss Sanda.'

The moon, bluish-white and full to bursting, broke from behind a cloudbank. Behind Aufeya and Moichi, shadows appeared, so faintly that they were like ghosts or angels, seen only intermittently in the corners of the eyes.

Moichi raised his arm and pointed into the moonlight. 'There, across Mu'ad, the Great Desert, lies Aden.'

But Aufeya was looking to their left where, past the thousands of hectares of Iskael's famed cedar groves, beyond the blackened volcanic steppes that led upward in unsteady increments to the lowest reaches of what, even as far away as the horizon, appeared to be a towering mountain. It was impossible to judge its size, since its crown was obscured by billowing cloud, mist and what might have been ice veils.

She stared at the mountain, transfixed by something she could neither name nor imagine. The mist that clung to its ragged upper reaches appeared, in places, almost translucent. Once or twice she started, convinced that she had seen a flash of indescribable color, diffused and expanded by the curious, curling mist.

What she could see of its slopes convinced her that she had never come across a natural formation like it. In her time she had seen many kinds of hills and crags, those humped and rounded by age, others sharp-edged, deep-gorged and in their adolescence. But the formidable ridges and rills of this mountain defied category.

It was as if she were staring at a formation that had just now, in the darkness of the night, emerged from the molten core of the earth, raw and bleeding as Moichi's emotions, and still full of primeval, fulminating energy. The fluted rills were disquieting, like great ebon rifts in the crust of the earth, the ridges plumed and spiky. She felt her scalp constrict, and she wiped her eyes which had unaccountably begun to water as they had done when as a child, she had stared too long into the noonday sun. She was about to make the sign of the Palliate but shuddered instead, knowing it no longer calmed her.

'Moichi,' she said in a hoarse voice, 'tell me about the mountain to the north.'

'I am afraid that would take years,' he said. 'That is the Mountain Sin'hai, the place of God.'

'The Iskamen God.'

'The *only* God.'

And still she could not take her eyes off the terrifying and exhilarating sight of the Mountain Sin'hai. 'Do you think that somewhere beyond it lies Syrinx, the land of Miira and her people?'

'Only God knows,' Moichi said. 'So far as I know, none has ventured there for centuries.'

'The only God.' Aufeya turned to him briefly. 'How can you say that? You who have encountered mages, beasts beyond imagining, sorceresses. You whose best friend is akin to a god.'

'Because, Aufeya, there are gods and pretenders to be gods - and then there is the God who dwells there atop the Mountain Sin'hai.'

'Have you ever seen this God?'

'No. No one has. But the Mountain is his manifestation. Our archaeologists tell us that the Mountain Sin'hai is unimaginably ancient. Ages have passed. Wind storms, rains, hail and ice. It is impervious to all. And that is as it should be. God led our people out of Aden and into the Mu'ad. The Adenese laughed at us and let us go. They were convinced we were dead men, anyway, because that is what the Great Desert does best: kill. But our faith in the God of our fathers was absolute and He led us through the searing heat and out the other side to Iskael. We survived the Mu'ad where no other men could.'

Aufeya, entranced, said, 'In fine weather what does Sin'hai's summit look like?'

'No one knows. The mists and cloud swirl there perpetually.'

'You mean no Iskaman has climbed the Mountain to see what is up there?'

'We *know* what is up there, Aufeya. Besides, the Tablets forbid it, and with good reason. The Mountain Sin'hai goes on forever, rising upward into the realm of God. Mortal man cannot conceive of such a height let alone contemplate scaling it.'

In Ama-no-mori night was coming on, the shadows lengthening across the cryptomeria and carefully groomed red pines. In one of the myriad great halls of the Kunshin's castle, the Dai-San sat eating his last meal before setting out for his trans-oceanic journey on the armoured back of his Kaer'n.

His high helm cast dark and light across every corner of the hall, which was empty save for himself. At the other end, bathed in an ethereal light that appeared to have no visible source, was the Dragon Throne, the ceremonial seat of power on which only the Kunshin sat. It was carved of a single piece of Fu-chui jade, the rarest of its kind, a luminescent, translucent green the color of spring leaves just as they unfold from their winter buds.

There were few who were allowed into the Dai-San's presence -or who could bear to be scrutinized by those eerie faceted eyes. Only those few who knew him well understood what went on behind those alien orbs and weren't intimidated by their gaze.

One of these now appeared from out of the shadows, a beautiful woman, to be sure, with slanting almond eyes and an unusually wide and sensual mouth. But she wore her hair in the long, traditional warrior's queue as, indeed, did the Dai-San beneath his high helm. Also, she was armored in the layered steel of Bujun manufacture that was the finest of its kind, both strong and supple so that it would not split

beneath even the most ferocious sword blows. Each section of her armor was imprinted with the platinum seal of the Kunshin: three plovers on the wing within the circle of the world.

'Chiisai,' the Dai-San said even before she had fully emerged from the shadows, 'would you join me for supper?'

The Kunshin's only daughter looked at the platinum ring on the index finger of his left hand. In its center was a blue pearl, the rarest of all, that she herself had plucked from a prized Kray oyster half-hidden on the bottom of Haneda bay. This oyster, which was now well over five feet in diameter, had been introduced into the bay by Chiisai's great-great grandmother. All the women in the Kunshin's direct line were exceptional divers, and part of their fortune had been amassed through the sale of pearls.

As Chiisai came and sat next to the Dai-San, she took his hand, her fingertips closing over the familiar warmth of the extraordinary pearl. She had been delivered of the secret knowledge of the pearl's properties by her mother before she had died, and one day, after she had taught her own daughter how to dive, she would divulge the secrets of the Kray oyster's blue pearl. Her father, the Kunshin, did not know these secrets, and neither did the Dai-San. She saw it as a symbol of the depth of her love for him that she had given him this gift of such hidden power.

'Must you go?' she said, although of course she knew the answer.

'I was created for war, Chiisai. Not for me home or hearth, family or love.'

She leaned forward, her face creased with worry. 'But we love one another.'

His high helm flashed darkly as he turned his head. 'We have been one, and when we couple I see your heart. That is very special to me.'

She wanted him to continue but she knew that he had already said more than he would to almost anyone else. Only Moichi Annai-Nin, his bond-brother, meant as much to him as she did. 'I would go with you,' she said in an almost defiant voice.

The Dai-San wiped his mouth, pushed his plate away. 'Why do you desire this?'

'You know why,' she said. 'It is because I desire you.'

'That is not enough,' he said in his enigmatic way. 'Besides, there are compelling reasons for you to stay.'

'Do you believe Ojime?' she asked. 'Are the forces of Chaos massing once again beneath a new banner? Is there really a successor to the Dolman?'

'I believe the roll of the snow-hare bones,' the Dai-San said. He rose and, with him, Chiisai. They crossed to the slitted windows, staring out at the geese flying in formation above Haneda's fields and paddies, and beyond the dark, rising slopes of Fujiwara. 'But as for High Minister Ojime, he is why I want you here in the capital. He has plans far and above those which he publicly espouses.'

'Have you heard something? How do you-?' She gave a tiny gasp as those baleful eyes were turned upon her. Was it her imagination or did they glow with a febrile, unearthly light? What *was* he? Neither man nor god, but something in between, a creature for which there was no current definition.

'Ojime fears me,' the Dai-San said, ignoring her questions for which there were no answers - at least no rational ones. 'Perhaps he hates me as well. I daresay I would if I were him. But he bears close watching. He is a liar and a cheat. Also, he harbors grandiose ambitions. I am a stumbling block to those ambitions - as is your father.'

'But what if this mission he has sent you on is false? What if he means only to get you as far away from Ama-no-mori as possible?'

The Dai-San regarded Chiisai's exquisite face. 'Then your reasons for remaining here are all the more compelling.' He lifted her chin with one huge knuckle. 'You are a warrior in your own right, Chiisai. It is not your karma to be either my concubine or my assistant.'

She nodded and sighed. 'I returned from Sha'angh'sei and the continent of man to be with you. I had thought to stay there a long time.'

'And you will go there again,' he said. 'But your instincts are solid. I can assure you that you did not return home simply to be with me. There is danger here - serious peril. And it is your destiny to confront it.'

He stared again out the slitted window and she could feel his desire to be lifted into the clouds, to begin his long journey. It was as if a third entity had slipped into the hall and now stood, silent as a shadow, between them.

Chiisai shivered a little, despite herself. It was impossible to grow enured to his other selves, as she had come to think of his enormous energy. 'Do you ever miss him?'

'Who?'

'Ronin. The human being you used to be.'

For a long time, the Dai-San said nothing, and Chiisai thought she had made a serious mistake. At last, the shadow between them stirred, and he said, 'You cannot miss what you do not remember.'

'You don't remember your former life?'

The Dai-San's fingers caressed the scaly hide of the six-fingered Makkon glove he wore. 'I remember it as you would a dream.'

'Oh, but that is so sad.'

He presented her with the smile he reserved only for her. 'I never said I didn't dream.' He drew on the Makkon glove. 'Red, green, blue. He is still here inside me, along with the tragic man-beast, Setsoru, and the female spirits, the essence of my old life, which I shed like the sere skin of a snake. Red, green, blue. Facets of a gem, parts of a whole.'

'I do not understand.'

'You were not meant to,' he said. 'That is why I do not speak of it.'

'Hold me,' she whispered, and with his arms around her, she felt better.

'Are you afraid?'

'Not for myself,' she answered, 'but for mankind. I thought when you killed the Dolman at Kamado we had defeated Chaos for all time.'

'Evil has one mind,' the Dai-San said like the tolling of a bell, 'one lung and one heart. It is monolithic in its thinking and in its progress. Its influence waxes and wanes, but always it has many devotees who succumb to its siren call. Nothing can be defeated for all time. We won a battle at Kamado, nothing more. The War continues.'

The tea-green walls of the Chamber of Prayer were brocaded with shadow. The Shinsei na-ke Temple within whose heart the chamber lay was no more than a block from the moated castle of the Kunshin where Chiisai and the Dai-San were, at that moment, saying their farewells.

The chamber which, but a moment ago, had been deserted, was now inhabited by what appeared to be one more shadow. Its ebon length remained motionless for some time, then it detached itself from the spiderweb darkness and swiftly, silently crossed to the raised platform and, in its exact center, just below the calligraphied scroll which Qaylinn's great-grandfather had written, the shadow knelt as if in prayer.

The long agile fingers of High Minister Ojime reached out and, emulating those of the chief Rosh'hi, pulled up the polished boards. Inside, within the hidden compartment, he pulled out the lumped, sueded cloth. His hands shook as he opened the package. Inside was the tongue sliced from the Makkon.

Power! thought Ojime in a fever of excitement.

He had managed to position himself during the interview with the Dai-San so that he could duplicate the movements the Rosh'hi had used to open the secret compartment. Then he had waited in a delirium of anticipation for the right moment. He knew he could not wait too long, for the power of the Makkon's flesh was ephemeral, and if it was allowed to dry out, it would dissipate uselessly. Ojime was determined not to allow that to occur.

Instead, he had formulated a plan and, arranging to be in the temple for some hours, had detailed the comings and goings of all the priests and Rosh'his. Then, at the time he had selected, he had stolen through the Corridor of Remembrance and, secreting himself within the thick shadows, had made certain that he was alone.

Now all his preparation had paid off. He had his prize!

Power! his mind screamed, as he carefully re-wrapped the Makkon's tongue and placed it within an inside pocket. He rose to steal away. But as he turned, he became aware that he was not alone.

'What are you doing, High Minister?' Qaylinn said. His face was dark with suspicion and anger. 'I doubt I need remind you that the Chamber of Prayer is a holy place. And I am hardly naive enough to believe you stumbled into it by error.'

'Oh, there was no error, sayann,' Ojime said, walking slowly and methodically toward the Rosh'hi. 'I am here for an important and profound reason.'

'And that is?'

The high minister was so close to Qaylinn when he pulled the knife that Qaylinn had no time to react. His mind afire, Ojime plunged the blade into the Rosh'hi's chest and, when Qaylinn did not fall, stabbed him again and again while he ground his teeth with the effort of splitting tissue, gristle and bone.

Death filled Qaylinn's eyes and he fell without a sound to the polished floor, a fountain of blood pumping with the last beats of his heart. The blood spread in a black, pristine pool at his feet. In it was reflected both slayer and victim.

Staring down at the dead man, his chest heaving, the high minister said, 'Not every question deserves an answer, sayann.' Then, throwing the bloody knife into a corner of the chamber, he strode swiftly and purposefully out of the temple.

A frenzied knocking came upon the villa's front door in the hour of false dawn. Moichi, half-dozing with his arm around Aufeya, started up. As he strode down the dark hallway his knuckles rubbed the sleep

from his eyes. It seemed weeks since he had had a decent night's repose.

He opened the door to see one of his crew and, just behind him, one of the Fe'edjinn guards Tamuk had promised to post along the perimeter of the property.

'Cap'n!'

'Is this one of your men?' the guard asked crossly. 'He claims-'

'He's mine,' Moichi said, directing his gaze to the crewman whose face was white with anxiety. 'What brings you here?'

'It is Arasomu, Cap'n. He went ashore on leave and was supposed to return to the ship for Rat Watch.'

'Four hours ago,' Moichi said, as Aufeya came up behind him.

'And he hasn't returned yet,' the mate said. 'With you ashore and-'

Moichi cut him short. 'Where was he headed, do you know?'

The crewman nodded. '*The Shadow Warrior*.'

'A bad place,' the Fe'edjinn said darkly. 'We only go there in pairs, and then only when it is necessary. It opens at midnight and closes at dawn. Women and sometimes, for the right customer, men sell themselves for an hour of bliss. It is also rumored that almost any illicit substance can be had there for a price.'

'Where is it?' Moichi barked.

'At the head of Red Spice Quay,' the Fe'edjinn said. 'But I wouldn't recommend-'

But by that time Moichi had pulled the door shut and, with Aufeya at his heels, was hurrying toward the front gates.

'Don't say I didn't warn you!' the guard called. 'There's a murder there so often we no longer bother investigating.' But he was just as happy. With the occupants of the villa gone he sought out a soft spot beneath a date palm and slept until his relief arrived.

At the far end of Red Spice Quay, a sleek, four-masted schooner was being loaded with bolts of wool and flax, crates of livestock to be taken into the far reaches of Kintai to the north. But the head or landward end of the quay was deserted. The Shadow Warrior crouched sullenly in a narrow space between two gargantuan warehouses, shuttered and black-faced.

A single red lantern creaked as it swayed above the narrow door. The crewman, who had hurried after them huffing and puffing to keep up, cowered against the facade of one warehouse. Moichi sent him back to the *Tsubasa* with a curt order. Then, grasping the brass knob, patinated green by the salt air, he pushed roughly into the interior.

It was overly hot inside the place, as if a blast oven's white iron doors had been left open. They found themselves in a single great room with a low beamed ceiling, black with years of smoke and soot. Red lanterns lit the room in a rubiate monochrome. A scarred, metal-topped bar ran along the rear and dark mirrors everywhere reflected their moving images. But the mirrors were in shards, flecks littered across the blackened wood floor. There were great dents in the bar, as if a giant had smashed his fists upon it. The room gave onto a small, cramped dining room, littered with overturned chairs, cracked tables and

splinters of crusted dishes. Behind were a filthy kitchen and toilet facilities. All were deserted. But the ovens were very hot, and the stove was lit and had obviously been on for hours. A pot of stew was burning, and Moichi took it off the flame. A flat loaf of unleavened chestnut-flour bread lay on a nearby wooden cutting board, which was otherwise dusted with crumbs.

'By the Oruboros, what happened here? It's as if a legion of berserkers was let loose in here,' Moichi said. 'And where is everyone?'

Aufeya looked around. 'It's as if they all disappeared in the blink of an eye.'

'Passing strange.' Moichi's nostrils dilated as he poked his head out of the kitchen. 'Perhaps there is more to the Shadow Warrior than meets the eye. After all, hiding contraband would be a primary goal of any such establishment.'

But an hour's futile search revealed nothing. He returned to the toilet to relieve himself. It was a particularly squalid place that stank so badly he was convinced the privy had never been cleaned out. He held his breath while he urinated, and that was when he saw the faint outline on the wall. At first, he thought it was another crack in the soiled stucco, but as he rebuttoned his trousers he saw that the line was perfectly vertical. He stepped away from the privy and, putting the flat of one hand to one side of the line, pushed hard. Nothing happened. He pushed on the other side and part of the wall swung inward and he saw the first treads of a steep and well-worn flight of stairs.

He called for Aufeya and told her to bring a lantern. Together, they went up the stairs. On the second floor, the stink of sweat and stale sex was everywhere. They went down a narrow hallway off which were doors on either side. Peering briefly into the tiny cubicles, they observed insensate couples or, in some cases, triads, naked, sprawled together. A peculiar sweet stench filled their nostrils.

'Opayne,' Moichi whispered. 'I thought I caught a whiff of it downstairs.'

'Opayne?'

'A powerful hallucinogen that purports to transport those in the throes of sexual bliss.'

'Now that sounds interesting,' Aufeya said.

But Moichi shook his head. 'It is highly addictive, and sometimes fatal. The effect on the brain is highly unpredictable.'

Aufeya shuddered as they proceeded from room to room. 'All of these people have used the drug?'

'Undoubtedly. You or I could kick them to a pulp and they would not awaken.'

By this time, they were almost at the end of the hall. Moichi opened the door on his left.

'But they will awaken sometime today?' Aufeya asked uneasily.

'Chill take it!' Moichi cried, standing stiffly in the doorway.

Aufeya pushed against him to gain a look at the shadow-shrouded room, and gasped. 'Arasomu.'

Moichi's First Mate was spread-eagled across a bed that had become a viscous lake of glistening innards that still seemed to crawl. The fecal stench was overpowering.

'This just happened!' Moichi said hoarsely as he drew one of his twin jewel-handled dirks.

'What happened to him?' Aufeya whispered.

It was a legitimate question. That Arasomu was dead was beyond dispute, but the method of his murder was almost beyond comprehension. Great ragged slashes had been scored vertically down his chest and abdomen so that all his ribs, fractured into shards, stuck out pinkly from the ribbons of his excoriated flesh. And, below, his viscera had been pulled out of him in a frenzy of death-lust.

'I've seen this before,' Moichi said with such fierce emotion in his voice that Aufeya became even more alarmed.

'Seen what before?' she said, clearly terrified.

'He has been killed by a Makkon,' Moichi said in a voice that indicated that he could not believe what he was saying or seeing.

And now he could not stop the crawling down his spine because his worst fears had been confirmed.

A horrific howling filled the room, and the shadows shuddered, dying and coming alive all at once. Moichi caught a brief glimpse of a pair of baleful eyes, their orange lambent in the semi-darkness of the quivering torchlight.

