

Glen Cook, whose "Severed Heads" is one of the three tales of "rape and revenge" which I mentioned in the introduction to this volume, has here told an unusual and moving story of this universal theme. When I began reading for this anthology, I admit to being prejudiced against male authors writing heroic fantasy; I felt I had read too many mindless stories of the old-style heroic fiction, and my attitude was quite simply:

"Blood and thunder, guts and gore;

Hero tales are such a bore."

But such writers as Charles Saunders, Charles de Lint, Steve Burns and Robin Bailey—to name only men represented in this anthology—quickly changed my mind.

When first I read "Severed Heads" I thought Cook a new writer; a query to his agent informed me that he is an unusually prolific newcomer, having written and sold eleven novels in the last three or four years, as well as a couple of dozen stories to virtually every magazine in existence, including F&SF, Asimov's, Whispers, Night Voyages, and many others.

Narriman, perhaps the youngest heroine in this anthology, lives the truth mentioned in the story; that without our fellow man, we are no more than severed heads which roll alone through the desert. Can it be that one reason for the mindless bias to uninvolved, blood-and-thunder old-time sword and sorcery fiction—which gave it such a bad name—was that the early writers, writing only of their fellow man, fell into the trap of using the women in the story only as narrative devices, objects, cardboard figures without even such small dimensions of emotional existence as were granted to the men? Thus the male characters, too, were only "severed heads" rolling around in the desert of "thud and blunder" fiction, with plenty of blood and guts but no emotional reality. Glen Cook does not fall into that trap. Not once.—MZB

SEVERED HEADS

by Glen Cook

I

Narriman was ten when the black rider came to Wadi al Hamamah. He rode tall and arrogant upon a courser as white as his djellaba was black. He looked neither right nor left as he passed among the tents. Old men spat at his horse's hooves. Old women made warding signs. Children and dogs whined and fled. Makram's ass set up a horrible braying.

Narriman was not frightened, just confused. Who was this stranger? Why were her people frightened? Because he wore black? No tribe she knew wore black. Black was the color of ifrits and djinn, of the Masters of Jebal al Alf Dhulquarneni, the high, dark mountains brooding over Wadi al Hamamah and the holy place of the al Muburak.

Narriman was a bold one. Her elders warned her often, but she would not behave as fit her sex. The old ones shook their heads and said that brat of Mowfik's would be no good. Mowfik himself was suspect enough, what with having gone to the great wars of the north. What business were those of the al Muburak?

Narriman stayed and watched the rider.

He reined in before her father's tent, which stood apart, drew a black rod from his javelin case, breathed upon it. Its tips glowed. He set that glow against the tent, sketched a symbol, (Symbol) . The old folks muttered and cursed and told one another they'd known despair would haunt Mowfik's tent.

Narriman ran after the stranger, who rode down the valley toward the shrine. Old Farida shouted after her. She pretended not to hear. She dodged from shadow to shadow, rock to rock, to the hiding place from which she spied on the rites of her elders.

She watched the rider pass through the Circle with arrogance unconquered. He did not glance at Karkur, let alone make obeisance and offerings. She expected the Great Death to strike him ere he left the Circle, but he rode on, untouched. She watched him out of sight.

Narriman stared at the god. Was Karkur, too, a frightened antique? She was shaken. Karkur's anger was a constant. Each task, each pleasure, had to be integrated with his desires. He was an angry god. But he had sat there like a red stone lump while a heathen defiled his Circle.

The sun was in the west when she returned to camp. Old Farida called for her immediately. She related what she had seen. The old folks muttered and whispered and made their signs.

"Who was he, Farida? What was he? Why were you afraid?"

Farida spat through the gap in her teeth. "The Evil One's messenger. A shaghun out of the Jebal." Farida turned her old eyes on the Mountains of A Thousand Sorcerers. She made her magic sign.

"It's a mercy your mother didn't live to see this."

"Why?"

But just then the guard horn sounded, ending on a triumphant note. The hunters had returned. Karkur had favored the tribe. Narriman ran to tell her father about the stranger.

II

Mowfik had an antelope behind his saddle, a string of quail, a brace of hares, and even a box terrapin. "A great hunt, Little Fox. Never was it so fine. Even Shukri took his game." Shukri could do nothing right. He was, probably, the man Narriman would wed, because she was her mother's daughter.

Her father was so pleased she did not mention the stranger. The other hunters heard from the old ones. Dour eyes turned Mowfik's way. Narriman was afraid for him till she sensed that they felt pity. There was a lot of nodding. The stranger's visit had confirmed their prejudices.