The flame was almost extinguished as the Makkon flew through the room, its bulk filling it now. Its great taloned feet crushed the bed and Arasomu with it. The thick, spiked tail thrashed from side to side, and the claws on its upper extremities were fully extended, black as obsidian, catching light and holding it, as if it could suck the living energy out of the atmosphere.

The howling came again, like a physical presence, as Moichi thrust Aufeya behind him, back toward the doorway. 'Get out!' he shouted, as the Makkon's beak opened. Where its thick tongue should have been, ululating its unearthly battle cries, was nothing but a repulsive black stump, quivering and pulsing in mute rage.

The Makkon's forepaw shot out, grazing Moichi, spinning him around, sprawling Aufeya onto her back. Moichi spun, simultaneously slashing with the blade of his dirk. But the blade merely skidded harmlessly off the Makkon's skin, plated like armor.

The Chaos beast thrust his claw at Moichi's chest, the ebon talons shearing cured leather and metal alike. The talons closed and the Makkon pulled Moichi toward its open beak.

Moichi could sense the chill, fetid breath of the beast, and he felt as if all the oxygen were being pulled from the air. As if he were underwater, he could not breathe. Still, he struggled to gain a foothold, a place of purchase upon the plated chest of the Makkon. The beast was vulnerable in its mouth, as attested to by its lack of a tongue. Someone or something had cut it out, and even through the terror of the situation Moichi found himself wanting to meet whoever had mutilated the Makkon. He fought to bring his dirk up and over, so that he could plunge its point into the soft tissue of the Makkon's throat.

The edge of the blade caught the Makkon's lower beak, sliding along the surface, and the Makkon staggered backward, smashing a hole in the outer wall of the building. In rage, it began to squeeze the life out of Moichi, slowly, inexorably, agonizingly, its orange eyes gaining in intensity with the escalation of Moichi's pain.

Through the rent in the wall blue moonlight fused with the yellow-red torchlight tumbling over the antagonists, bathing Aufeya, and in so doing, revealing a remarkable transformation.

Where an instant before Aufeya had been, now lay a tall slender woman with the head of an ibis. She

was dressed in cloth-of-gold with wings of feathers protruding from her shoulderblades. Then the light changed subtly or perhaps it was the lurching of the antagonists throwing shadows against the still-melding light sources. Whatever the case, in another instant she had become a statuesque woman with the coolly glowing skin of pearls. Her thick, twining hair was platinum flex and her eyes were cabochon rubies. Her long, curving nails were translucent sapphires and her partially revealed breasts were fire opals. Then, the light shifted again, and she was revealed as a far smaller woman with a flat face and high cheekbones. Her skin was as dusky as Moichi's, as any Iskaman or Adenese. Her eyes were the color of cobalt chips and her long hair, plaited into a single braid was the color of freshly scrubbed copper. She was clad in a curious mirrored corselet over which was a black doeskin vest. Trousers of the same material were tucked into well-worn hunting boots that came to just above her knees.

She twisted her torso so that one mirrored facet on her breasts caught the moonlight and, reaching out her hand, her long, slender fingers closed over the resulting flash of reflected light. When they opened, she was holding an odd weapon that looked like nothing more than an icicle, so clear and glistening was it. She drew back her arm and hurled it at the Makkon's shoulder. It pierced hardened skin and flesh, disappeared completely inside the beast.

The Makkon roared, arching back and, simultaneously, letting go of Moichi, who swiped at it with his dirk. Black viscous fluid, sticky as glue, drooled from the wound. Still howling, it drove through the rent in the wall, disappearing instantly into the shadows of the massed warehouses.

Moichi, head bowed, hands on his knees, gasped air into his lungs. When at last he was able to rise, he turned to Aufeya, who stood, looking as she had always looked to him. She stood with the torch raised high, far back in the doorway, safe where the moonlight could not reach her.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

He nodded. 'With perhaps the aid of God.'

'The God of the Iskamen,' she said. 'How I envy you that.'

It was an odd thing for her to say, but given the circumstances he thought no more of it. But the memory stayed and when, much later, it surfaced, he knew who had said it before: the sorceress, Sardonyx.

But by then it was far too late.

The Dai-San speaks:

If only I could make Chiisai understand, but she is only human, after all, though Bujun. I have a great and abiding kinship with the Bujun. It was their sorcery that created me; it is their secrets which invigorate me. But these are not secrets which can be passed on, like the lore of a people, from one generation to the next. I am enmeshed in secrets, now. That is my karma. But it is wearisome, sometimes, because, as with Chiisai, they distance me from all others save the Kaer'n.

I look deep into Chiisai's eyes and I know her heart. She has joined with me many times and those couplings have been as much fierce physical contests as they have been tender mercies for her. She is the Kunshin's daughter, after all, and by definition untouchable. But I know her. She is fierce and proud and not a little bit sad. I know, too, that she is the less sad for knowing me. That is not a boast, merely fact which I can read at every moment in her eyes.

In other times and circumstances surely I would take Chiisai as my wife. Surely, the Kunshin would wish it, but I have spoken to him as the Kaer'n have spoken to me and he is resigned. He is, after all, more used to the Kaer'n than even I. I have lived with them, it is true, for some years,

but he has known them all his adult life.

He knows the inevitability of what must happen, but he does not know everything. His mind is human, after all, and can absorb only so much at a time. The Kaer'n are most cognizant of this. They are, I fear, more understanding than I would be. I find, over time, that I lose patience with this slowness of human thought, the sheer linearity of it.

I must guard against such tendencies. The Kaer'n say that I must hold close the shreds of humanity still remaining to me, that I must not lose them. They are as important to my make-up - and therefore my power - as my own sorcerous dai-katana.

I know the Kaer'n are right. They always are...

PART TWO

MU'AD

FIVE

SPIRITS RISING

The white sun, crystalline as diamonds, heavy as a mailed fist, beat down upon Mu'ad, the Great Desert. Moichi, lampblack smeared on his cheeks, his head covered with a capacious Fe'edjinn cowl, squinted into the rolling nothingness of white dune and wind-whipped sand. The heat penetrated even the sturdy oil-hardened leather of his seaboots. The soles of his feet were on fire and there was a distinct wetness between his toes, whether from burst blisters or blood and sweat he did not know.

Four days out into the Mu'ad and already it felt like a month. Tamuk had warned them of this. In fact, the First Darman had used every form of persuasion he could think of to talk Moichi out of his desire to go to the settlements in the Mu'ad. But Moichi remained resolved and, at last, Tamuk had acceded. Moichi was an Annai-Nin, after all, and brother to the Qa'tach.

Aufeya, lighter and thinner than he, seemed to be faring a bit better. Her entire face had disappeared within the Fe'edjinn's cowl and she wore the d'alb, the traditional desert robes as if she had been born to them. Being Daluzan that was, of course, impossible. Still, there was no doubt that she took to the desert life like a native, and for that Moichi was grateful.

In the hottest portions of the day she used small sticks to tent out the cowl, giving more shade, even a millimeter of which was priceless, and she caught herself as she nodded in her saddle.

Other times, she ignored Tamuk's instruction to ride single-file and came up beside Moichi. They spoke of many things but, oddly, never distant Daluzia, her home. She seemed fascinated by the Mu'ad, and when Moichi told her how the Iskamen had learned to terraform parts of the Great Desert, she seemed to know about it already. He should have marked this moment, and others like it, but perhaps still his need not to face the truth was too pressing.

Moichi would tell neither Tamuk nor Aufeya why he was so adamant about going to the Mu'ad. In truth, he was not sure himself. He only knew he was being drawn here like a lodestone to north. He wanted to mourn for Sanda and for his mate Arasomu, but his mind kept returning to the Makkon. Surely the Chaos beast had slaughtered them both. The manner of their deaths was identical. Over and above Moichi's shock at seeing another Makkon when he had been certain that the Dai-San had destroyed them all was the question: why? Why had the Makkon murdered these two people? Was there a connection or was it random mayhem? But, chillingly, his knowledge of the Makkon told him that they

were a kind of harbinger - outriders for a more highly developed, more powerful Chaos force. In the time of the Kai-feng, it had been the Dolman. But the Sunset Warrior had slain the Dolman, of that Moichi was certain. What, then, was this Makkon's liege lord?

The Makkon never killed randomly. There was always a purpose. Chaos's purpose. But this Makkon was slightly different than all the others Moichi had encountered. Those had never been able to fully integrate themselves into the world of man and so their outlines pulsed and changed with every beat of their twin hearts. This one had not; it was fully in this world.

It was also without its tongue and filled with such a rage as Moichi had never felt before. There was a mystery here he knew needed solving. In the morning of Arasomu's murder he had walked the jam-packed streets of Ala'arat and was certain that the Makkon had fled the city. Where had it gone?

There was a spoor. Whereas its former brethren had left none, being only partially in this world, this one was all here, and Moichi could smell it. Not with his nose, but with his mind.

He could say nothing of these things to Tamuk, who would immediately dismiss him as a madman - the First Darman had his own agenda which dictated the murders had been committed by Al Rafaar, the Adenese terrorists. As for Aufeya, Moichi did not want to alarm her, as he himself was alarmed by the Makkon's malevolent presence.

Across the Mu'ad they rode, on dun-colored co'chyn, long-legged desert beasts with knobby knees, horned, triangular heads with sorrowful eyes and a curling trunk for sucking up water from the most unlikely places. Co'chyn also had three stomachs, two of which apparently stored fluids in the stifling heat and the long migratory marches of the species. Both the Iskamen and the Adenese had found ways to train these animals, using them exclusively for desert travel.

Tamuk, ever security-minded, had brought two of his Fe'edjinn warriors with him. They invariably rode at the front and rear of the single-file line. Normally, desert travel was accomplished at night, when the worst heat of the furnace day had dissipated somewhat, but in the Mu'ad this would have been a mistake and, in fact, had claimed the lives of many travelers unaccustomed to its peculiarities. Here, it was imperative that you keep moving during the bulk of the day, otherwise you could quite literally fry. In fact, sleep was only possible in those few hours on either side of midnight when the Mu'ad was merely hot, rather than unbearable.

Sleep, then, was often dreamless and absolute, the mind and body so exhausted that you would drift off before the evening meal was over. Not so for Moichi.

Each night he dreamed, and it was more or less the same dream - at least, it was the same person who came to him as if she were an angel in the cindery dark.

He dreamt of Sanda, slaughtered like a beast in her own bed.

But they were like no dreams he had ever had before. Rather, they were like fevered visions or hallucinations that, in some cultures, were still called visitations.

Aufeya's mother Tsuki had claimed to have experienced such phenomena. Poor dead Tsuki, killed by the vengeful Sardonyx.

Sanda came to him in many guises. At first, she appeared as a teenager, bursting with life and energy, her eyes laughing even when he teased her or her face dark and flushed after witnessing one of his epic fights with Jesah. In these dreams she never spoke, merely guided him through flashes of memory which electrified him like lightning on a stormy night. At last, she led him to the deathbed of Jud'ae, a scene,

finally, of forgiveness between father and son. At once, Moichi was again on the deck of his ship, scenting the imminence of death. He had returned home to find his father dying.

Then, Sanda came to him as a woman with the head of a bird - a snowy egret with downy feathers glistening of beaded water. Her long black beak hooked downward and there was a flopping fish impaled on its sharp tip, its flat golden eye staring at Moichi as if with a singular purpose. With a sudden flip of her head she ; swallowed the fish whole. Then her beak opened and she spoke:

'Time is of the essence, When the spirit flies above marsh and chasm Take care to bury past heart, And seek out the bear in the stone Not to possess, But to be possessed.'

The voice was high, like a peacock's harsh and grating cry, and the dreaming Moichi was obliged to strain mightily to hear all the words. They made no sense to him, but he remembered them when he awoke and wrote them in charcoal in his stained leather-bound captain's logbook.

In the last of the dreams the night before they reached the first oasis encampment, deep within the Mu'ad, Sanda appeared as she must have on her blood-stained bed. It was appalling to see her blue-white instead of flushed with color as he remembered her. She moved as if she were still in pain. Only (he thought in his dream) dead people cannot feel pain. She shuffled and cupped her hands at her lower belly to keep her innards from slithering to her feet Her shattered chest was opened up like the skeleton of a wrecked vessel, rotting at the bottom of the sea. Ribbons of skin hung from her like sea grape.

Moichi tried to look into her eyes, to see any semblance of the beloved sister he had once known but, as in many dreams, his eyes refused to focus or, again, perhaps she had no eyes at all, for he was aware only of a yawning and terrifying void, as if whatever had once been Sanda - her spirit - had been torn from her along with her insides.

Sanda! he cried soundlessly. *My sister!* His heart was beating so fast it seemed it might fly out of his chest or break into ten thousand pieces. He wanted only to talk with her - to *her* - not all these manifestations. He ached for reassurance that this was indeed a nightmare - everything she had ever been had been taken from her in the manner of her death.

Then she opened her mouth and, to his horror, blood spilled out. There was a horrid gurgling sound that eventually resolved itself into two words repeated over and over, and even when he awakened, bathed in sweat, trembling, his pulse pounding and his heart constricted with grief, he heard it still, echoing in the utter silence of the desert dawn:

Save me!

A blood-condor screamed, its iridescent purple plumage swooping just beyond the top of a dune. Tamuk called for the column to halt, and swinging his co'chyn around, rode back to where Moichi had reined in.

The settlement is on the far side of that dune,' he said tensely. 'ut you know as well as I do what the presence of the carrion eater augurs.'

'Why have we stopped?' Aufeya asked, coming up on her co'chyn. 'I see no sign of a settlement.'

'I fear for them, lady,' Tamuk said, wheeling his mount round. 'There were twenty settlers and Fe'edjinn.'

'But there are no palms, no signs at all that we are near an oasis,' Aufeya insisted. 'Even the Fe'edjinn could not have pitched camp without a steady supply of water nearby.'

'She's right,' Moichi said. 'Are you certain we are in the right place, First Darman?'

Tamuk snorted derisively, then, signalling to his men, who drew their scimitar-shaped weapons, he spurred his co'chyn toward the long rise of the dune beyond which the blood-condor continued to circle and swoop. Moichi and Aufeya followed the Fe'edjinn at a distance.

One of the Fe'edjinn, fed up with the bird's grating cry or perhaps nervous at what was waiting for them, loosed an arrow which struck the blood-condor in its breast. It plummeted straight down, disappearing behind the dune.

Moichi stood in his stirrups, urging his steed slowly forward as he scanned the horizon. There was naught to see in any direction but an endless sea of gently rolling dunes, here and there tufted with powdery sand as gusts of fiercely hot wind swirled.

Tamuk and his men crested the dune and began their descent of the far side. In a moment, they had disappeared, and Moichi urged his co'chyn up the slope. At the dune's crest he paused, waiting for Aufeya.

'Where are they?' she asked, staring down at the waad, the deep depression below. It was devoid of all life. 'It's as if the desert itself swallowed them whole.'

At that moment, they felt a rumbling. Their co'chyn snorted and skittered nervously as rivulets of sand began to stream down the far side of the dune into the waad. The rivulets soon became rills and streams that plumed into the air like rapids and waterfalls. The co'chyn screamed and bucked as their footing was eroded and they began to slide down the dune into the waad, which itself had changed radically. It was now an evil-looking swirl of sand that seemed to have turned molten, to be revolving, expanding before their eyes.

'Quick!' Moichi shouted. 'Off the co'chyn!'

He slid off his terrified mount, only to see it shoot past him, tumbling into the waad, which sucked it down like a gigantic maw. He turned, slipping in the cascading sand, pulling Aufeya off her co'chyn, as it slipped to its knobby knees, then tumbled trunk over tail into the maelstrom of the shifting waad.

'Let's get out of here!' Moichi shouted, keeping hold of her as he tried to struggle up the slope of the dune. The two were reduced to crawling on all fours, but for every step up, the cascading rivers of sand took them down the equivalent of three.

Moichi glanced over his shoulder, saw how appallingly close they were to the sucking, swirling base of the waad and redoubled his efforts. He was rewarded by a heavy cascade of sand in his face, and he and Aufeya tumbled further down the dune.

The bottom of the bowl-shaped waad was sucked abruptly down, and from out of this hole rose a slithery thick shape, like a primeval serpent, huge and either covered by sand or made of sand itself. A beast. Could it be? Moichi wondered. A beast that lived below the surface of the Mu'ad.

The shape arched - far too large for the bowl of the waad to contain - and then, with a great thrashing, plunged into the center of the waad. It was now very close, and abruptly they heard the rumbling again, but this time it seemed to resolve itself into a voice that echoed off the dunes and the distant, uncaring white sky high above.

'*FE'EDJINN!*' In an eerie, hissing attempt at pronunciation. '*FE 'EDJIINN!*'

Just above them, an avalanche of sand was forming, shaking itself from what once had been the crest of the dune. It was coming and Moichi knew there was nothing they could do to avoid it. But the rumbling

echoed still in his brain and he fought for one last hope, to understand.

Think! he berated himself. *Think!*

The avalanche of sand now drowned out all sun. The blessed shade inundated them and for an instant it seemed utterly delicious. Then Moichi was scrabbling at his Fe'edjinn cowled robe, clawing at it to get it off.

'What are you doing?' Aufeya screamed.

'Take off your d'alb!' Moichi shouted, throwing his aside in a knot and pulling Aufeya's over her head.

'Are you mad? You-'

The avalanche took them, tumbling them down, down into the maw of the rumbling waad. Had he gotten the d'alb all the way off Aufeya? He couldn't be certain. Then a huge fistful of clotted sand struck him full in the face and he began to suffocate. He struggled but a weight, growing heavier, lay upon his chest. The blood rushed to his head as he was flung upside down; the world went black and he lost consciousness.

Blood was still on High Minister Ojime's hands, metaphorically speaking, as he hurried through the city of Haneda. He could feel the lumped package of the Makkon's tongue burning like a live coal against his lower belly.

He could not mourn the Rosh'hi's death because from the first he had seen Qaylinn as an enemy. Not that that was necessarily immutable. Over the years, by dint of bribe or other less savory coercion, Ojime had proselytized many enemies to his cause. But not Qaylinn. He was a stubborn man, some might say a righteous man, though that term left a bitter taste in Ojime's mouth. Ojime's father had thought of himself as righteous. He had beaten Ojime mercilessly when his 'righteousness' was in full flower. Ojime had no idea why his father beat him, and the fact he was never given the reason made it all the more terrifying. The randomness, the pure irrationality of it, scarred Ojime more deeply than any laying on of the chain his father had used on him.

As a result, Ojime was properly skeptical of those who characterized themselves as righteous, divining in their strict rectitude the bud of evil and twisted psychosis.

And yet there was another reason, just as compelling, why he could not mourn the Rosh'hi's passing: he had enjoyed plunging the blade into Qaylinn's breast. This vertiginous rapture was what made him stab the Rosh'hi over and over. He could not stop, did not want to stop.

Deep down, his delight in death appalled him, turned his belly to ice, but it had also turned his heart to stone and, these days, he found it ever more difficult to understand what he had found appalling in the first place.

Ojime crossed a narrow and rotting bridge into the Hinin, the area of the city that lay in the lowest section of the capital's terrain. It was to this place that all of Haneda's sewage flowed on its way to the bay, and it was here that the garbage of Bujun society had been dumped, eking out of the wet, clayey earth the semblance of an existence.

Down alleys dark and slimy even at noon-time Ojime hurried, following a convoluted path that he had devised days ago. He paused frequently to check whether he was being observed, and he altered his pace, doubling back often to ensure that no one was following him. And with each clever detour he made, as he advanced further into the squalid and dangerous depths of the Hinin, he felt increasingly secure.

At length, he came upon a packed dirt-lane that even for the Hinin was putrid. He ducked into this and, holding his breath down its entire length, knocked upon a thatch and willow door. He was just becoming slightly light-headed when the door opened a crack. It was unnaturally dark in the interior, and, gasping for breath, Ojime breathed in an odor from the gap so fetid that he was certain he would faint.

'Who sent you?' said a rough voice. The reek of foul breath sent Ojime back a pace.

'Tokagé.' Ojime uttered the forbidden word as softly as he could. Even within the Hinin the name of the arch-collaborator with the forces of Chaos should not be used.

'Inside,' the voice commanded harshly, raising Ojime's anger. But he had been warned repeatedly about the ill-mannered creature who dwelled within this mud and thatch hovel, and he held his tongue.

The door banged shut behind him and immediately his eyes began to water. *What is the floor made of,* he wondered, *feces?* For that was precisely what it smelled like.

Some hump-like thing shuffled just ahead of him, leading him through room after room, until Ojime began to distrust his senses. Surely, something was amiss. From the outside, the house at the end of the evil-smelling lane looked as if it could contain no more than four rooms, and yet he had already counted three times that.

Alarmed that he had been entrapped, his hand crept to the long-bladed dirk sheathed on the inside of his left boot.

'Violence in any form will get you dead.'

Ojime started erect at the sound of the voice. He looked ahead, saw a shadowy figure sitting in a fan-backed chair in what could only be called a solarium. Sunlight flooded through the highly polished panes of glass, illuminating a bewildering array of dwarf potted plants, herbs, ferns, mushrooms and curious flowers, none of which Ojime had ever seen before.

Ojime, blinking heavily after the long journey in darkness, looked around for his humped guide but it appeared that, for the moment at least, he was alone with the figure in the fan-backed chair.

'Who sent you?' the shadowy figure asked.

And Ojime gave the same answer: 'Tokagé.'

'Present yourself,' the figure said as imperiously as if they were in the Kunshin's opulent castle instead of here in the village of the pariahs.

Ojime stepped forward. As he crossed the threshold into the solarium, the evil odors vanished as if they had never existed. Instead, the sweet scents of new-mown grass and packed hay mingled with the pleasant spices and nectars of the unknown herbs and flowers.

Light fell upon him in a steady stream, like waves upon a shore, until Ojime felt himself to be in the center of a celestial spotlight, singled out, chosen.

'What have you for me?' the voice rustled.

Ojime hesitated for just an instant. Instinctively, he trusted nothing and no one, but he also understood that great risk was a necessary part of his plan. The Makkon's tongue meant nothing to him in its present state. He had been assured that this creature was the only one in Ama-no-mori - perhaps in the entire world - who knew what to do with this piece of otherworldly flesh. And so, long before he would steal

the Makkon's tongue, he had schemed and connived, cajoled and threatened and, lastly, had given up lordly sums of jewels, mother-of-pearl and platinum to arrive, untouched and unknown, at this place at the far end of Haneda.

'Have you come this far only to be ruled by your fear?' the voice rustled crossly.

'I *have* no fear,' Ojime said, believing this to be so.

'Then give it to me.' An impossibly long-fingered hand extended out of the shadows, and Ojime found himself wondering, not for the first time, what foul and perverted creature would lock itself away in such a gilded cage surrounded by a moat of stinking excrement.

His fingers trembled slightly as he dug inside his robe and placed the lump of sueded cloth into the outstretched hand.

'*Ahhhh!*' It was like a long-drawn sigh. The fingers were trembling as they unwrapped the flaps of cloth, revealing the grayish-blue lump of otherworldly flesh. 'It is true, then!' she cried. 'Damn his soul to a thousand hells unknown!

'But have I a revelation for him!' The figure rose and stepped out of the shadows. Though Ojime had steeled himself for the worst his imagination could conjure up still he was unprepared for the sight that greeted him. For he found himself standing face to face with the most ethereally exquisite female he had ever seen.

She was as delicate as a butterfly and when she moved she seemed to float like a fairy on a current of fragrant air. Her skin was the color of the first snow and her long hair was jet black, floating about her face in a style alien to the Bujun. The perfect bow of lips was a scarlet so intense it seemed to sear his retinas, and the heavy lids of her enormous eyes were powdered in silver dust. Her long, graceful neck was girdled by a chain of perfectly matched pearls the color of sea-foam. Her slim frame was cloaked in a kimono of white, on which were brocaded egrets in cloth-of-platinum. It was cinched tightly with a wide sash of white silk studded with seed pearls. They looked like stars flung into the ocean.

Ojime, his face flushed, whispered, 'You are magnificent!'

The woman smiled with the innocence of a child. 'You are kind to say so.' Her long fingers closed over the Makkon's tongue, and her voice changed, momentarily chilling him, 'You did not touch this?'

'No.'

'Did anyone else?'

He heard the tenseness in her voice but did not understand it. 'Not to my knowledge. Except for the Dai-San.'

Her head swiveled. 'The Dai-San knows.'

'Yes. He held it. But he was wearing that hideous six-fingered glove of his.'

'The Makkon's skin.' She nodded. 'But he knows nothing. No harm done, then.' She looked at him. 'I can do it, then, what you wish, what you have paid handsomely for. I can make the potion that will make you immortal.'

He hesitated but a moment as she turned and led him now to the rear of the solarium where there were fires burning from an unknown source. She thrust the Makkon's tongue unceremoniously into a blocky

stone and ceramic square not unlike a forge. The orange flames turned immediately black and a cloud of chokingly thick smoke rose into the air. The stench made Ojime forget about all the dark rooms he had passed through. He fell to his knees and gagged.

The fairy-like woman stood motionless, staring down at him until the flames returned to their original color. Then, astonishingly, she slid her right hand into the forge's opening, into the flames and the incredible heat. Ojime gasped but she did not so much as flinch. A moment later her hand, blue with cinder, emerged in a fist. She walked over to a zinc-topped table filled with the implements of gardening and grinding.

She opened her fist over a large marble mortar and Ojime watched a colorless ash sparkle down in a thin stream. What she added to this residue of the Makkon's tongue he could not even begin to say. An hour after she had first beckoned him into the solarium, she announced that she was done.

'I will take possession of it now,' Ojime said.

She turned and, smiling that innocent childlike smile, said, 'You must meet my price.'

Ojime's face darkened. 'Why, I have paid you more than a score of men and their sons will earn in their lifetimes. I have met your price.'

'That you have,' she affirmed still smiling sweetly. 'That was my price for making the potion. What you have asked for, after all, is unique, highly dangerous.' She held a small glass phial aloft. It contained a thick liquid that seemed to flash and fluoresce. 'You could hardly have gone anywhere else to get this.'

'Damn you,' Ojime said menacingly, taking a step toward her. 'We struck a bargain. We have a deal.'

The woman appeared unperturbed. 'My price for delivery is simple. You will grant me your allegiance *after* you have become immortal.'

Ojime, who had no intention of honoring any promise he made to this witch, laughed out loud. 'Is that all?'

'I warn you.' She lifted a long finger. 'There will be dire consequences should you refuse to grant my wish.'

Ojime, his mind aflame only with the consequences of what she held in her hand, knew he had no reason to heed her counsel. 'I agree to your price for delivery,' he said.

Power! his mind cried, transfixed by this moment. *Power!*

The woman nodded, and he stepped forward, took the glass phial out of her hand and, with a quick flick of his wrist, upended it over his open mouth. He swallowed convulsively, and felt a peculiar burning in his gullet, working its way down to his stomach. Any liquid that was powerful enough to raise the dead, he had reasoned, would make of him, a living human being, something akin to a god. Someone to challenge and defeat even the great Dai-San.

It is working! he thought, gripped by exhilaration. He began to laugh. 'I've tricked you, witch,' he said, looking at the ethereal woman through eyes that had begun to water.

That angelic smile. 'Have you, Chief Minister Ojime?'

'No names!' he cried. 'How do you know my name?'

The woman began to laugh. 'Why, you fool, I know *everything*.' She spread her arms wide. 'Did you think I didn't know that you lied to me?' She leaned forward and now - though Ojime could not be sure because his eyes were streaming tears - her aspect did not seem quite so angelic. In fact, she did not appear benign at all. '*Power*, Ojime. That is your ambition. And now that you have it, tell me whether it meets with your expectations.'

Ojime had fully intended to do just that, to tell her that despite her gloating he still maintained the upper hand. He was Chief Minister, after all, and a Bujun warrior. What was she? He opened his mouth to utter these things and more but at that moment the liquid cascaded into his stomach.

The pain hit him like a swordsmith's hammer. Every cell in his body seemed on fire, bleeding, imploding, the agony feeding on itself, until...

Ojime kept right on screaming all the way through the transformation.

SIX

BELLY OF THE BEAST

Moichi awoke into musty darkness. It was warm, but far from the broiling heat of the Mu'ad. 'Aufeya?'

He reached out, but could not find her. He rolled over and groaned, holding his head steady until the waves of vertigo subsided. He got up on his hands and knees, felt for his dirks. They were gone; he had been disarmed. He began to move, but almost immediately paused. Didn't the floor feel spongy? Didn't it feel moist and almost sticky?

He heard the eerie sibilance in his mind again: '*Fe'edjinn! Fe'edjinn!*'

A cold chill swept through him. Could it be that he was in the belly of the beast? Swallowed but not ingested. And where was Aufeya?

He began to move again, but it wasn't long before he felt the hard steel edge of a weapon at his throat.

'Don't move!' a voice hissed.

A light appeared, a small brass lamp with a tiny flame rising from its wick. By its mean light Moichi saw a moon face the color of suet. It seemed to be stuck directly onto a body of gross weight with no intervening neck.

'You're not dead,' the moon face said with some surprise.

'Should I be?'

The blade of the weapon - one of Moichi's own dirks, he saw - softly caressed the skin on his throat. 'Everyone else is who comes here,' the moon face said. Black round button eyes blinked below a beetling brow, and the cherry bow of feminine lips made a moue.

'You're not.'

The button eyes blinked again. 'Turn over.'

'What?'

The point of the dirk drew blood. 'You heard me. Turn over, I'm hungry.'

Moichi was obliged to move. As he turned on his side, he said, 'Where are we?' And then, on his back, 'What are you going to do?'

A tiny pink tongue worked its way around the bow of his lips. 'Hungry. I'm going to open you up and feast on-'

Perhaps it was the hunger or the anticipation of satiation, but his concentration wavered for an instant. Moichi slammed his fist into the side of the hand that held the dirk. At the same time he used the edge of his other hand on the nerve plexus in moon face's shoulder. There was so much flesh he had to lift himself off the floor in order to find it.

Moon face cried out and the dirk fell to the floor. Moichi scooped it up and, placing it at the fat man's throat, felt around for its twin. When he had both dirks in his possession he said, 'Who are you?'

'Dujuk'kan's my name,' the moon face wailed. 'And for the love of God have pity on me. I've been incarcerated here for...' His head swung around in disbelief. 'Assan, I don't know how long I've been here!'

'Assan!' Moichi repeated. 'You're Adenese!'

'What of it?' Dujuk'kan said. 'Are you an Iskaman?'

'As it happens, I am.'

The fat man stared at him open-mouthed. 'Assan, you can't be Fe'edjinn.'

Now we're getting somewhere, Moichi thought. 'Why can't I?'

'Because... because...' Dujuk'kan looked away. He yelped, jumped as Moichi pricked him with the dirk, and his head turned back. His eyes, squinting, made him look sad like a child's forgotten toy, thrown in a corner to gather dust instead of love. 'You're hurting me,' he said mournfully.

Moichi laughed mirthlessly. 'That isn't the half of what I'll do unless you cooperate. You were going to eat me for dinner!'

'That was necessity. I am hungry. What choice did I have? But you're just being cruel.'

Moichi pricked him again and he squealed like an animal. 'The... thing here... eats Fe'edjinn. Like everything else in the Mu'ad its survival instincts are honed to a sharp edge.'

'But why only Fe'edjinn. Why didn't it eat you?'

Dujuk'kan shrugged. 'I don't know I - oww!' He stared at the rivulet of his own blood and Moichi felt sure he was on the verge of tears. 'Now look what you've done!' he wailed like a woman.

'If you tell me the truth no more blood will be spilled.'

Those black button eyes stared at Moichi. 'Promise?' And when Moichi nodded, he sighed. His expression was very sad. 'I'm a trader, you see. I've lived in the Mu'ad all my life. Don't ask me why except it is my home and I find it impossible to leave. Like this... thing's, my survival instincts are formidable. When it sucked me in I knew I had to make a deal fast.'

'So you bartered your knowledge of the Mu'ad for your life.'

The fat man nodded. 'It's true. I'm guilty. I led it to Fe'edjinn settlements in return for my life. But the

bargain backfired. I became too useful; it refused to let me go, so I've been imprisoned down here for Assan only knows how long.'

'But *where* are we? In the belly of the thing?'

'Oh, no! We're in one of the underground tunnels it digs out for itself wherever it goes. It's somewhere -' he looked to either side - 'around here.'

'But it didn't eat me.'

'No.'

'And the woman I was with?'

'What woman?' Dujuk'kan said. 'I saw no one else.'

Then where is Aufeya? Moichi asked himself frantically. *Could the thing have...?* But he stopped himself. That way led madness. 'We have to find her,' he said to the fat man. 'How extensive are the tunnels?'

'We've been here quite some time while it... feasted. If she's still alive, she could be anywhere. We'd never find her in time.'

'In time? What do you mean?'

'The thing has just gorged itself on... the three Fe'edjinn. It's in a period of stasis now while it digests. It-'

Stasis! That was it! 'Quick!' Moichi said, pulling the fat man to his feet with a grunt. 'Take me to the thing.'

Those button eyes nearly popped out of Dujuk'kan's head. 'Are you mad? What this thing is...' He shuddered. 'You don't want to go near it. Trust me, you don't even want to see it.'

'Take me there! Now!' Moichi pushed the lamp into the fat man's trembling hands, then shoved him along the tunnel. 'If it is still in stasis we have a chance to kill it before it awakes.'

'Kill it?' The fat man's tongue licked his lips as if he needed to taste the concept.

'It's the only way you will get out of here,' Moichi said.

Dujuk'kan's eyes lit up. 'Kill it! Yes!' He ducked his massive head as he began to lead Moichi down a twisting tunnel. The lamp illuminated the curving walls, carved with corkscrew markings, as if they had been routed out with a gigantic drill.

'Just what is this thing?' Moichi asked as Dujuk'kan led him down a left-hand branching.

'Assan knows,' the fat man said. 'A misshapen monster bred in this desert of wonders. Perhaps it is the last of its kind.' He shuddered again, his shoulders and sides wobbling like Daluzan custard. 'I pray to Assan it is so.'

Moichi was aware that Dujuk'kan was leading him along a series of tunnels that led deeper into the desert floor. There seemed to be no rock here, but sand compressed into the density of stone. Still, it was sand, moist and almost springy to the touch as he had discovered.

Ever downward they went until they were enveloped by a wet coolness that seemed as stifling as that of

an ocean's floor. The air seemed as thick as honey and Moichi's lungs began to labor with each breath. When he felt a wave of dizziness, he pulled the fat man around. 'How much farther?'

'Not far.' The button eyes squinted. 'Are you all right?'

'Fine,' Moichi said, indicating that they should push on.

They hardly needed the lamp now, for the walls of the drilled out tunnels spiralled with crawling things, insects of some sort, which emitted a pulsing greenish-yellow light. The moving lights served to further disorient him so that he staggered and, at one point, fell against the wall. Huge insects began to crawl all over him, turning him phosphorescent.

Seeing this, Dujuk'kan turned and brushed the creatures off him. 'The light will waken the thing prematurely.' His voice was now a whisper, a sign that they were close to the stasis lair. But so close to the wall Moichi saw thick, dark veins running through the hard-packed sand. He touched them with his fingertips. They seemed metallic and Dujuk'kan confirmed this.

'There is no real rock bed until you get much further down,' he said. 'But there are veins of metal ore - tin, lead and antimony -hard as diamond.'

The route now turned so steep they were obliged to slide part of the way down. Moichi wondered how they would ever get back up for there were no handholds and the floor of the tunnels, smooth and giving, would be impossible to climb.

At the bottom of what was almost a chimney of sand the tunnel narrowed down. Moichi could see immediately that the Adenese would never fit through. There were no insects here and it was dark and dank, save for the pitifully small circle of light from the lamp's flame.

'There,' Dujuk'kan whispered, pointing directly through the narrow defile. That is the neck of the lair.' He crouched down, lifting the lamp as he did so. 'It is still curled in stasis.' He looked at Moichi. 'You will have to go in there.'

Moichi drew one dirk, put it crosswise between his teeth. He held the other in his left hand and, pushing the Adenese aside, took the lamp from him and began to crawl through the narrow neck. He was immediately aware of the walls closing in on him until he could feel them on all sides. Still, he pushed on, though he could feel the compressed sand dragging at his clothes. How much narrower could the neck become?

He squirmed his way onward. Now he was obliged to curl his shoulders toward one another in order to keep going. The narrow tunnel seemed to stretch onward. He had supposed, going by Dujuk'kan's description of a 'neck,' that he would have to pass through only a short distance.

Still, the tunnel narrowed. There was no space to turn around. Moichi could hear the thunder of his heartbeat, the wheezing of his breathing. He could not even lift his head anymore. He was like a worm, heading downward into darkness, into an unknown fate, to confront... what? Some monstrous beast that ate human beings as naturally as he drank water.

He pressed on, knowing instinctively that to stop would be a mistake, for that respite would allow doubts, fears and even panic to assail him, crushing courage underfoot. But it was now so narrow that it was all he could do to inch painfully along. His skin beneath his clothes felt rubbed raw by the constant contact with the compressed sand.

Abruptly a fetid whiff came to him. The neck had ceased to narrow and, with a great effort, he wriggled

forward. The air, though somewhat foul, ceased to be moist, and his grateful lungs sucked it in. Then, all at once, his head and shoulders were through and, squirming, he used his elbows against the wall of the lair to 'ever himself all the way out.