Mowfik stopped outside their tent. "Little Fox, we won't; sleep much tonight. I hope you've gathered plenty of wood."

She heard the weariness in his voice. He had worked harder than the others. He had no woman to ride behind and clean game, no woman to help here at home. Only old Farida, his mother's sister, bothered to offer.

Marriman took the quail and hares, arranged them on a mat. She collected her tools, stoked up the fire, settled down to work.

The sun settled westward and slightly south. A finger of fire broke between peaks and stabbed into the wadi, dispelling shadows. Mowfik glanced up.

He turned pale. His mouth opened and closed. Finally, he gurgled, "What?"

She told him about the rider.

He sat with head bent low. "Ah, no. Not my Little Fox." And, in response to an earlier question, "There are those even Karkur dares not offend. The rider serves one greater than he." Then, thoughtfully, "But perhaps he's shown the way. There must be a greater reason than a feast when game runs to the hunter's bow." He rose, walked into the shadows, stared at those dread mountains that no tribe dared invade. Then he said, "Cook only meat that might spoil before we get it smoked."

"Tell me what it means, Father."

"I suppose you're old enough. You've been Chosen. The Masters sent him to set their mark, that all might know. It's been a long time since a shagun came. The last was in my mother's time."

III

Mowfik had been north and had bathed in alien waters. He could think the unthinkable. He could consider defying the Masters. He dug into his war booty to buy Makram's ass. He loaded all he possessed on two animals and walked away. He looked back only once. "I should never have come back."

They went north over game trails, through the high, rocky places, avoiding other tribes. They spent twelve days in the hills before descending to a large oasis. For the first time Narriman saw people who lived in houses. She remained close to Mowfik. They were strange.

"There. In the east. That is el Aswad, the Wahlig's fortress." Narriman saw a great stone tent crowning a barren hill. "And there, four days' ride, lies Sebil el Selib, the pass to the sea." He pointed northeast. His arm swung to encompass the west. "Out there lies the great erg called Hammad al Nakir."

Heat shimmered over the Desert of Death. For a moment she thought she saw the fairy towers of fallen Ilkazar, but that was imagination bom of stories Mowfik had brought home from his adventures. Ilkazar had been a ruin for four centuries.

"We'll water here, cross the erg, and settle over there. The shagun will never find us."

It took eight days, several spent lost, to reach Wadi el Kuf, the only oasis in the erg. It took fourteen more to finish and find a place to settle.

The new life was bewildering. The people spoke the same language, but their preoccupations were different. Narriman thought she would go mad before she learned their ways. But learn she did. She was the bold one, Mowfik's daughter, who could question everything and believe only that which suited her. She and her father remained outsiders, but less so than among their own people. Narriman liked the settled people better. She missed only old Farida and Karkur. Mowfik insisted that Karkur was with them in spirit.

IV

Narriman was twelve when the rider reappeared.

She was in the fields with her friends Ferial and Feras. It was a stony, tired field. Ferial's father had bought it cheap, offering Mowfik a quarter interest if he would help prove it up. That morning, while the children dug stones and piled them into a wall, Mowfik and his partner were elsewhere. Feras had been malingering all morning, and was the scorn of Narriman and his sister. He saw the rider first.

He was barely visible against a background of dark rocks and shadow. He was behind a boulder which masked all but his horse's head. But he was there. Just watching. Narriman shuddered. How had he found them?

He served the Masters. Their necromancy was great. Mowfik had been foolish to think they could escape.

"Who is he?" Ferial asked. "Why are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid," Narriman lied. "He's a shaghun." Here in the north some lords had shaghuns of their own. She had to add, "He rides for the Masters of the Jebal."

Ferial laughed.

Narriman said, "You'd believe if you had lived in the shadow of the Jebal."

Feras said, "The Little Fox is a bigger liar than her namesake."

Narriman spit at his feet. "You're so brave, huh?"

"He doesn't scare me."

"Then come with me to ask what he wants."

Feras looked at Narriman, at Ferial, and at Narriman again. Male pride would not let him back down.

Narriman had her pride too. I'll go just a little way, she told herself. Just far enough to make Feras turn tail. I won't go near him.

Her heart fluttered. Feras gasped, ran to catch up. Ferial called, "Come back. Feras. I'll tell Father."

Feras groaned. Narriman would have laughed had she not been so frightened. Feras was trapped between pride and punishment.

The certainty of punishment made him stick. He meant to make the whipping worth the trouble. No girl would outbrave him.

They were seventy yards away when Feras ran. Narriman felt the hard touch of the shaghun's eyes. A few steps more, just to prove Feras was bested.