He found himself in a small chamber. It was empty. He went back to the neck he had climbed through, shouted, 'Dujuk'kan, the thing is no longer here. What-'

His voice was drowned out by a deep rumble, and he leaped back from the opening a moment before a torrent of sand came rushing through. It spewed into the chamber, filling it by a third. His heart sinking, he lifted the lamp, kicked at the sand. It was solid enough. He pushed it away from the opening and more gushed through. There was no doubt that sand filled the neck completely. He was cut off. Which, he saw now, was precisely the Adenese's plan.

Chill take him! Moichi thought. He has buried me alive here. Too late, it occurred to him that Dujuk'kan must have lied about almost everything, that he knew where Aufeya was, that he wanted her for himself or, just as likely, to sell in the infamous and illicit Mu'ad flesh markets. With her red hair and copper eyes she was an exotic type in this part of the world; she'd no doubt fetch a fortune for the fat Adenese.

Holding the lamp high, he walked around the chamber. It was devoid of anything except sand, and it was small enough so that with the one opening blocked it could not be long before he ran out of air. In fact, the lamp's flame was using precious oxygen. He could douse it, of course, but he lacked a means to relight it.

He stood in the middle of the chamber, overly conscious of his breath going in and out. He knew he shouldn't concentrate on it, he should think of other... Wait! Maybe he *should* concentrate on his breathing - or at least the air he was taking in. Because it wasn't musty and, this far down, in a chamber with one egress that was now blocked, it should have been. But, except for that faint fetid scent, the air was clear and, as he had noted earlier, drier than that of the tunnels above. This could mean only one thing.

He looked upward, searching for the place where fresh air was filtering into the chamber. He went around the room four times, slowly examining the high walls and ceiling of the chamber. It had to be there, he just knew it.

And, at last, he found what appeared to be a crease in the near featureless wall. It was appallingly high up, almost at the ceiling but... He stood beneath it, sniffing lightly and then more deeply. Yes, the air was marginally drier and fresher here. His spirits lifted. Then there was at least a chance of another way out. But how to reach it? The walls of the chamber, though grooved lightly like all the other tunnels, rose straight up without so much as a hint of hand- or footholds. And what good was a way out if he couldn't reach it? The irony of it threatened to overwhelm him.

Then he went over to the wall, put the flat of his hand against it. It was harder, drier than those in the moist, heavy atmosphere above. He took one dirk, drove it horizontally hilt deep into the wall three feet up. He put his weight on it, straining. It did not give.

His heart beating fast, he climbed on it then, reaching up, drove the second dirk into the wall, three feet above that. He stepped up, carefully putting his weight onto the higher dirk. It held. He took his weight off the lower dirk and, leaning down, pulled it free. It was tough work, and he resolved to make the subsequent steps up shallower. It would slow his progress but he would be assured of pulling the lower dirk out of the wall.

Thus he made his painful way up the chamber toward the breath of air seeping in. He was sweating heavily from the exertion and the delicate balancing act he was obliged to perform simultaneously. Once,

he was sure the lower dirk would not shift, and he spent an agonizing ten minutes working on it, using patience as well as muscle to inch it out of the wall. When it finally came free, he paused, crouching on one bent leg like some exotic avian, letting his heartbeat return to a semblance of normalcy.

He went on, rising until he was within three feet of the ceiling. He could see the rift in the wall now, a dark ruffled scar in the sand. Carefully, he reached up until his fingertips closed over the top of the rift.

It was a ledge of some sort!

God of my fathers, he breathed silently, thank You!

He had one dirk sheathed, and now he put the flat of both hands onto the ledge and, with a massive effort, pulled himself up. It was very tight. The rift itself ran for more than eight feet horizontally, but it was only about eighteen inches in height, and that was in its center. It tapered off on either side so narrowly it seemed that no one could squirm through. Moichi turned around and, reaching down, pulled the dirk out of the wall. Then he turned his attention to the rift.

He could feel clean fresh air blowing on his face, and there was a dim illumination some way in the distance. That was good news indeed, since he had been forced to leave the lamp behind on the chamber's floor.

He examined the rift and calculated that if he went headfirst into the center of it he could just about make it through. In any case, he had no choice. He had to try.

The way was somewhat easier going than he had expected. The sand here was so dry it was like shale, cracking off in thin layers so that he could work the aperture wider in spots. Also, the rift was shallow, so that he was through it in just over two body lengths.

He sat for a moment on the other side, bathed in the eerie bluish glow and wiped the sweat from his forehead. I'm still not out of this, he had to remind himself.

And that was when he saw the six red eyes staring at him from the shadows. It was a moment before the image resolved itself and he understood that all six eyes belonged to one entity.

God of my fathers, he thought, so Dujuk'kan wasn't lying about everything after all.

Slowly, he took one dirk, held it point first in front of him. He crouched in the gloom, his muscles tense, his nerves singing with adrenaline.

'Fe'edjinn.' It was the voice he had heard just before he and Aufeya had tumbled into the swirling waad. 'Fe'edjinn.'

'I am not Fe'edjinn,' he said emphatically. He thought of the fate of Tamuk and his men and his stomach turned over in revulsion. 'Who are you?'

'I am I.' The thing shifted in the shadows but Moichi still had no clear idea of its shape or size. He knew only that it was blocking his sole path out of this underground prison. As if it had read his thoughts, the thing said, 'I am Jailor. I mete out punishment.'

'Is that why you swallow Fe'edjinn whole? To punish them?'

'I only punish one. The others are sustenance. I must live; I must eat.'

Moichi crept a little forward, willing his gorge not to rise. What was it about this creature that caused

such absolute antipathy? Was it simply its gruesome diet?

'Your prisoner?'

Those horrific red eyes staring at him. 'Yes. The Adenese Dujuk'kan. He is criminal. His cruelty is boundless. Incarcerated, he was here for a purpose. Now you have disturbed that purpose.'

'Dujuk'kan told me he was a merchant.' The Adenese had told Moichi many things. Which ones were the truth and which the lies?

'As is usual with him he lied and truthed all at once,' Jailor said. 'Merchant he is, but in only one specific way: he is a slaver. For years, he ran an Adenese slave camp in the Mu'ad. Iskamen settlers - mostly children and adolescents - were his prey. Cruel he was to them. Inhuman he was.' An odd, chilling sound filled the cavern, rolling and echoing. It was only after a time that Moichi understood that the thing was snickering. It had used the word 'inhuman' ironically. It was at this moment that it came to Moichi that this was no unthinking monster as Dujuk'kan had led him to believe.

'Oh, yes, he is merchant. He sold his contraband or himself tortured them until he laughed hard and long.'

'But someone must have put an end to it,' Moichi said. 'Someone put him down here with you as his guardian. Who?'

'Bjork.'

'Who is Bjork?' Moichi asked.

'Bjork made me with his magic. With his magic he set Dujuk'kan's poor livestock free. He caused Dujuk'kan's prison to be made. I am prison and guard, yes, one and same.' The eyes wavered and seemed to glow more brightly. 'There was a plan. Bjork's plan. Now you have disturbed it all.'

'I? How?'

'Dujuk'kan has escaped. Because of you.' Those six eyes were like fiery coals blasting the shadows, and Moichi could feel an animus rising, dark and dangerous. 'You and the woman have my attention diverted.'

Moichi's heart leapt. 'The woman. Aufeya is alive?'

'Dujuk'kan clever is,' the creature continued. 'Taken the woman he has. Gone he is.'

Moichi shifted forward. 'Then I must go after them. Is Aufeya all right?'

'Unconscious she is. All I know.'

'You must let me go. You-'

'NO!' The shriek filled Moichi's ears, overflowing the cavern, echoing on and on without end. The eyes grew as the thing slithered forward until it blocked the way completely. In a moment it would emerge from the shadows and Moichi would see. 'You will go nowhere. Here is where you will stay in place of Dujuk'kan.'

Moichi flicked the blade of his dirk. 'But I am no criminal. You have no cause to keep me against my will.'

'Best cause,' the thing said, and that odd, chilling snicker came again. 'My life, my existence, depends on

prisoner. I told you of Bjork's plan. He created me to guard. When Dujuk'kan dies, I cease to exist. But while Dujuk'kan lives, so must I. Without someone to guard I will perish. Happen I will not let that.' The six eyes seemed to expand exponentially as it came straight for Moichi. 'You are my prisoner now for all your days until the moment of your death.'

When Chiisai knocked on the thatch and willow door of the mean house at the end of the foul-smelling lane in Hinin, she was clad in the rags of a street urchin. She had made it her business to follow High Minister Ojime to the Shinsei na-ke Temple where, unbeknownst to her, Ojime had stolen the Makkon's tongue and had callously murdered the chief Rosh'hi. She had hunkered down in the shadows, waiting patiently for him to emerge, and so she had observed him at length slip out of the temple and hurry away. He had led her a merry paranoid chase through crowded shops and teeming marketplaces, beneath arching bridges, down cobbled thoroughfares thick with produce carts and itinerant calligraphers and fortune-tellers, and along narrow alleyways, some of which he had furtively doubled back on. But she had persevered, shadowing him all the way to the Hinin bridge where she quickly slathered her clothes with mud and hurried after him. Seeing where he was headed, she rent her already filthy clothes and, to make the picture perfect, had rolled around on the packed-dirt lane until she had acquired the right degree of ripeness. Then she had boldly knocked upon the thatch and willow door.

'We have no food to spare,' the humped figure muttered from the open doorway. 'Be gone with you. Weeee-'

The voice turned into a screech as Chiisai put a knife to the hunchback's throat. 'Where is he?' she said.

'Who?' The screech came again as she drew the edge of the blade lightly across his curiously hairless skin.

'Do you think I am joking?' she hissed in the hunchback's ear. 'Do you think I am unaware of the treasonous activities attributed to the owner of this place?' She tightened her grip upon the figure. 'Ojime. Where is he?'

'You will wish you never came here,' the hunchback said as Chiisai propelled him through one evil-smelling chamber after another.

'I am already wishing that,' she said, her nose wrinkling.

'My mistress will kill you,' the hunchback whined. 'She guards her privacy most jealously.'

'Don't we all.'

'Not like her,' the hunchback said, racing along as fast as his short, misshapen legs could carry him. 'She is fanatic. You'll see.' He tried to twist his head around to look at her and she rapped him smartly on the temple. He made a low gurgling sound, like a cud-chewer, and hurried on. She was almost climbing his back as she urged him on.

'No matter how quickly we get there, you will not unnerve her. She knows everything. It is her business.'

'And what business might that be?' Chiisai said.

'She is Kaijikan, the Keeper of Souls.'

Chiisai grabbed at the shell-like back, hurling the figure against one filthy wall. He bounced off with a grunt and she slammed the heel of her hand into his chest. She put her face up against his, pale, sickly and worn, as if he were centuries old instead of decades. 'What nonsense are you promoting? Kaijikan is a myth, an ugly creation to frighten young children into behaving. Kaijikan does not exist.'

'Then you will be slain by a myth,' the hunchback said through thick lips the color of freshly seeping blood.

'Go on,' Chiisai said, hurling him forward, 'show me where she is.'

'No need,' said a soft but commanding voice. 'I am here.'

The hunchback gave a little moan as the tall figure reached out, enfolding him in an embrace of sorts. In a moment, he was no longer there.

Chiisai squinted through the gloom. 'Who are you? And where is High Minister Ojime?'

'I am as Te-te said. Kaijikan, the Keeper of Souls.'

Chiisai laughed, but she was uneasy. She could not make out a single feature in the gloom.

'But you have already met one,' Kaijikan said. 'A soul, I mean. Isn't that right, Te-te.' And just like that the hunchback reappeared, cowering and shivering.

'I hate when you do that,' he said. 'It hurts.'

With a yowl he disappeared again.

'Spiritually, he means,' Kaijikan said. 'Of course he is beyond feeling any form of physical pain.' She lifted one long arm. 'Come. You wanted to see the High Minister. This way.'

She turned and went through the doorway. Chiisai had no choice but to follow. She did not for a minute believe that this creature, whoever she might be, was the mythical Kaijikan, Keeper of Souls. She was a madwoman, but no doubt cunning and dangerous for all that.

The brightness of the solarium was almost blinding for the first few moments. As Chiisai adjusted to the flood of light, she saw Kaijikan's features emerging, one by one. She saw the long black hair first, in its asymmetrical, non-Bujun style, then the enormous eyes, the bright bow of a mouth, the long, elegant neck, and the slim, firm body wrapped in the magnificent white and cloth-of-platinum kimono.

She was taken aback, though she struggled mightily not to show it. The eyes, for instance, told her that this woman was clever, yes, but not mad. Madness, she had come to learn, had its own spectrum of toxins that dissolved the color of the irises, causing them to become nothing more than lenses beyond which could be glimpsed the dark void of insanity. These eyes glittered with life, with energy beyond understanding.

On the other hand, the snowy skin was like nothing she had seen on a human. It was without line or blemish and, when she looked more closely, was without pores as well.

'You are wearing a mask,' Chiisai said.

'Do you think so?' Kaijikan pouted, then opened her mouth wide, making certain Chiisai saw there was no possibility of a mask. She put impossibly long fingers up to her cheek. 'Do you think I need one? So many men - and women - have fallen in love with me it never occurred to me that I might need one.'

'Where is Ojime?'

'Oh, yes,' Kaijikan said sweetly. 'I almost forgot.' She turned toward the rear of the solarium, where it was damnably hot from a squat kiln and a roaring fire. 'It seems as if the Chief Minister doesn't feel himself today - to say the least!'

Chiisai looked in the direction Kaijikan indicated and her heart thudded so heavily in her breast it seemed to skip a beat. There, stood a huge, dark-bearded man, immense and powerful, dressed in full battle armor of a manufacture unfamiliar to her. His square face was heavy-jowled, with slanting cheekbones and thick, almost alien, brows over heavy-lidded black eyes that were all glittering iris. Upon his helm was soldered a golden, writhing reptile that Chiisai recognized as a salamander, the creature of eternal life, and the same signal creature was depicted in a clasp at his throat carved from a single ruby with onyx eyes. It was surrounded by onyx flames which reached up into its open mouth.

'Tokagé!' she intoned. 'But that is impossible!' She turned to Kaijikan. 'What trickery have you conjured? What illusion? This beast - this traitor to mankind - was killed by the Dai-San in the Kai-feng.'

'True enough,' Kaijikan said. 'But I won't try to convince you this is indeed Tokagé. Illusion, do you think? By all means, go to him. Touch him. See for yourself.'

Chiisai went hesitantly across the solarium. As she passed Kaijikan a scent came to her nostrils of rose petals and silver sage, and she gasped, for these odors were associated with the mythical Keeper of Souls. She paused for a moment, staring at Kaijikan, who merely smiled back at her. Then she turned and went up to Tokagé. As she did, his glittering eyes followed her, but when she reached out to touch him - he was indeed solid enough - he did not move.

'Satisfied now?' Kaijikan asked.

'No. He could be anyone,' Chiisai said. But she was staring into his eyes and she recognized that look and knew, despite what she might rationally believe impossible, that this was indeed the arch-traitor of mankind. 'Besides, he hardly seems alive.'

'In that you have some justification,' Kaijikan said. 'He is but halfway back from the dead.' And when Chiisai turned to look at her that smile was still in place. 'You see, I needed two things to reanimate him. The tongue of the Makkon and someone living ambitious enough so that when Tokagé's soul re-entered the physical realm the body - and mind - would not be torn apart. High Minister Ojime fit the bill perfectly.'

'This is Ojime?'

'Not anymore,' Kaijikan said. 'Oh, parts of him still exist, I would imagine, here and there. But he has become what he dreamed of, something more.'

'So that is what Ojime was doing hanging around Shinsei na-ke Temple. He wanted to steal the Makkon's tongue.'

'And steal it he did,' Kaijikan said, 'spilling the Rosh'hi's blood in the process.'

'He murdered Qaylinn?'

'In cold blood, I am pleased to say.' She was beaming. 'Such a perfect host for Tokagé!'

Chiisai whirled. 'I will kill him!'

She drove at the huge, armored figure, her blade drawn. But behind her, Kaijikan made a series of complex signs in the air, a circle of talismans, and just as the point of Chiisai's blade was about to pierce a seam in his armor, Tokagé moved.

The point glanced off metal, shrieking in protest, and a huge mailed fist chopped down, making her whole arm go numb. The blade clattered to the solarium floor, and Tokagé grabbed her in an iron grip, spun her

around.

'His soul was mine from the very moment of his violent death,' Kaijikan said. 'I have plans for him now. Plans so sweeping you could not even imagine them. And I have no intention of allowing you, or anyone else, to interfere with them.'

SEVEN

DUK FADAT

The jailor with six eyes came crawling out of the shadows and Moichi thought he would faint. The thing was so hideous the reaction was instinctive. It had a long, flat insectoid head. A double slit like a cross with four thin lips served as a mouth. It was surmounted on either side by black, beetle-like mandibles. Its bloated, misshapen body, blotched and mottled with patches of clotted wiry hair, wound around and around, ending in a wickedly barbed tail, segmented like that of a scorpion. It had a multitude of short legs, each ending in four powerful talons, on which it scuttled crabwise. A viscous white foam ebbed and flowed from the corners of the ghastly mouth. The eyes, however, were alive with interest.

'You thought me ugly before you even saw me,' the creature said. 'Now have I fulfilled your fear.' The flat shell-like head bounced up and down. 'That is how Bjork made me. A Jailor should be hideous, yes, and I was the only creature Dujuk'kan was meant to see.'

'Then Aufeya and I got sucked in,' Moichi said, swallowing hard. 'How was it you didn't eat us as you did the Fe'edjinn?'

'Came they first. Full was I when you appeared. You were sucked down in the aftermath of my great hunger. No need had I for you while I slept, while full was my belly.'

'So we were meant to stock your larder.'

'I understand not.'

It was hard to look at the creature but Moichi forced himself. 'You were saving us until you were hungry again.'

'That will be long time. I liked woman.'

'Liked Aufeya?' Moichi cocked his head. 'In what way?'

'Dujuk'kan saw her. Saw I him drooling and thought I, if I keep her and he can't have her, sweet torture for him then and I am fulfilling Bjork's purpose even more.'

Moichi considered this a moment. 'Do you understand what is happening? Something Bjork obviously did not anticipate.'

Jailor sniffed. 'Bjork anticipated everything.'

'Not the fact that his jailor would begin to take on the characteristics of his prisoner.'

'Understand I not.'

'Look. You were created to keep Dujuk'kan incarcerated, away from his own kind so he could not harm them as he had for so many years.'

'I do so.'

'Yes,' Moichi said. 'And then you decided to do more. To torture him as he tortured the children he had stolen. What is the difference then between jailor and prisoner?'

It seemed as if Jailor was humming as it got down to work. Using its mandibles, it collected the viscous white liquid and rapidly began to spin out strands of shining filaments. These it strung from the walls of the low grotto which it was guarding.

'What are you doing?' Moichi asked uneasily.

The humming continued as the web became more complex. 'One prisoner escapes, another can do. This will prevent further escapes.'

Moichi stepped forward, slashed at the strands with the dirk. To his consternation, the strands mended themselves even as they were being sliced. He hacked and hacked at the web with the same result. There was never enough time to break free before the strands coalesced.

'You see,' Jailor snickered, 'told you I that Bjork thought of all.'

Moichi stepped back, wiping the sweat from his face. What would it be like to spend the rest of his life in captivity? he wondered. Each day like stepping into a pool of quicksand, sucking you down into nothingness. Time would become meaningless; so too, eventually, responsibility and thought. Just a slow drifting away like a tiny boat on a vast night-time sea. He could not allow that to happen.

'What now of Dujuk'kan?' he asked. 'Won't you go after him? He's your real prisoner. I am only a stand-in.'

'Go nowhere but tunnels I,' Jailor said. 'Made me Bjork for this. Here stay I.'

'But you *must* go after Dujuk'kan. He's a criminal. Surely Bjork could not have meant this to happen?'

The beast rose up, its mandibles clenching and opening in extreme agitation. 'You see not. Leaving the tunnels I die. End of story.' Then the humming came again as it continued to spin its maddening web.

'Do you know where Dujuk'kan went?'

'Yes. But no use to you.'

Moichi had his eye on several spots where the strands were not yet woven close together.

'I want to know where he is taking Aufeya.'

He moved as Jailor did, waiting for the angle he needed, patient until the beast was very close.

'Ah, Aufeya it is that interests you. Like Dujuk'kan.' Its mandibles clicked in admonishment or incomprehension. 'So much interest in one creature. Well, takes her *he* to depths of Mu'ad: the Mas'jahan.'

Inching forward, calculating vectors. 'Are you sure?'

Jailor continued its clicking as it spun. 'An evil place. Very wild. Business interests has he in the citadel. Of course go there he.'

Moichi lunged with the tip of the dirk, angling it through the space between the strands. The blade shot through the diamond-shaped opening, straight into the beast's head. A great cloud of purple dust shot upward as Jailor shrieked. It bucked upward, almost dislodging the dirk from Moichi's grip. But he had

been prepared and he threw himself against the web. As he suspected, it gave, enough for him to follow Jailor's movements and shove the blade further into the carapaced skull. He twisted the blade as he buried it hilt-deep.

All Jailor's short legs began to tremble as it collapsed. Its long talons scored deep gouges in the packed sand. The purple dust continued to spew from the rent Moichi had made in its head. It writhed on the ground, in agony, jaws working spastically. Its eyes, four of them dark and ruined, stared up at Moichi.

'So, Jailor, it comes to this. In order to catch Dujuk'kan, I must kill you.'

'Not my wish,' the beast said, 'but my nature.'

Moichi nodded. 'Unfortunately, I understand.'

The mandibles, covered with purple dust, leaked white viscous fluid. 'Understand nothing you. Pain am I. Born into misery, asked not for this I. How often wished I for death but Bjork's magic would not let me. Dujuk'kan must be guarded.'

'But now that he has escaped you are vulnerable?' Moichi said pressing down with the blade. 'Is that what you are saying?'

The jaws worked, but no sound came out. A moment later, they were filled with purple dust.

'Don't die yet, Jailor,' Moichi said. He withdrew the dirk, slashed again at the strands with the same result as before. 'Tell me how to get past this damnable web you have spun. Tell me!'

'Want to know I,' Jailor said, his voice weak and half-strangled now, 'what makes this woman you and Dujuk'kan think of worth saving?'

'Chill take you, how do I get out of here?' Moichi thundered.

'What do if not tell you I? Kill I?' Jailor tried to laugh, but there was too much of his own substance choking his throat. The body gave a great shiver and the two working eyes bulged as if a great pressure were building up. 'That woman... you think of...' The voice was so soft Moichi had to push against the web to hear it. 'At my release from bondage give you her I.'

'What do you...?' The light was dying in its eyes. A musty smell filled the grotto. And then into Moichi's mind popped Aufeya. She was strapped across the back of a co'chyn that was speeding across the Mu'ad beneath Dujuk'kan's black whip. He knew it was Aufeya as one identifies people in a dream - by the feel of her. But how could this be his Aufeya? For the woman in his mind had the head and neck of a snowy ibis.

Moichi blinked and the vision was gone. He looked down at Jailor who was stone dead. He had kept his promise to Moichi - or was he playing some cruel joke? Had the vision been an image of reality? If so how had Dujuk'kan come upon a saddled co'chyn, and how had he altered Aufeya?

Moichi realized that neither of these questions would matter a whit if he could not break free of Jailor's web. How was he going to...?

And then he noticed that down low one strand had been sliced in two and had remained cut. What had been able to do that? And then he saw: Jailor's own talon!

Quickly, Moichi bent down and, using his dirk, carved off a foot. He brought it back through one of the larger spaces between the strands and, reversing it, began slicing through the web with a wickedly curved

talon.

He ducked through the circular hole he had made and stepped over the hideous beast's carcass. Then, he turned back, hunkered down next to it. Somehow, Jailor seemed more pitiable than ugly now. That odd animosity had passed and in its place was a kind of gratitude at being human, prey to all the joys and sorrows attendant on the condition.

'Sleep well, Jailor,' Moichi said, rising. 'It seems to me you've earned it.'

The warren of tunnels was riddled with the kind of vertical chimney Moichi and Dujuk'kan had used on the way down to what was supposed to have been Jailor's stasis chamber. These, Moichi worked out, were short-cuts Jailor had carved out of the Mu'ad's sandbed in order to better keep an eye on its charge.

He was near exhaustion and racked by dehydration by the time he came upon one that provided a surprising way up - and the answer to the question of how Dujuk'kan had managed to escape.

The clever Adenese had sunk chunks of the metal ore that ran in veins throughout much of the tunnels, making a series of foot-and hand-holds in the chimney. He looked up seeing, far away, a tiny oval of clear blue. Sky! As dizzy with relief as with exhaustion, Moichi began his long ascent.

He had to stop many times, as a blackness that swam at the periphery of his vision threatened to overwhelm him. Increasingly, he crouched against the side of the chimney, shivering as if with the ague, his clawed fingertips digging frantically into the packed sand to stop from toppling backward into extinction. He knew this was dangerous, that he must continue upward at even the slowest pace, that the longer he kept motionless the more difficult it would be to get going again, both physically and mentally. His muscles were cramping and he was losing strength exponentially as he ascended.

At first, the smell of the fresh air quickening all around him was enough to keep him at it, but when that proved insufficient he set small goals for himself. He thought of Aufeya, and the vision the Jailor had provided for him of her strapped to a co'chyn ridden by Dujuk'kan on the way to Mas'jahan. Then, when he had reached his goal, he turned his mind to Sanda, and the stream of dreams or, alternatively, presentiments he had had in the Mu'ad when she came to him. He recited from memory the enigmatic words she had spoken. *Seek out the bear in the stone*, she had chanted. *Not to possess but to be possessed*. He pondered the riddle for some time until the image of his ravaged sister would not be denied and he heard again her heartfelt plea: *Save me!* From what? What had the Makkon done to her soul at the moment of her death? During the Kai-feng he had heard outlandish stories about the Makkon's predilection for drinking the souls from the eyes of their victims, but he had dismissed such whispered stories as psychological propaganda sown by the forces of Chaos to dishearten their enemy.

Save me!

Was Sanda - or some part of her essence - somehow still alive?

Reaching his next goal, he turned his thoughts to the tongueless Makkon. What had happened to it? Who or what had made it mute? Who had power enough besides the Dai-San? Moichi knew of no one else. While trapped in Jailor's lair he had lost all scent of the thing, and now he wondered whether he would be able to pick it up. Didn't such things have a specific afterlife? His experience in tracking both man and beast told him that there was. But the Makkon was not of this world, and perhaps different laws applied to it.

Reaching his goal, he crouched panting, on the outcrop of metal ore. Because of Dujuk'kan's girth and weight these were quite generous by Moichi's standards so that he was able to get both feet on at once.

However, he was so near total exhaustion that his muscles jumped and shuddered so that he shook almost uncontrollably. He closed his eyes for a moment, but that was a mistake as he almost toppled off his perch. To distract himself, he looked upward and was immediately cheered by the size of the oval of blue sky. He was almost there!

But, oh, it was hard to raise himself off his haunches, and when he reached up toward the next outcrop pain streaked through his left hamstring, making him pant out loud. He put his forehead against the rough sand wall and massaged the muscle until the agony was reduced to a deep ache. He continued upward, his nails torn, his fingers bloody, half-unconscious, continuing now by sheer effort of will. But when he reached the next - the penultimate chunk of ore - his left leg gave out and he slipped off his perch.

He caught himself, held on by his linked fingers, his body swinging precariously over an abyss he had overtly refused to acknowledge. Painfully and laboriously he levered himself up onto the perch then, without stopping, climbed onto the next one. Only one more to go.

But now he became aware of a soft ululation. As the echo filtered down from the opening above his head, his blood turned to ice. He knew that eerie, almost bestial, sound from his childhood. Duk Fadat. A sandstorm was brewing in the Mu'ad. Moichi wondered whether he was safer here at the edge of the Jailor's world than up there where the wind-whipped sand could flay the d'alb and skin off a man.

Then, with a whoosh, a great swirl of sand spilled through the opening, nearly detaching him from the outcrop and he knew he had to take his chances in the Duk Fadat. It was certain death to stay in the chimney; it was not a question of if but of when some gust of blasted sand would take him down.

He stretched upward, gaining purchase with his elbows, since the shifting sand outside the mouth of the chimney would provide no certain ground for his fingers. With a mixture of a groan and a gasp, he drew his torso, then his legs, up and out of the chimney. He was free at last, but into what nightmare world had he been thrust?

Tokagé, reanimated, wanted to break Chiisai's neck.

'She is the Kunshin's daughter,' he said in a curious metallic rumble like dangerously nearby thunder. 'She should be dead.' It seemed to emanate not from the voice box of his diaphragm but from some distant and unrecognizable shore, some pale land beyond Chiisai's imagining. She looked at Kaijikan - for she had no doubt now that this ethereal woman was the legendary Keeper of Souls - for deliverance. Strange thing! She knew she would get none from Tokagé.

'It is because she is the Kunshin's daughter that we will keep her alive,' Kaijikan said reasonably. 'She is far more valuable to us as a means of extortion.'

'I say extortion be damned,' Tokagé said, tightening his grip of Chiisai and enjoying it. 'The wreckage of this body flung down at the Kunshin's doorstep will strike terror into every Bujun warrior's heart.'

Kaijikan seemed not to exert herself at all as she came across the solarium to stand a hand's span from the huge and intimidating figure. As she did so, she appeared to become taller so that she was now the equal of his extraordinary height.

'But you know so little about the Bujun heart,' she said. The rebuke was like a slap across his great square face and his onyx eyes glittered in anger. Noting this, she said, 'Why do you think I had you reanimated here in Ama-no-mori? Why do you think I endured years of squalid life in this putrid swamp? Why I slunk undetected into this island Kunshindom in the first place? To complete your education. You will never rule this world until you learn to master the secrets of the Bujun heart, for the Bujun are the protectors of this world. It was their magic that created the Dai-San, your arch-nemesis.'

The mention of the Sunset Warrior's name stung him deeply. Chiisai felt his muscles twitch in involuntary spasm, heard the horrific sound of his gray tombstone teeth grinding together.

Kaijikan held out her hand. 'Now, give her over to me, Tokagé. I know how to use her best.'

'Tell me,' he said, his eyes canny slits. 'Then you can have her.'

For a long moment, Chiisai listened to the silence that had sprung up between them because it was an unquiet silence, one rife with emotional sparks. If not quite a full-blown contest of wills, she recognized in the sizzling tension a psychological maneuvering unusual in allies. It was a matter of power, of course. Both were used to absolute obedience and one would have to give way each time a decision was made.

'I had a sister once,' Kaijikan said. 'A twin, my mother once told me, though I could never see the resemblance.' She squared her shoulders but, curiously, Chiisai could detect no sign in her that she had ceded power to him. 'My sister was a mute from birth. She was very smart, very clever, but her muteness was her weakness and it proved her undoing. As a young warlord the Kunshin took a fancy to her and took her as his concubine. He used her when it was his will and it was gratifying to him that at other times she could not use her voice to complain or to ask for favors, for my sister was too ashamed of her disability to use writing as a substitute.' She stared unblinkingly at Tokagé. 'I do not know whether you will understand this, but the emotions on her face were her sole form of communication. The future Kunshin had neither the time nor, apparently, the inclination for emotion. He was driven by lust: power and hormones were his sustenance and the devil take those who interfered with his unholy feedings.'

'One night, my sister got in his way. She was frightened in one way or another most of the time she was with him. My sister was used to fear and she could manage it, but when she became lonely for her family she was inconsolable. And when she refused to perform when her warlord demanded it, he had her beheaded.' Her eyes, which had been locked on Tokagé's, swung abruptly to Chiisai. 'This is your father I am speaking of, my dear, so my advice is for you to pay close attention.'

'It is a story, that is all,' Chiisai said. 'An uncorroborated story.'

A flicker of raw emotion passed across Kaijikan's usually imperturbable countenance. 'Are you foolish enough to think the Kunshin a saint, then?' she said.

'No, he is but a man,' Chiisai said. 'But a good man for all that.'

'Good,' Tokagé spat, as if it were a filthy expletive.

Kaijikan smiled, having found common ground. 'Good and evil are not immutable, my dear. They are not laws of nature, but concepts dreamed up by mankind. How typically naive of you to cling to notions without true meaning.'

'You are wrong,' Chiisai said hotly. 'Morality is as immutable as any law - as gravity.'

'Really?' Kaijikan cocked her head and, with a complex weaving of her hand, began to rise off the floor. '*Nothing* is immutable, not gravity, not death. And here with your own eyes you witness the proof.'

Chiisai said nothing. What *could* she say? With a grunt, Tokagé flung her away from him and she was caught by silken fingers, preternaturally long, that closed around her slender wrists.

'You are a warrior, and I admire that,' Kaijikan said. 'Be assured that when you die - and you *will* die, my dear - it will not be a warrior's death. That would bring a modicum of solace to your father and I cannot have that. I have waited a long time for this moment. My sister's soul cries out for vengeance, and vengeance she shall have.'

Moichi was too hungry to sleep. As he crouched, slumped over, breathing hard, he saw an iridescent blue-black shape in the lee of a dune. Above it, great plumes of sand were gyring like Catechist dervishes, the fanatic sect who had carved the Mas'jahan out of the unforgiving bones and flesh of the Mu'ad.

Moichi crawled painfully toward the shape. As he did so, his tongue licked lips that were cracked and dry, bleeding now as the sand scoured them. He crawled gratefully into the lee of the dune and, ducking his head below the shrouds of sand, could not believe his luck. It was the blood-condor the Fe'edjinn had shot down. It was still fresh. How long had he been in the Jailor's enchanted lair? He had no way of knowing, but this evidence indicated it had been a shorter time than he had imagined.

He pulled the arrow from its breast. The desert sun had already half-baked it and, though Iskamen law forbade the eating of carrion predators, he tore into its flesh with his teeth, spitting out some of the feathers, swallowing others. The taste of food in his mouth overshadowed the pain in his raw lips as he gnawed at the bloody meat, sinew and bones. He sucked the blood out of those parts he did not eat, then cracked the bones, digging out the rich marrow. Finished with his meal, he threw what remained of the carcass into the wind. Then, abruptly, he lay back in the dune. His starved stomach, unused to food, let alone half-raw blood-condor, threatened to revolt on him. He gagged once, then willed his stomach into quiescence. He could not afford to vomit up the only thing that would keep him alive.

He turned over and, closing his eyes, plunged into a slumber so profound that only the scent of the Makkon could have driven him awake.

Later he started awake. In that instant between sleep and consciousness he thought the Makkon was here. His hand pulled free a dirk, then he snapped fully awake and, looking about him, laughed mirthlessly. Even the unearthly Makkon would think twice about venturing into the Mu'ad during Duk Fadat.

He was about to crawl along the lee of the dune when he saw a shape emerging over the crest and begin a remarkably steady descent out of the gusting wind and sand.

A co'chyn!

And, upon further inspection, he discovered that it wasn't a wild one, but one of the group on which he had come into the Mu'ad. How had it escaped the sand whirlpool? Then he remembered the vision Jailor had set in his mind of Dujuk'kan and Aufeya on a co'chyn. His heart leapt. As he took hold of the co'chyn's reins he was more inclined to accept the vision as the truth, for this was Tamuk's mount. He recognized the weapons-laden saddlebags. A shame it was not one of the others that held their supply of food and water. He had just feasted on the blood-condor but that sustenance would last no more than two days before his body required more. Otherwise, lassitude, extreme muscle weakness, dehydration and death would be his fate.

He patted the co'chyn's neck, stroked its trunk as he swung up onto its back. He pulled on the reins and its head swung around, dipping once before it took off, loping from dune to dune, always in the lee, exposing itself to the swirling sand as briefly as it could. Still, those bursts were painful, like a severe lashing with a multi-tailed whip. Moichi knew from the sun which direction to head in, and he kept it always over his left shoulder. Mas'jahan was in the extreme north-western section of the Mu'ad, in a wide sandstone waad that bordered a desolate and uninhabitable section of Aden.

The Catechists were strict political neutralists, and had remained aloof from overtures of an alliance with either the Adenese or the Iskamen. Even the Adenese Al Rafaar were leery of inciting these brutal and utterly fearless warrior-zealots. The Catechist dervishes believed in a living god who chose to walk

among them anonymously. Their search for him was constant and eternal because to look upon his face meant beatification, a shedding of the mortal coil and an end to all suffering. They were devout mystics about whom other races knew little, yet because they condoned slave trading and sexual promiscuity - their peculiar religious rites had a distinct sexual edge - Mas'jahan drew a steady stream of intrepid and evil-minded infidels. Because they were rabid proselytizers the Catechists accepted - even, stories insisted, encouraged - such travelers. As far as they were concerned every evil-minded criminal they came in contact with was a potential acolyte. And, by all accounts, they were surprisingly successful in their conversions.