She took five long, deliberate steps, stopped, looked up. The shaghun remained immobile. His horse tossed its head, shaking off flies. A different horse, but the same man. . . . She met his eyes. Something threw a bridle upon her soul. The shaghun beckoned, a gentle come hither. Her feet moved. Fifty yards. Twenty-five. Ten. Her fear mounted. The shaghun dismounted, eyes never leaving hers. He took her arm, drew her into the shadow of the boulder. Gently, he pushed her back against the rock.

"What do you want?"

He removed the cloth across his face.

He was just a man! A young man, no more than twenty. He wore the ghost of a smile, and was not unhandsome, but his eyes were cold, without mercy.

His hand came to her, removed the veil she had begun wearing only months ago. She shivered like a captive bird.

"Yes," he whispered. "As beautiful as they promised." He touched her cheek.

She could not escape his eyes. Gently, gently, he tugged here, untied there, lifted another place, and she was more naked than at any moment since birth.

In her heart she called to Karkur. Karkur had ears of stone. She shivered as she recalled Mowfik saying that there were powers before whom Karkur must nod.

The shaghun piled their clothing into a narrow pallet. She gasped when he stood up, and tried to break his spell by sealing her eyes. It did no good. His hands took her naked flesh and gently forced her down.

He drove a burning brand into her, punishing her for having dared flee. Despite her determination, she whimpered, begged him to stop. There was no mercy in him.

The second time there was less pain. She was numb. She ground her eyelids together and endured. She did not give him the pleasure of begging.

The third time she opened her eyes as he entered her. His gaze caught hers.

The effect was a hundred times what it had been when he had called her. Her soul locked with his. She became part of him.

Her pleasure was as great, as all-devouring, as her pain the first time. She begged, but not for mercy.

Then he rose, snatched his clothing, and she cried again, shame redoubled because he had made her enjoy what he was doing.

His movements were no longer languid and assured. He dressed hastily and sloppily. There was fear in his eyes. He leaped onto his mount and dug in his heels.

Narriman rolled into a tight ball of degradation and pain, and wept.

V

Men shouted. Horses whinnied. "He went that way!"

"There he goes! After him!"

Mowfik swung down and cast his cloak over Narriman. She buried her face in his clothing.

The thunder of hooves, the cries of outrage and the clang of weapons on shields, receded. Mowfik touched her. "Little Fox?"

"Go away. Let me die."

"No. This will pass. This will be forgotten. There's no forgetting death." His voice choked on rage. "They'll catch him. They'll bring him back. I'll give you my own knife."

"They won't catch him. He has the Power. I couldn't fight him. He made me want him. Go away. Let me die."

"No." Mowfik had been to the wars in the north. He had seen rape. Women survived. The impact was more savage when the victim was one of one's own, but that part of him that was Man and not outraged father knew this was not the end.

"You know what they'll say." Narriman wrapped his cloak about her. "Ferial and Feras will tell what they saw. People will think I went willingly. They'll call me whore. And what they call me I'll have to be. What man would have me now?"

Mowfik signed. He heard truth. When the hunters returned, chastened by losing the man in their own territory, they would seek excuses for failing, would see in a less righteous light. "Get dressed."

"Let me die, Father. Let me take my shame off your shoulders."

"Stop that. Get dressed. We have things to do. We'll sell while people are sympathetic. We started over here. We can start again somewhere else. Up. Into your clothes. Do you want them to see you like this? Time to make the brave show."

All her life he had said that, whenever people hurt her. "Time to make the brave show."

Tears streaming, she dressed. "Did you say that to Mother, too?" Her mother had been brave, a northern girl who had come south out of love. She had been more outsider than Mowfik.

"Yes. Many times. And I should've held my tongue. I should've stayed in the north. None of this would have happened had we stayed with her people."

Mowfik's partner did not try to profit from his distress. He paid generously. Mowfik did not have to waste war booty to get away.

VI

A Captain Al Jahez, whom Mowfik had served in the wars, gave him a position as huntsman. He and Narriman had now fled eight hundred miles from Wadi al Hamamah.

Narriman began to suspect the worst soon after their arrival. She remained silent till it became impossible to fool herself. She went to Mowfik because there was nowhere else to go.

"Father, I'm with child."

He did not react in the traditional way. "Yes. His purpose was to breed another of his kind."

"What will we do?" She was terrified. Her tribe had been unforgiving. The settled peoples were only slightly less so in these matters.

"There's no need to panic. I discussed this with Al Jahez when we arrived. He's a hard and religious man, but from el Aswad originally. He knows what comes out of the Jebal. His goatherd is old. He'll send us into the hills to replace him. We'll stay away a few years while he stamps your widowhood into everyone's mind. You'll come back looking young for your age. Men will do battle for such a widow."