Moichi, hunched over the saddle in a combination of exhaustion and self-preservation, could scent the Makkon in his mind. Beyond his left shoulder, the slowly setting sun was largely obscured now by the sand devils sent aloft by the Duk Fadat. He had consulted Tamuk's maps, still rolled securely in one saddlebag, and knew that the oasis the Jailor inhaled was two-thirds of the way toward the settlement to which Hamaan had gone to bring Sanda's husband Yesquz back to Ala'arat. As it happened, this settlement was not far from Mas'jahan, but Moichi knew that in Duk Fadat with no food or water the distance might as well be that of the ocean that separated Iskael from the continent of man.

He had been elated to find the co'chyn alive but now this might prove to be a cruel jest - merely a prolongation of misery and slow death.

Time was his most precious commodity and he determined to make the most of it. Accordingly, he pressed the co'chyn to its limits and past it as he headed ever northwest. The pace he chose was not the swiftest, for the intensifying Duk Fadat obliged him to make less frequent directional sightings than he was comfortable with. He resisted the temptation to spur his mount on faster for he knew well the worst fate that could befall him was to become lost, only to find that he had chased his co'chyn's tail in a circle for days. Sun and stars were only visible sporadically through the thickening hail of sand and, as the days progressed, they became ever more faint, until at last he could have believed he was back in Jailor's underground lair.

Still, he urged his mount on a steady pace day and night. He fell asleep, swaying, slumped over his saddle, remaining there only because he tied his wrists tightly to the pommel with the reins. Once, his co'chyn found water, using its trunk to burrow in the sand where a patch of dune grass clung precariously, but Moichi was unable to find it with fingers and dirk.

He pushed on, dehydration draining him of energy and, finally, of consciousness. He awoke, choking on sand and knew that if his journey continued in this manner he would perish in less than a day.

With the utmost reluctance, he drew his dirk and slew his mount with a swift, merciful slash across its throat. He drank its blood but that merely made him more thirsty, so sprawled in the lee of a dune, half-covered in cascading sand, he carefully made an incision along the skin of its underside. He slid out the three ovals of its stomachs, opened the third one and drank the fluid inside. He made a bladder of the second one, also filled with precious fluid, then set about butchering the beast as best he could.

He ate slowly, mindful of his last meal. After he had eaten his fill, he threw out everything in Tamuk's saddlebags, loaded one side with the bladder, the other with choice slabs of co'chyn meat wrapped in skin. He slapped it over his shoulder and continued his trek northwestward. The spoor of the Makkon was stronger in his mind and this drove him on, past even his tolerance for pain and fatigue.

Pain-racked days passed and he pressed on, into the Mu'ad, into the teeth of the Duk Fadat, measuring out rations of water and meat until both were gone. Still, he put one unsteady foot in front of another, his eyes all but plastered shut against the stinging sand.

But, at length, even his mind and iron will gave out and he collapsed upon the breast of the Mu'ad. Soon, in the height of the Duk Fadat, his form was layered with whispering sand until only a creature indigenous to the vast, shifting wasteland would recognize the cairn upon the dune as something alive.

EIGHT

RED VEIL

One bright spark in the darkness danced, its gyrations expanding into a recognizable pattern that was speech: 'The Black Angel is shut away. Evil is as evil does. Darkness is as Darkness will. The living testament of Zarathus, of He Who Walks Alone, shall be done.'

Scrims of sand resolved themselves into swirling arcs of brightly patterned fabrics. Blue, green, yellow, the turquoise of a bay, the jade of a storm-tossed ocean, the amber of the sea at sunset, all these shades and more spun by him like wheels on fantastic vehicles.

He opened eyes which seemed to him to have been glued shut for weeks and saw the robes and skirts billowing and whirling past him. At once, he grew dizzy and he shifted his gaze overhead. He was in an enormous tent of some thick natural muslin. Tentpoles of polished wood rose up like a copse of trees wherever he looked. He became aware of odors next: the strong scents of broiling meat and stewing fruit, rich and astringent all at once. Now and again, through these mouth-watering smells came the acrid stench of unwashed bodies.

Moichi closed his eyes. Perhaps he was dreaming. Perhaps he was dead, having been buried in the Duk Fadat and this was some afterlife the Iskamen had not imagined. Then the swirl of color, motion and fabric became recognizable for what they were: dancing. He was among the Catechist dervishes.

He groaned a little as he tried to rise up from the pallet of soft goatskins upon which he lay and immediately a heavy woman was at his side, squatting, smiling down at him benevolently. She looked oddly familiar despite the fact that he had never before met a Catechist. She was quite beautiful.

'You have healed magnificently,' she said in a heavily accented voice that was nonetheless pleasant. 'Your warrior spirit has impressed the Fianarantsoa.'

'The what?' he managed through cracked lips.

She laughed, her jowls shaking, her long earrings swinging, her myriad bracelets clacking together. Her bosom heaved with her laughter. 'The elders, dear one. The religious teachers. The word, literally translated, means seeker after truth.' Her clear blue eyes regarded him with some mirth. 'Yes, you are truly back from the dead. You were but a burial mound in the Duk Fadat when we found you.'

Moichi licked his lips and she gave him liquid to drink from a hollow gourd. It was sweet and citrusy and he drank it all down.

'What were you doing out in this weather?' he asked, gingerly feeling his lips with his fingertips.

'Keep them clean,' she said, taking his hand in hers. 'They were infected, but the salve I have been using is taking care of that.'

'My name is Moichi Annai-Nin,' he said.

'And mine is Ambositra. I am a healer.'

Moichi struggled to sit up, grateful that she made no move to help him. 'I must thank you for your

kindness. I would be dead without you and your people. But what *were* you doing out in the Duk Fadat?'

'Why, looking for you, dear one. The dervishes dance in order to follow Zarathus's living testament and we divined your presence in the Mu'ad.' She smiled. 'We found the saddlebags with the remnants of the co'chyn's innards. You are an ingenious man.'

'All my ingenuity would not have stopped me from dying.' Moichi held his head. 'Where am I? In Mas'jahan?'

Ambositra shook her head. 'Still the desert. But our band is on its way there. We will reach the citadel tomorrow evening.'

Moichi stared at the dervishes, whirling and spinning, faster and faster in concert to an inner rhythm old as time.

'They are synchronizing themselves to the cosmic pulse of Zarathus.'

'Entering into a mystic state,' Moichi said, fascinated.

'Exactly. In this way they can hear the words of his living testament and carry them out.'

Was it his imagination or did he feel a kind of heavy pulse in the air timed with the dervishes' movements? He was very conscious of Ambositra's proximity: her heat, the scents of her that were not all displeasing. She jangled as she moved closer, hunkering next to him. She leaned over so that her sun-streaked hair brushed his cheek. 'I am your nurse, dear one. I have seen your body. I have put my hands upon it, lovingly healing your flayed flesh.' He saw her smile broaden and she squeezed his arm. 'While the Fiana-rantsoa were impressed with your spirit I was impressed with your warrior's body.'

'Ambositra,' he said softly, 'I am grateful to you for all you have done, but

She cast down her eyes. It is my size. Like most infidels you find me too fat, too gross.'

'On the contrary, I find you desirable, but the truth is my heart belongs to a woman who has been abducted by a criminal, an Adenese named Dujuk'kan. I was told he was headed to Mas'jahan. A terrible murderous beast called a Makkon is also on its way there -I can tell from its spoor.' He looked at her. 'Now that I am feeling better I would speak to the members of the Fianarantsoa to determine if they know anything of the criminal or the beast.'

'In time,' Ambositra said gently. 'The elders dance now, and later they will rest. Tomorrow morning, before we set out for Mas'jahan, I will arrange an interview.' She turned, brought bowls into his lap. 'Now you must eat. Build up your strength for the journey tomorrow. We travel very fast.' She rose with a soft jangling of jewelry. 'When it is time for sleep I will return to check your wounds.'

It was quiet and deserted by the time he saw her re-enter the tent. He had been staring at the thousands of footprints left in the sand by the dervishes. Like clouds, he thought he could make out the shapes of fantastic buildings and beasts, one flowing into another. All the gourd bowls had been scrubbed with sand and packed away in preparation for the morning's journey. The tent was filled with shifting shadows, the lone light source a torch that had been left flickering near the tent flap. He could hear the occasional snort and pawing of the band's co'chyn that had been tethered somewhere outside. And, once or twice, he heard soft voices as the guards passed each other. He had had a glimpse of the Catechist weapons: wicked double-bladed push-daggers which, when held properly, were magnificent for hand-to-hand combat. The blades seemed to emanate from between the second and third fingers so that the entire

force of wrist, arm and shoulder could be brought to bear in the strike. He assumed they possessed long-range weapons as well.

'How do you feel?' Ambositra asked as she knelt beside him. 'I thought you would be drowning by now.'

'I am tired but sleep will not come,' Moichi admitted. He winced slightly as she peeled bandages off still tender skin. The Duk Fadat had done an admirable job in almost flaying him alive, but whatever was in the salve she was applying was healing him with astonishing speed. 'I am anxious to continue my search.'

'You are healing more quickly than I had anticipated.' Her clear blue eyes met his and again he was struck by a profound sense of *deja vu*. Had he met this woman before? Impossible, and yet...

Ambositra smiled. 'I am happy you are attracted to me despite my size.' She wrapped fresh bandages around his wounds. 'It proves a point I have been longing to make.'

Moichi looked at her. 'And what is that?'

He gasped, his heart turning over heavily as he saw the outline of her body flicker like the flame of the torch, then begin to melt like hot wax. And as it did so, her face began to change ever so subtly. Only the eyes remained constant, regarding him covetously through this transformation.

And when it was over, he understood everything: Aufeya's strange behavior, her remarking on the moon, her knowledge of the Mu'ad, her use of the phrase *The God of the Iskamen - How I envy you that*. Everything. His mind was whirling with ten thousand questions, but only one escaped his lips.

'Where is she?' His voice was dry and harsh.

'Aufeya, dear one?' the sorceress Sardonyx said softly. She moistened her lips. 'She never came with us on our journey to Iskael. It was always me.'

'God of my fathers!' he cried in anguish. 'How could I have been so duped?'

'You weren't duped, dear one.'

'Stop calling me that!' he shouted so violently that the tent flap parted and a guard peered in.

Sardonyx, in her guise as the Catechist Ambositra, put her finger to her lips. 'It is his wounds,' she said. 'They pain him.'

When the guard nodded and disappeared, she returned to her form as Sardonyx. She appeared as she had the first time he had encountered her in her castle in the land of the Opal Moon, all glittering metallic skin, heavy-lidded eyes, hair of twisted platinum strands. She lay down beside him, stroked his chest softly. 'I lied a little when I told you that Zarathus had revealed your existence to the dervishes. I put you in their minds while they danced. How they interpreted the vision was up to them.' Her stroking continued. 'I couldn't let you die, dear one.'

'Why not?'

'Because you love me. You are the only one who ever has.'

'You are out of your mind.'

'Am I? Who was it you made love to all across the ocean?'

'It was Aufeya, chill take you! I thought -'

'That I was your betrothed? Truthfully? But wasn't there something in the back of your mind, some sure knowledge you chose to ignore?'

'No, I-'

'And in Ala'arat? Tell me you did not suspect. Tell me the doubt did not come crowding home. No, no, dear one, you ignored them all because... Because you loved me from the moment we first met.'

'I admit I was intrigued, like a moth to a flame, but-'

'Yes, you were all that, but there was something more. I felt it and so did you.'

He felt rage trembling his muscles, but he lay back, staring at the star-shaped top of the tent. 'How did you escape from Dujuk'kan?'

'He came upon some of his former cronies - flesh peddlers unafraid of the Duk Fadat. While they sat at camp eating, drinking and fornicating I slipped away. The fat Adenese was lucky. Were he alone I would have turned him into a co'chyn so I could ride him into Mas'jahan.'

It was an amusing thought but Moichi was in no mood for wit or levity. 'Tell me about Aufeya. Is she alive?'

'The story is complex and goes far back in time.'

'I will have no more of your lies, Sardonyx.'

'No lies,' she said softly. 'I promise.'

He rose up on one elbow. 'What is the worth of the promise of a pirate, a freebooter and a murderess?'

'Perhaps we should both stop lying to one another.'

'This isn't about me,' he hissed, doubly angry at her cleverness. 'It's about you!'

She stared at him for some time, her clear blue eyes searching every millimeter of his face as if trying to memorize a long-cherished possession. 'What would you demand as proof?'

'I want the truth,' Moichi said firmly. 'I want to know what you really look like. No more masks, animations or transformations. Forget the sorceress.'

'You once called me a prestidigitator, a highly accomplished illusionist. Do you believe that now?'

He ignored that. 'Show me the woman.'

'I don't know.' She looked away for a moment. 'She has been in hiding for so long even I have forgotten what she looks like.'

'No you haven't,' Moichi said. 'Not by a long shot.'

'I am afraid.'

He said nothing.

'You *do* love me, don't you. Just a little bit.'

Moichi, ready with a sharp rebuke, found that he did not want to look inside himself, and in a sense that

was answer enough.

Her head bent so that the platinum strands fell across her face. Then they began to run together, pulsing and shifting, flowing like a stream gathering speed as it runs downhill. Her body shimmered, becoming less slender than it had been but not as heavy as it had been when she was Ambositra. The metallic arms and legs became flesh and blood, garbed in ebon leggings, suede waistcoat over a silk shirt open at the collar. The outfit accentuated the swell of her full breasts while hiding the flare of her hips, the roundness of her belly. The hollow of her throat was filled with an oval star sapphire that emitted an eerie, milky light. Her hair was the color of cinnamon, streaked by the sun. She wore it as short as a man. And when she lifted her head he saw revealed, at last, the woman Sardonyx.

She had been born beautiful, with a heart-shaped face, finely sculpted cheekbones, a strong nose and wide full lips, but then life had intervened. There was a scar running down the left side of her face from just beneath one blue eye to the point of her chin. It had been a deep cut; worse, it had not been taken care of and so had healed badly.

'So now you know.' There was a kind of defiance in her voice, born of vulnerability. 'And now you will never acknowledge your love for me. The truth!' She almost spat out the words. 'How I despise the truth. I have lost you for ever.'

He lay for a long time, staring at her face which she thought of as ruined. It was like looking at a lifetime, the ebb and flow of each year etched upon her countenance, the sorrow and the suffering; he could not deny recognizing them there. She reminded him of Licah, the woman written of in the Tablets of the Iskamen, who had borne the scorn of her people for her faith in God. They had taken her children from her, had stoned her unto death, but still she would not renounce her faith in God. And God had lifted her up, had healed all her wounds, had restored to her her children, and had taken her to dwell on the wooded slopes of the Mountain Sin'hai, where she lived for 999 years. And on the eve of her thousandth year God had summoned her to the summit, welcoming her into His House.

But then Moichi's heart hardened. 'She is dead, isn't she?' he said, already knowing the answer in his heart. 'Aufeya-'

'Yes. Dead like Tsuki, her bitch mother.'

Reality fell upon him like snow upon the icy upper reaches of the Mountain Sin'hai. But, surprisingly, he was beyond anguish, beyond even tears. He felt nothing at all.

'You wished for the truth,' Sardonyx said, her warm hand still upon him, 'so now you will have it. But the Catechists have a saying, "Beware for what you wish because one day you will be delivered unto it."'

She watched the rise and fall of his chest and, with it, the sheath of years peeled away until she was very young again, the unmarked girl who had been sold into slavery by her destitute and crippled mother, the girl who had murdered her master and had then been thrown into an Adenese jail for the crime of wanting to be free of abuse, the girl who had used her primary assets - her face and her body - to bribe her way to freedom.

'I left Aden as quickly as I was able,' she said. 'I had no clear idea of where to go or what I would do. I only knew that I had to get away from Aden and that I wanted never to return.'

Inevitably, I found myself in the Mu'ad. But I was in luck. I stumbled into a caravan of spice traders bound for Mas'jahan. Once there, I predictably came under the influence of the Catechist religion. I was drawn by the mysticism; I had no center, no sense of life or, more importantly, of myself. But quite soon I became skeptical of their main tenet: that God was living among them, speaking in tongues only the

Fianarantsoa could hear and interpret. The ecstatic state of dervishing is indisputable - the feeling, believe me, is supremely exquisite - but I, at least, felt no closer to God when I danced, and within a year I had drifted from the faith.'

As she spoke, Moichi could see her words as if they were pictures moving in the air, montages of her early life into which he was now drawn as inextricably as any of the personages she was describing.

'One member of the Fianarantsoa liked me especially. Vato-mandry. It was he who supervised my training, who danced with me in order not to lose me. But, though he was as much a fanatic proselytizer as the others, he was the only one who treated me as someone, not just another piece of meat for the Catechists to mold. Vato-mandry was an ancient man with a long, bearded face and eyes that had surely glimpsed God. He offered to take me into his household, to be made one of his daughters, and had I accepted I have little doubt that my faith would have been restored. No matter. I declined. Curiously, he seemed to understand.

"God comes to us in His own time," he told me. "Your time has yet to come. You *will* return to us, of that I have no doubt." And, in a sense, he was right because here I am.'

She was so still for some time that Moichi glanced over at her. Then she spoke again and the images swam before his eyes.

'Vato-mandry took me to meet a man. "Since your path leads you to the secular world I must ensure that it starts auspiciously." The man was a trader, only temporarily in Mas'jahan. In fact, I

soon learned that he was scheduled to depart the next morning. Vato-mandry had arranged for him to transport me through the Mu'ad and, furthermore, for me to become his apprentice.

'This man was well-known in Mas'jahan, and to Vato-mandry in particular. And, with the perfect vision that comes with hindsight, I believe that everything that subsequently transpired was, in some way, anticipated by him. You see, it is my belief that Vato-mandry wanted me to learn all the lessons of the secular world, for he believed with all his heart and soul that I belonged to the Catechists. He often spoke of the possibility of my becoming the first female member of the Fianarantsoa. And when even that potent inducement would not keep me at his side, he threw me at once and totally to the wolves.'

Through the bridge of her hand on his chest Moichi became aware of a tension filling her and he concentrated more fully on the images.

'He was a tall, handsome man with clear, ruddy skin, green eyes and blond hair. It did not take me long to discover that he was a brilliant trader. His skill at negotiation, at obfuscation and deceit were mind-opening to me. To say that I was a quick study would be to understate the case. He was astonished at how completely I grasped the psychology of the con. People are gullible. They are your most potent ally simply because they want to believe and, curiously, the more outlandish the lie you spin, the greater the gain for them, the more eager they are to put themselves in your hands.

I found in the con what I believed then was the same form of ecstatic liberation I had discovered with the dervishes. But I was young and foolish and wrong. The truth was, I was addicted to the adrenaline rush.

'As we traveled from province to province, from land to land, so I grew in skill and cunning. And as I made more and more money for this trader, he began to look at me differently. Utterly predictable. I went from being his paid-for pupil to his apprentice to his co-conspirator to, finally, his equal. By that time we were nearing his home and I noticed a curious change in him. The closer we drew to our destination the more ill at ease he became. It was as if he had lost all sense of home; that he cared only for being in distant lands, plying his trade with the greatest of skill - as if the game, of which he was a

grandmaster, was all that mattered to him.