"Why are you so kind? I've been nothing but trouble since that rider came down the wadi."

"You're my family. All I have. I live the way of the Disciple, unlike so many who profess his creed because it's politic."

"And yet you bow to Karkur."

He smiled. "One shouldn't overlook any possibility. I'll speak with Al Jahez. We'll go within the week."

Life in the hills, goatherding, was not unpleasant. The land was hard, reminding Narriman of home.

But this was tamer country. Wolves and lions were few. The kids were not often threatened. As her belly swelled and the inevitable drew nearer, she grew ever more frightened. "Father, I'm not old enough for this. I'm going to die. I know it." "No, you won't." He told her that her mother, too, had grown frightened. That all women were afraid. He did not try to convince her that her fears were groundless, only that fear was more dangerous than giving birth. "I'll be with you, I won't let anything happen. And AJ Jahez promises he'll send his finest midwife."

"Father, I don't understand why you're so good to me. And I'm baffled as to why he's so good to you. He can't care that much because you rode in his company."

Mowfik shrugged. "Perhaps because I saved his life at the Battle of the Circles. Also, there are more just men than you believe."

"You never talk about the wars. Except about places you saw."

"Those aren't happy memories, Little Fox. Dying and killing and dying. And in the end, nothing gained, either for myself or the glory of the Lord. Will you tell the young ones about these days when you're old? Those days weren't happy, but I saw more than any al Muburak before or since." He was the only one of a dozen volunteers who survived. And maybe that, instead of the foreign wife, was why he had become an outcast. The old folks resented him for living when their sons were dead.

"What will we do with a baby. Father?"

"What? What people always do. Raise him to be a man."

"It'll be a boy, will it?"

"I doubt me not it will, but a girl will be as welcome." He chuckled.

"Will you hate him?"

"Hate him? We are talking about my daughter's child. I can hate the father, but not the infant. The child is innocent."

"You did travel in strange lands. No wonder the old ones didn't like you."

"Old ones pass on. Ideas are immortal. So says the Disciple."

She felt better afterward, but her fear never evaporated.

VII

"A fine son," the old woman said with a toothless smile. "A fine son. I foretell you now, little mistress, he'll be a great one. See it here, in his hands." She held the tiny, purplish, wrinkled, squalling thing high. "And he came forth with the cap. Only the truly destined, the chosen ones, come forth with that. Aye, you've mothered a mighty one."

Narriman smiled though she heard not a tenth of the babble. She cared only that the struggle was over, that the pain had receded. There was a great warmth in her for the child, but she hadn't the strength to express it.

Mowfik ducked into the tent. "Sadhra. Is everything all right?" His face was pale. Dimly, Narriman realized he had been frightened too.

"Both came through perfectly. Al Jahez has a godson of whom he can be proud." She repeated her predictions.

"Old Mother, you'd better not tell him that. That smacks of superstition. He's strict about religious deviation."

"The decrees of men, be they mere men or Chosen of the Lord, can't change natural law. Omens are omens."

"May be. May be. Shouldn't you give her the child?"

"Aye. So I should. I'm hogging him because one day I'll be able to say I held such a one." She dropped the infant to Narriman's breast. He took the nipple, but without enthusiasm.

"Don't worry, little mistress. Soon he'll suckle hearty."

"Thank you, Sadhra," Mowfik said. "Al Jahez chose well. I'm in both your debts."

"It was my honor, sir." She left the tent.

"Such a one, eh, Little Fox? Making him the Hammer of God before he draws his first breath." Narriman stared up at him. He wasn't just tired. He was disturbed. "The rider?"

"He's out there."

"I thought so. I felt him."

"I stalked him, but he eluded me. I didn't dare go far."

"Perhaps tomorrow." As she drifted into sleep, though, she thought, You'll never catch him. He'll deceive you with the Power. No warrior will catch him. Time or trickery will be his death. She slept. And she dreamed of the rider and the way it had been for her the third time. She dreamed that often. It was one thing she kept from Mowfik. He would not understand. She did

not understand herself.
Maybe she was a whore at heart.

VIII

Narriman called the child Misr Sayed bin Hammad al Muburak, meaning he was Misr Sayed, son of the desert, of the al Muburak tribe. Hammad could be a man's name also, so it became that of her missing husband. Misr's grandfather, however, called him Towfik el-Masiri, or Camel's Feet, for reasons only he found amusing.