'And now he had created someone who was his equal. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, I can see that he was at once intimidated and impassioned. He wanted me - badly. At first, I would awake in the middle of the night to find him standing over me, staring at me. When I asked him what was the matter he turned away mutely and, naively, I assumed that so close to home he was missing his wife. This went on for three nights. Then I found him in my bed. I have a history of using my body and, furthermore, I am a highly sexed creature. He was not only handsome but charismatic. He had also been my teacher, had become my mentor and best friend. We had shared intimacies in the heat of battle - and dangers, surely, from authorities who had sought to stop and imprison us had they ever caught us.

'It was a mistake to bed him. I think even then I understood that somewhere deep inside me. But the lure was too great. There were too many reasons for us to couple, and only one to abstain, and that got lost in the whirlpool of our lust.

'We enjoyed each other in that manner for four days and, during that time, made no attempt to travel further toward his home. By then, of course, it was too late. He told me what should have been obvious to me all along, that he no longer thought of home, that since meeting me all he wanted was for us to be together. Our couplings had been wonderful, even spectacular at times, but that was all they were, couplings. I was not in love with this man and I had no intention of spending the rest of my life with him. With the directness of youth I told him so.

'He tried to reason with me, talking of the fortune we would amass together, the life we could live as one. When that didn't work, he tried to have sex with me, as if that sweet oblivion could wipe out reality. Angrily, I pushed him off me. He fell to his knees and, pressing his head into my lap, professed his undying love for me. A little afraid of his intensity, I wanted to hurt him. I told him I was sure he had said the same thing to his wife and now look what was happening. What was to stop a man like him from doing the same thing to me a year from now?

'He seemed to go mad. Straddling me, he hit me again and again and when I tried to claw his eyes out he hit me so hard I passed out. When I came to I found myself bound to stakes he had pounded into the ground. When I began to cry out he gagged me. Then he raped me, brutally and without mercy. Why was I so surprised? I had seen this side of him many times when we worked the con, I had even admired it, tried to emulate it to the best of my abilities. My one failure.

'How many times he raped me I cannot remember. I am sure I will never want to. And each time he was more brutal and uncaring. He did things to me... Perhaps these were things he had dreamed of doing for years, and now that he had his chance he held nothing back.

'In between, he got drunk, because he could not face the future, which he blamed entirely on me. I choose to think it was because he could not face what he had become. In time, he passed out so completely that I had time to work my way free of the bonds.

'I was weak with the obscenities he had forced on me, shaking with rage and terror. I stanchd the blood as best I could. I ate a little food, vomited it up and tried again. When I could get some to stay down I dressed myself with shaking hands. Then I stood over him. I can recall the moment as if it happened yesterday. I wanted to kill him, I admit it. God knows I had killed before. But this was somehow different. This man had been like a father, raising me, so to speak, in my new life, teaching me everything I needed to survive. How could I murder him in cold blood even after what he had done to me? I thought of Vato-mandry and the Catechists, and the utter purity of their dervishes sang like a haunting melody in my head. I felt the pull of Mas'jahan and knew that, for the time being, at least, I had had my fill of the secular life. So I took some money - only what I had earned - and I left him there.'

Her tension had risen to such a pitch that Moichi could feel the vibrations emanating from her fingers. There was a heat like the Mu'ad at noon penetrating him from the center of her palm.

I was only a day and a half away from him when I was picked up by a patrol. They asked me if I had been the trader's companion and by the manner of their questions I knew they knew. If I lied I knew it would go bad for me so I told the truth.

'They took me into the trader's hometown, through the crowded streets where I was gawked at as if I were a circus freak. I was expecting them to take me to prison, but instead I wound up at a sumptuous private house. They forced me to kneel in front of a beautiful woman, a green-eyed witch with hair of silver.'

Moichi took her hand in his as he sat up. 'What are you saying?'

'You know what I am saying,' she said softly.

'You were in the Daluzan capital of Comma. This woman was Tsuki Seguillas y Oriwara. Her husband was the trader who took you in.'

'Yes.'

'Aufeya's parents. God of my fathers!' He ran a hand through his hair. 'But I was told the Senhor died in a duel.'

'That would be an altogether honorable death, would it not?'

'But-'

'You wanted the truth,' Sardonyx said. 'Now you must accept it. Sometimes we are better off-'

'No, no. I want to hear it all.'

Sardonyx nodded. 'As you wish.' She pushed him down. 'Now lie back so that the pictures can come to you clearly.'

When he had done as she bade, she continued:

'Senhora Seguillas y Oriwara wore a long brocaded dress the color of dried ox-blood, and across her face was the traditional

Daluzan red veil of mourning. "Is this the bitch?" she said. "The animal who murdered my husband?"

"It is, my lady," the captain of the guard replied with such conviction that I knew I had been tried and convicted without having stepped into a courtroom.

I gasped when I heard that Narris Seguillas y Oriwara had been killed, and supposed he had been set upon by brigands seeing, in his drunken stupor, an easy mark. I wept for him, but Tsuki bent over and slapped my face so hard I was thrown upon the marble floor.

"How dare you!" she cried, her voice shaking. "How dare you!"

I told her that I did not kill her husband.

"And I suppose you did not fornicate with him either!" She bent over me, her face twisted evilly. "Liar! You were observed! There are witnesses!"

"No one could have seen me kill him because I did not," I protested.

"The blood, Senhora," the captain said dutifully. "Look at her. She is covered with blood."

"My husband's blood!"

"No! It is mine! You don't know what he did to me. He-"

But the captain bent over me, shoved a rag down my throat. "You will not defame Senhor Seguillas y Oriwara." He turned his face up to Tsuki's. "Should I kill her now, Senhora, and be done with such filth?"

"No," Aufeya's mother said. "I have a better idea." And commanding the captain to hand over his dirk, she took it in her hand as if she had been born to it. "Hold her down," she commanded.

Sardonyx put her fingertips up to her scar, running them down its entire length from top to bottom, and Moichi could see the tip of the blade do its deft work.

'She was an expert on carving. She knew just how deep to go and where to mark me. Then, she commanded the captain to keep custody of me until I was healed of my own accord. On no account, she said, was I to be allowed medical attention. If the cut became infected, so be it. God would decide my fate.'

"If she lives, let her be scarred from this time forward," she said. "So that everyone she meets will know what she is and what she has done."

Outside the Catechist tent, Moichi could hear the co'chyn, restless now for a time. Perhaps they were in need of a feeding. After a while they calmed down, and only the sound of the fitful wind, the last feeble gasps of the Duk Fadat, could be heard.

'Now you have squeezed me dry,' Sardonyx said, getting up. 'I hope you are satisfied.'

But she stopped as he reached up and took her hand. She responded as he pulled her down to him. 'Somewhere,' he whispered, 'there is an end to this story.'

'I did not kill Aufeya, if that is what you mean.'

'Right now I don't know what it is I mean.' He touched her shoulder. 'What happened to her? How did she die?'

'It happened on the mountainside when we fought for the Fire-mask - when you had it on, when you were closing the door between our world and the dimension of Chaos. She slipped and fell. Even with all my magic I could not save her. Nothing could.'

'So it was you I had the idyll with all the way back to Comma.'

'Yes. I became Aufeya because that was what I thought you wanted. And what I wanted was to be close to you, to be loved by you. But very quickly the lie began to pall. I did not want to be Aufeya; I did not want you loving her. I ached to be me. But I was trapped in her skin. And I was terrified of what you would do if you learned the truth. I resolved then never to let you know. I was willing to become another person if that meant you would be mine. Or so I thought.'

'All across the ocean voyage to Iskael my own personality fought to be free, and each time it rose up you knew, even though you will never admit it. You knew I could not be Aufeya.'

Sardonyx was done now, but though her words had died, the ghosts of the images she had conjured

from out of the past still floated in the shadows. In a way, she had done the impossible: she had caused time to reverse itself. She had, for a little while, called upon the great spiral of time to open its iris so that they could peer across the gulf of the years to what had been, and what very well might be again. He was all too aware of the painful repetition. Was what Narris Seguillas y Oriwara visited upon her different from what she had suffered at the hands of her former slave-master? He did not believe so, and yet she had chosen a different resolution the second time.

Moichi looked into her clear blue eyes and, in doing so, peered into his own heart. 'Yes,' he said. 'You are right in what you say. I fought you in every way I knew how.'

'Not only me,' she said. 'Yourself.'

He sat, simply breathing for a time, trying out the air in this brave new world he was discovering. At last, he said, 'Will you tell me about the scar? Why do you still have it? Surely someone with your sorceress powers could excise it, restore yourself to the way you once were.'

'But I am no longer what I once was. I am something else now.'

'Is it a form of self-inflicted punishment, then?'

Sardonyx was quiet for some time and he found he had no desire to intrude because he felt that silence involved him.

'Once I was beautiful,' Sardonyx whispered. 'I knew it and everyone around me did, too. They acted appropriately. They reacted to my face and I learned to use my body to get what I wanted. But, you know what, I discovered those things weren't what I craved. And then I understood the inadvertent grace that the bitch of Cor-runa had bestowed upon me. She had set me free - free of the prison of my beauty. And so I became a freebooter - independent - a city-state unto myself in the land of the Opal Moon. And like a city-state that is required to fortify itself against unwanted intrusion I cloaked myself, masked and armored in my own enchantments until I could no longer remember the woman beneath. Then you came and I found that I was afraid of everything that lay beneath the masks.'

Her hand lifted to her face briefly, then fell to her side. 'I can, if you ask me, make it disappear.'

He knew just what she was asking of him, saw in her face how profoundly his wrong answer would cut her. He reached out, touched her cheek. 'The scar means a great deal to me,' he said, taking her in his arms. 'But not in the way you feared.'

And when his lips closed over hers, when he felt her hot tongue meeting his, he also felt her tears burning his skin like the images from her past, embers lifted by emotion, like time, swirling around and around in a spiral without end.

NINE

SATELLITE

There was a place in Ama-no-mori where, it was said, the wind made no sound as it blew through the cryptomeria. These sentinel pines climbed a steep and ugly scree overlooking the ocean. At the summit, a dizzying height, so the tales went, lay a forbidden cavern.

In ages long past, it was said, the ancient ancestors of the Bujun were in possession of weapons of mass destruction and in the cavern were buried the remnants that survived the holocaust that had consumed nine-tenths of mankind. This alone was incredible enough but the stories were more specific. It was said

that the cavern was guarded by evil kami who glowed, emitting invisible energy that sapped human strength, a kind of vicious borer that, once in the body, ate it away from the inside out.

Chiisai ascended the sparsely vegetated scree in the company of the magus, Kaijikan, and the reanimated Tokagé. The terrifying warlord was in possession of her dai-katana, her longsword, along with her wakizashi, the long-bladed Bujun dirk.

It had taken them three days to get here, riding astride swift luma.

Always, Chiisai was between her two captors, her luma tethered to their mounts, her wrists bound tightly and painfully behind her back, with no chance to escape.

The weather had turned bitter, with icy winds whipping the mottled underbrush on the scree. As she scrambled along, Chiisai glanced up at the boughs of the cryptomeria swaying in the wind. No sound came from them and her heart was chilled.

Half-way up the scree it began to snow, drifting white skeins heading in from the ocean that had all but disappeared in the front. The brightness of the day devolved to an unnatural milky twilight. A conch shell foghorn sounded every now and again, melancholy and remote, increasing her sense of isolation. Tokagé had unbound Chiisai's wrists so she could climb without undue difficulty, but he had tethered her around the neck as he had her luma on the journey here. It took some time for full feeling to return to her numb fingers.

At length, they rested in the lee of a copse of cryptomeria. Chiisai had never been to a place that was so utterly still. The powdery snow filtered through the boughs and needles, piling up quickly. While she watched, Kaijikan fed Tokagé as if he were a child. What she put in his mouth Chiisai had no idea, lumps like coal from an inner pocket of her robe. He drank no water nor liquid of any kind. The living dead, for certain. She thought of Kaijikan's manservant, the hunchback Te-te, and wondered. She had been able to frighten him, but when she had pricked his throat with her blade what had run out? Surely not blood.

As for herself, Kaijikan ate nothing. Even the Dai-San ate, so what kind of creature was she? Even magi must ingest sustenance. Chiisai shoved the last of her fish paste and cold sticky rice into her mouth while she pondered the imponderable. Then they continued their assault up the scree.

Clearly, their goal was the summit, and Chiisai approached it with an increasing sense of trepidation and fear. What if the stories were true? Magi and the living dead might not be susceptible to evil kami and their invisible energy but humans surely would be.

They reached the summit at the height of the snowstorm. It was impossible to see much further than a pace in any direction. Still, Kaijikan did not hesitate, but guided them unerringly across rock strewn ground bearded with pale and efflorescing mushrooms. These, when trod underfoot, gave off a sickly sweet odor not unlike the stench of death.

All too soon an unnatural darkness loomed before them, and Chiisai knew that they were approaching the cavern. It was blown out of a matte-black massif unlike anything she had ever seen. The rock seemed to have a powdery surface which clung like sweat to a warrior's muscles, and there was a peculiar odor which invaded her nostrils, making her throat and lungs prickle as if with ten thousand minute insects.

'I will not go in there,' Chiisai said, standing her ground. 'It is forbidden.'

Kaijikan turned and smiled. 'Are you afraid, Chiisai? But I will protect you. My magic is stronger than the ancients' mistakes.'

'So the stories are true. There are guardian kami in there.'

'Not a bit of it,' Kaijikan said. 'But beware, the earth of the cavern floor is highly toxic.'

'Earth poisoned by the ancients?'

'As inimical to life as anything on this planet can be,' Kaijikan affirmed with an almost erotic pleasure.

'I will not take another step,' Chiisai said, digging her heels into the ground.

'I am afraid that decision is not yours to make.' Kaijikan gestured at Tokagé, a runic swipe in the air, and he jerked upon her leash so hard that she was pulled off her feet. He advanced toward the cavern mouth and immediately she began to choke on the noose. He dragged her along the hard-packed earth, making a wide runnel in the drifting snow.

He stopped at the mouth of the cavern as if by some pre-arranged signal. Kaijikan knelt, one knee pressed painfully on Chiisai's chest. 'If you fail to obey me it will go ill with you, this I promise. And do not mistake me. Death will not be your punishment. No, for what I do to you, you will cry out for death, believing it your only salvation.' She gave a quick meaningful glance at the reanimated

Tokagé. 'But I shall see that it never comes to you. To bring him back I required the Makkon's tongue. This is because he made a blood-pact with Chaos. But I will not have so much trouble with you. Remember Te-te?'

Pulling the noose from her throat, Chiisai looked at Tokagé through watering eyes. She could not imagine what it must be like to be undead and under Kaijikan's spell. The very thought unnerved her, and she nodded meekly.

'Excellent,' Kaijikan said, rising. She reached down and, with surprising strength, helped Chiisai to her feet. 'Once we are inside remember one thing: while you are with me you are perfectly safe. But if you are thinking of escaping, don't. Without my protection the poison buried in the soil will claim you.'

Chiisai nodded, her heart a block of ice.

The cavern had no smell at all, and Chiisai was aware of being neither cold nor warm. There were no sounds, none of the dripping or small crackings one associated with deep caverns. And this one was deep. It was as if they had entered a void, a zone of nothingness.

Kaijikan had lit the tarred top of a reed torch, and by its flickering light Chiisai stared with morbid fascination at the ground upon which they walked. It was dark, but here and there it appeared streaked with a substance that seemed whitely metallic, faintly glowing. Could this be the source of the invisible death?

Far back in the cavern a wall rose up. In the center of it was a jagged streak of black, as if some primitive tribesman had crudely rendered a bolt of lightning. But, on closer inspection, Chiisai saw that it was no daub of paint but a fissure in the living rock.

As she stood before the fissure, Tokagé came up behind her. She could feel his massive armor plate at her back, his curious breathing on the nape of her neck. Kaijikan took Chiisai's dai-katana from him and placed it in Chiisai's hand. At once, Tokagé's heavy mailed fist closed over hers.

'Now,' Kaijikan said, 'I want you to direct the blade into the fissure.'

'What is going to happen?' Chiisai asked.

'Do as I say, child.' The warning in her voice was unmistakable.

No:

Kaijikan sighed. 'This was unavoidable, I suppose. Such a strong will would be applauded in other circumstances.' She made a series of signs in the air and Chiisai screamed. There was a pain inside her so intense, so terrible there was no name for it. It was as if Kaijikan had opened her flesh and was scraping raw one nerve at a time.

Chiisai, her eyes streaming tears, would have fallen to her knees, save for Tokagé's hold on her. She could not breathe, could not think, and, yes, she wished for death, anything to escape the unendurable pain.

Then all at once it was gone and she felt whole again.

'Now do as I ask, child,' Kaijikan said softly.

Chiisai's mind was blank with the intense sensory overload. Without conscious thought she lifted the blade and, flat side up, slipped it into the fissure.

Nothing happened.

'No, no,' Kaijikan said, irritably. 'You must *think*. You must want to do it.'

'But I *don't* want to do it,' Chiisai said.

'Then you choose the alternative?'

Chiisai closed her eyes. *I am weak*, she thought. *I am not worthy to be a Bujun warrior*. But she knew this to be untrue. Now she regretted bitterly not finding an opportunity during their journey here to use the slim, pearl-gripped tanto she had secreted inside her right boot. But there had been no opportunity and she had failed to make one. She had erred on the side of caution, knowing that she would have only one chance. She thought the undead Tokagé might be vulnerable but what about Kaijikan. The magus was the one Chiisai feared, and so far she had detected no weakness in her. Further, she did not know the extent of her powers. How then to fight her and prevail with only a tanto and limited knowledge of the enemy? She would have no more than an instant before Kaijikan reacted and brought her magic to bear. The odds had been untenable, and so she had chosen to do nothing. *Inaction*, her sendai had once told her, is *equal to action in its consequence*. Now she understood fully the meaning of that lesson.

But that was the past. Here, now, she was presented with another choice. Action or inaction, which would it be? Passivity would only get her more mind-bending pain that would continue until she either acquiesced or her mind snapped. Then, Kaijikan would surely do as she promised - she would kill Chiisai and reanimate her. Like Te-te, she would be Kaijikan's slave for ever. If she chose action, she would still be strong and clear of mind. There was at least a chance, no matter what the magus thought to the contrary.

Therefore, Chiisai raised the dai-katana and slid it into the jagged fissure. At first, nothing happened. Then, so gradually it took some time for her to become aware of it, a certain vibration was transmitted from the forged steel to her arm and, thence, into her body. It jarred her senses, rattling her teeth and making her heartbeat erratic. She nearly passed out, but Tokagé's strong right arm held her fast.

'Yes,' Kaijikan said. 'It is happening.'

When Chiisai became aware that her eyes were closed, she opened them. She could hardly breathe. In fact, if she did not know that it was impossible she would swear that she was absorbing something other than oxygen from the air, as if she had turned into another form of creature altogether.

And then her eyes locked on the blade of her dai-katana, which seemed to shimmer darkly in the torchlight. And then she blinked, for she saw that what she had mistaken for refraction was, instead, a substance crawling out of the fissure along the center of the blade.

It was orange-red and flowed like molten lava or mercury, travelling at first painfully slowly, then more swiftly along the blade. Chiisai's erratic heartbeat was making her ill. Black spots danced in front of her eyes and each breath caught in her throat, becoming a heroic labor.

'Almost there,' Kaijikan cried in triumph.

And then Chiisai's breathing became less labored, her heart rate descended. The orange-red substance flowed, coating the entire length of the blade and then began to drip off it onto the floor of the cavern. As it pooled it became more viscous, then solid, pouring upward - if such a thing were possible.

It became denser, darker, like the fall of a sea of night. And, to Chiisai's dismay, it began to take a form. At first, there were but hints - an appendage here, what appeared to be a tentacle or a tail there. The brief bulge of a head, ballooning out, then as quickly deflating, forming in another place.

And all the time the thing was growing, expanding exponentially. Like a horribly deformed fetus it grew arms, legs, tail and head. Then the details began to be imprinted upon the living substance. Until, at last it rose up, and trembling in its birth pains, towered over even Tokagé.

Chiisai gasped and her nerveless fingers fell from the hilt of her dai-katana, which nevertheless remained securely inserted in the fissure. For standing in front of her was a beast at least seven feet in height. It stood upon sturdy hind legs with taloned feet and a scaled tail with a multi-spiked end. It had a humanoid torso, though horribly distorted, but its head was truly hideous: that of a predator owl - all enormous, circular eyes and a wickedly curved beak. The luminous yellow eyes gazed in rapt attention at the being it found confronting it. It turned its neck in small birdlike increments and when it spoke its voice filled the cavern. It was so grating Chiisai found it painful to listen to.

'So you have fulfilled your promise.'

'Yes, Phaidan. You are in the world of man.'

'Then the Bridge has been made constant.'

'It has, indeed,' Kaijikan said.

'No more maiming of my people; no more extinguishing of their spirit as they make the Leap from one dimension to another.'

'No,' Kaijikan assured him. 'The sword and this brave one make the Bridge absolutely reliable.'

And Chiisai screamed inside, cursing herself, because now she knew the consequences of all the wrong choices she had made. She should have chosen to act during their journey here, no matter the odds against her. She should have chosen passivity now, anything rather than place her dai-katana in the fissure, creating the Bridge from this world to...

'Many will follow me,' said Phaidan, the Chaos creature. 'This time there will be no error. Our retribution will be complete.'

The Dai-San speaks:

I wanted to stay with her but I could not. The world does not work that way; even the Dai-San cannot have everything he wants. In a profound way there is a kind of solace in that. Our universe tolerates no absolute power, but this is no time to debate the concept of God. No one - not even I, not even the Kaer'n - knows the truth about how the Mountain Sin 'hai was born and what exists upon its summit. There are still some mysteries beyond our grasp; enigmas yet to be born.

Here I admit my love for Chiisai. Why not? It is part of my remaining humanity and, as I have said, the Kaer'n have taught me the importance of this. I will not think about her being taken away from me; my Kaer'n forbids me to think such thoughts and I must realize it is for a good reason. The Kaer'n nurture me and protect me and I still have much to learn about them. In many ways, they remain the greatest mystery left for me to unfold.

They are like origami - that complex Bujun art of making paper creatures - unfolding in so many layers the process itself becomes dizzying. The Kaer'n exist on many levels at once. Well, what can you expect, considering their origin. And it is this very thing which keeps them hewn to the shadows. Fear is still the easiest emotion to evoke in humans, and there is no telling what kind of panic common knowledge of the Kaer'n would set off- even in the Bujun.

But I must continue to learn about them for I have come to understand that this is the only way I will ever fathom the key to my own existence.

PART THREE

SYRINX

TEN

WHITE LOTUS

*Unlike other desert communities, notable chiefly for their impermanence, Mas'jahan was a fortress. To the eye of the weary traveler its brooding brown-black sandstone walls, beetling with the weapons-filled crenellations of a citadel eternally at war, said *sanctuary*. This was no doubt because the vast majority of those who passed through its lion gates were considered, at least in other parts of the world, criminals. Not in Mas'jahan. The sacred Mahatsin'jo, the fiercely visaged lion with the plumed wings of the phoenix, was the protector of all who lived beneath his benevolent wingspan.*

Mas'jahan sat at the extreme northwest corner of the Mu'ad. It was a desolate tract of land, even by the standards of the Great Desert, streaked with a curious dark sandstone the Catechists alone knew how to work. But over its ramparts one could see looming the Mountain Sin-hai, its summit perpetually obscured by fulminating clouds and severe ice storms. Occasionally, a kind of reddish lightning illuminated those clouds and the citizens of Mas'jahan lifted their heads to stare, standing with their legs far apart as the ground beneath them shuddered as if in great racking sobs. These not infrequent quakes were the overt signs, so the Fianarantsoa told its constituency, that Zarathus was, indeed, among them, striding across the snow-encrusted summit of the Mountain Sin-hai, his sacred site of meditation.

Near the base of the Mountain Sin'hai's blue-black flank, legend had it, lay the ancient land of Syrinx. But none in Mas'jahan had ever ventured there or, at the least, returned to tell of it.

This was what the members of the Fianarantsoa had told Moichi in the pre-dawn interview Sardonyx had promised him. As they tore rough chunks from rounds of unleavened bread and popped dried dates in

their mouths, they told him the dogma of Catechism - the ecstatic side was not yet for him, an infidel. But as for Dujuk'kan and the Makkon, they had no knowledge and no recommendations. They had been in the Mu'ad for forty days and forty nights, as the Living God, Zarathus, had bade them. As for recent events in Mas'jahan they were deaf, dumb and blind. But they gave him a gift, just the same: a magnificent push-dagger with double blades of an almost black Damascus steel, a gold-veined bronze guard and a carved mahogany grip.

'I did not believe they could help. But no matter,' Sardonyx had said blithely.

'How can you say that?' Moichi had asked. 'When I get to Mas'jahan I will need help.'

'And you shall have it,' she told him with such conviction he had no other choice but to believe her.

Mas'jahan possessed a formidable presence, abetted no doubt by its reputation. No people had ever been successful in extraditing one of their own from this Catechist stronghold by diplomatic means and none were foolish enough to attempt such a thing by force. 'God has brought him to our bosom,' the Catechists invariably said. 'Sooner or later, he will find the Path.'

This was the Catechists' most profound belief: that in every human being lies the seed of good from which God would manufacture His magic: redemption. It spoke to the very heart of the faith which, with its other face, both condoned the trading in human life and encouraged sexual exploration as a furtherance to attaining the ecstatic state required to hear and interpret the testament of the Living God.

'We accept the trade in human flesh because it is part of the natural order, part of God's design,' Vato-mandry had told Sardonyx when she had been under his tutelage. 'We do not believe in equality for all people, for we have found that breeds anarchy and discontent. When people are given a freedom they cannot handle, the wildness that is buried inside them erupts and disturbs the ongoing process of goodness that will lead them onto the Path. This is not mere speculation or religious dogma but proven fact.'

'But how can you or anyone else make the decision of who will be free and who will be enslaved?' Sardonyx had asked. 'The Iskamen were enslaved in Aden and they rose up against it and became free.'

'We are the chosen of Zarathus,' Vato-mandry had said, 'God chooses. As for the Iskamen, it is our belief that their freedom is illusory. They are still tied to Aden in ways hidden from normal sight. Their battle for freedom is not yet done.'

Sardonyx related this disturbing conversation as they walked down the narrow streets of Mas'jahan. Everything was made from the same indigenous sandstone, so that it seemed somber and austere for a place with such a reputation for carnal and venal pleasures.

Above them, the harsh desert sun, the color of a ripening fig, hung brutally in the hard, cloudless sky. Moichi began to appreciate the cleverness of Mas'jahan's plan. The citadel's high walls cut off all wind, and the narrow, plaza-less streets, made for a minimum of blown sand. The central market made a slightly crooked X through streets jam-packed with cowled and robed religious leaders and brigands and cut-throat traders alike. These people appeared to live in, if not quite perfect harmony, then a state astonishingly close to it. What minor incidents Moichi witnessed - petty larceny, disputes over prices - were swiftly resolved by a member of the Fianarantsoa. These elders moved through the throngs, faced drawn weapons and razor-thin tempers with the admirable sang-froid of seasoned politicians. Not one of the disputations that Moichi witnessed was allowed to get out of hand.

Sardonyx bought them a concoction of ripe black figs and a tangy yellow cream that she said was made

from co'chyn mares in heat. They ate this with their fingers as they walked through the market. Below the colorfully striped awnings they passed merchants selling all manner of spices, dried fruits and meats suitable for desert journeys. Coppersmiths and artisans in pewter, silver filigree and gold wire watched them from behind their magnifying loupes. The air reeked of so many scents it was often impossible to identify them all.

Up ahead, Moichi saw a wizened old woman, her back in the shape of a comma. She sat upon a well-worn stool tooled with complex and indecipherable runes. Before her gnarled hands were the skulls of a half-dozen small animals - rodents, no doubt - in shades of white, cream and ivory. They had been bleached by the sun, patinated by being constantly handled. In this way, they had taken on a character all their own - almost another life - one might say.

Seeing her dressed in Catechist robes, Moichi asked about her.

'She is a Tsihombe, a kind of Catechist oracle.'

'I did not know the Catechists believed in divination.'

'It is often surprising what their religion embraces.' She looked at him cannily. 'Do you wish to petition her?'

Moichi nodded. Though he was anxious to get on with his search for Dujuk'kan, Sanda's merchant husband Yesquz, and the Makkon, he knew he had business here. 'I had a dream in the Mu'ad when Sanda came to me. "*Save me!*" she implored me. And then she recited what seemed a riddle to me.'

As they approached, the Tsihombe raised her cronish head and, licking her lips, took her handful of tiny skulls off her baize table and rolled them around in her palm. They made a curious clacking sound, as musical as a row of hollow gourds.

'The future, good sir?' she cried in her cracked voice. 'But no.'

She lifted a gnarly forefinger. 'The future is not your immediate concern, though it should be. You seek an answer to a question.'

She cackled a little, rolling the skulls out before Moichi could tell her what question he wanted answered. She stared down at the result for not more than a tenth of a second. Then her watery eyes lifted to Moichi's expectant face. 'The bear you seek is not what you expect. It lies northwest of here.'

'Northwest lie the slopes of the Mountain Sin'hai,' Moichi said.

The Tsihombe nodded. 'But before the Mountain lie the great fens and marshes, the Barrier. Within them waits the bear.'

'What barrier?' Moichi asked.

'Why, the Barrier God created between the world and Syrinx.' There was a sly smile on her face. 'The moment His servant Miira passed her Mirror around the chamber of state He formed from the great marshes and fens the Barrier, expanding it a thousand-fold and populating it with all manner of strange and wondrous life. All this in the moment death and retribution were visited upon Syrinx.' The spread of her sly smile made of her face an eerie mask. 'You know the tale of Miira's Mirror, do you not, good sir?'

'That I do,' Moichi said. He gestured to Sardonyx. 'Pay the Tsihombe for her service.'

The crone raised her hand. 'This oracle was not for sale, good sir.' She nodded her head, her rheumy eyes hooded. 'Continue on your way to the house of Vato-mandry, and may God look you in the eye.'

'How did she know where we were headed?' Moichi said as they hurried down the street.

'Vato-mandry's house is just down this block.' She shrugged. 'Then again how did she know what question you wanted answered?'

'I did not even know it was a question,' Moichi said, repeating for her in total the poem Sanda had recited in his dream.

The Fianarantsoa's dwelling was unremarkable. In fact, it looked much like the brown-black sandstone buildings on either side of it.

Only a lone fig tree out front, gnarled and bent as the Tsihombe's back, marked it. Sardonyx used the brass knocker which sand and wind had blasted to a dull, rough finish.

A heavy cedar door opened inward and Sardonyx said, 'Bes-abas, is that you? I have returned.'

'Child!' A large turbaned woman with great red cheeks and frizzy strands of black hair flying free stepped out of the doorway, her arms open wide. She embraced Sardonyx with whole-hearted delight. 'Husband was right. The prodigal has returned at last!'

Sardonyx kissed her cheeks with tenderness. 'Sadder and wiser, as he no doubt foresaw.'

'Come in, come in!' Bes-abas said as Sardonyx introduced Moichi. 'No doubt you both are famished from your long journey.'

The interior was dark, candle-lit, blessedly cool. The atmosphere was thick with the smells and humidity of boiling stew and vegetables. This moisture, Moichi soon saw, suited well the myriad small plants, flowers and ferns set in beautifully wrought metal and ceramic pots throughout the house. In the steaming kitchen, three burly women were at work. All stopped to hug Sardonyx in turn and ask her a non-stop flow of questions: Where had she gone? How far had she traveled? What sights had she seen? What adventures? Did men in faraway lands have different sexual proclivities? All eyes were on Moichi as the last question was asked. But before Sardonyx could answer, Bes-abas shooed them back to work.

She brought back plates piled high with food, and metal steins filled with a fizzy alcoholic beverage that was thick, thirst-quenching and delicious.

'You have a large kitchen staff here,' Moichi said. He saw Bes-abas give Sardonyx a quick glance.

'Those women aren't staff,' Sardonyx told him. 'They are Vato-mandry's other wives.'

'Other wives?' he said, dumbfounded.

'Precisely,' Bes-abas said, urging them on to eat and drink their fill. 'I am First Wife. These others - my sisters now in this family - well, Vato-mandry must produce progeny.'

'For the members of the Fianarantsoa it is a sacred duty,' Sardonyx explained.

Moichi thought of a horrifying possibility. 'So if you were to become the first female member of the Fianarantsoa

'I would be required to have many husbands,' she said with a twinkle in her eye, 'to ensure I bore many children.'

They made camp as best they could. They tried to hack off blocks of ice, but it clung to its stone base with an unnatural tenacity and all they came away with were long icicle-like shards.

As had been agreed, they did not bind Hamaan's wrists or ankles. He curled down in a ball, covered himself in his stiff tent and was instantly fast asleep. Moichi and Sardonyx took turns sleeping. He stood guard first. It was dark and close. The wind howled but otherwise the storm made it seem as if he were locked in a small closet. The earth trembled and was still, but those echoes continued, filling Moichi with fear. What was out there in the darkness?

He closed his eyes, trying to calm himself, and was soon asleep. He was startled awake by a human scent. He opened his eyes to see Hamaan crouched beside him. He held the point of an ice shard to the soft hollow of Moichi's throat.

'I want you to know I kept my promise,' he whispered harshly over the wind. 'I said I would not try to escape but I made no mention of not killing you.'

Moichi stared into his face without fear. 'Did we come from the same parents?'

At almost the same instant the two brothers saw a movement in the night. They remained silent and still, listening to their instincts. A moment later, it appeared as if a mound of snow were moving. Then, the head came up and they saw a pair of piercing ice-blue eyes.

Wolke'en!

The beast, its thick snow-white coat dusted in snow, stared at them. It was as big as a man, perhaps six feet long. Its four legs looked powerful and its long bushy tail flicked nervously back and forth. Hamaan moved and its ears flattened back and it went into a crouch. Both men were sure the Wolke'en would leap at them, but it did not budge. The staring contest continued. They could see the tiny clouds of its exhalation staining the night. The ice-blue eyes did not blink. At last, so slowly that at first they were unsure anything was happening, it backed away, until it was outside the perimeter of their camp. Then it vanished altogether.

For a time, neither man spoke or moved as the built-up tension gradually evaporated. Slowly, everything came back to normalcy and the brief moment when the brothers had been locked together against a common antagonist vanished as completely as the Wolke'en.

'Oh, yes.' Hamaan returned his attention to his brother. 'Can't you see father in both of us?'

Moichi felt the makeshift weapon still at his throat. He closed his eyes. 'Yes, kill me. Make the deed complete. Murder all your siblings.'

Nothing happened, and when he opened his eyes, he saw Hamaan had returned to his place beneath his stiff tent, curled in a ball, already asleep.

The next morning, as they were striking camp, the storm abated and by the time they were ready to set off, it was gone altogether. A rare glimpse of sunlight illuminated the snow-covered ice field. Above, blue sky glittered like an unattainable grail.

They moved up the slope of the ice field, crunching through the virgin snow. But directly ahead Moichi could already see a thin gray line, that became thicker and deeper with alarming rapidity until it resolved itself.

The trio stopped in their tracks. Even Hamaan was struck dumb. Now Moichi understood the unconscious warning of the echoes of the rock slides and avalanches. Had they continued on yesterday,

She appeared to think about what he had said for some time. Then she buried her head in his shoulder. It might have been the wind through the trees but he thought he could hear her weeping. He put his arms around her and, after a very long time, she let go of the sword. It fell at her feet, lying there, gleaming dully as a ghost of moonlight fired its edge.

Finally, he pulled her thick hair back from her face, kissed her temple, but he made no effort to move. He thought of Bjork and Owlmy. He was enveloped by a sense of serenity he could not explain. Perhaps, so close to the Mountain Sin'hai and all its secrets - known and unknown - he could allow himself the notion that the kinship he felt so profoundly for these folk was not merely psychological. Could it be that somewhere inside him a bit of Shinju or - like the Kaer'n and the Dai-San - Chaos still abided? He remembered what Bjork had told him of his father's fascination with Syrinx.

He held Sardonyx more closely, feeling a sense of calmness gradually steal over her. She was right: from the moment they had met in her castle in the land of the Opal Moon it was clear they were meant for each other. No one else, he knew, could have saved the sorceress from her own spell. He kissed her again, heard her sigh as she clung to him.

Time enough after he defused the holy war to explore his own nature. He was quit running away to sea - at least for the time being. The oceans of the world - such old friends! - seemed remote to him now, almost dreamlike, much like his journey astride his Kaer'n sister upon the sea of night.

He looked upward, through the latticework of the leaves, to the clear sky filled with clusters of stars so bright they seemed burned into the velvety blackness like suns. Somewhere, up there, he knew, the joyous host of Kaer'n was flying homeward. As if he were there, he saw Sanda catch up with them, flying alongside Chiisai and the Dai-San. Part of him was with them.

I am but a ship's captain, he had said so ingenuously to Owlmy. Only now was he beginning to understand the nature of her enigmatic smile.