Misr grew quickly, learned rapidly, and was startlingly healthy. Seldom was he colicky or cranky, even when cutting teeth. He was happy most of the time, and always had a big hug for his grandfather. Narriman remained perpetually amazed that she could feel so much love for one person. "How do women love more than one child?" she asked.

Mowfik shrugged. "It's a mystery to me. I was my mother's only. You're your mother's only." The first two years were idyllic. The baby and goats kept them too busy to worry. In the third year, though, Mowfik grew sour. His heart was not in his play with Misr. One day Narriman found him honing his war sword and watching the hills. Then she understood. He expected the rider. The prospect fired her fantasies. She ached for the shaghun. She held her left hand near the fire till pain burned the lust away.

Shortly after Misr's third birthday Mowfik said, "I'm going to see Al Jahez. It's time you became Hammad's widow."

"Will we be safer there? Won't the shaghun just ride in like he did before?"

"Al Jahez thinks not. He thinks the priests can drive him away."

Narriman went to the tent flap, surveyed the unfriendly hills. "Go see him. I'm afraid to go back where people might cry shame, but I'm more scared of the shaghun."

"I'd hoped you'd feel that way."

She had begun to relax. The night had passed without incident. Mowfik should be back by noon. If she could stay too busy to worry. . . .

It was almost noon when Misr called, "Mama, Grandpa coming." She sighed, put her mending aside, and went to meet him.

"Oh, no. Karkur defend us." Misr could not be blamed for his mistake. He'd seldom seen anyone but Mowfik on horseback.

The shaghun was far down the valley, coming toward her. He seemed larger than life, like a far city seen through the shimmer over the great erg. He came at an unhurried walk. The rise and fall of his animal's legs was hypnotic. He did not seem to draw any closer.

"Go into the tent, Misr."

"Mama?"

"Do it. And don't come out till I tell you. No matter what."

"Mama, what's wrong?"

"Misr! Go!"

"Mama, you're scaring me."

She gave him her fiercest look. He scooted inside. "And close the flap." She turned. The rider looked twice as big but no nearer. His pace was no faster. The shame in her heart grew with the heat in her loins. She knew he would take her, and her evil side called to him eagerly.

He came closer. She thought of running into the hills. But what good that? He would hunt her down. And Misr would be left alone.

She snatched the bow Mowfik used for hunting, sped an arrow toward the rider. She missed.

She was good with that weapon. Better than her father, who remained perpetually amazed that a woman could do anything better than a man. She should not have missed. She sped a second and third arrow.

Each missed. The fourth plucked at his djellaba, but only because he was so close. There was no fifth. She had seen his eyes.

The bow fell from her hand. He dismounted and walked toward her, reaching.

Only one moment from the next hour stuck with her. Misr came outside, saw the rider thrusting into her, ran over and bit him on the buttocks. That would remain with her forever, in that mixture of amusement and pain such a thing could recall.

Afterward he stared into her eyes. His will beat against her. She dwindled into sleep.

Cursing wakened her. It was the violent cursing of savagery and hatred. She felt too lazy to open her eyes.

She recalled the inexorable approach of the man in black coming up the valley on a line as straight as the arrow of time. She recalled his touch, her fevered response. She felt the sun on her naked shame. She flew up, wrapped herself in discarded clothing.

Mowfik belabored a fallen tree with his axe, cursing steadily.

He blasphemed both Karkur and the Lord of the Disciple. She scrambled into her clothing, frightened.

Exhaustion stopped Mowfik. He settled on the tree trunk and wept. Narriman went to comfort him.

"It's all right, Father. He didn't hurt me. He shamed me again, but he didn't hurt me." She put her arms around him. "It'll be all right, Father."

"Little Fox, he took Misr. It wasn't you this time."

IX

Narriman changed, hardened, saddened. The Narriman of Wadi al Hamamah would not have recognized her. That Narriman would have been terrified by her.

Mowfik took her to see Al Jahez. The captain was properly outraged. He set his men to scouring the country. He sent an alarm across the kingdom. He appealed to the Most Holy Mrazkim Shrines for a Writ of Anathema, and for prayers for the Lord's intervention.

"And that is all I can do. And it's pointless. He won't be seen. Those who serve the Masters come and go as they please."

"Can't somebody do something?" Narriman demanded. "How long has this been going on? How many women have had to suffer this?"

"It's gone on forever," Al Jahez said. "It went on throughout the age of Empire. It went on before the Empire was bom. It'll go on tomorrow, too."

"Why isn't it stopped?"

"Because no one can stop it. One of the Emperors tried. He sent an army into the Jebal. Not one man returned."

She was venting frustration. She knew the futility of battling the Masters. No, this was personal. This was between herself and one shaghun. The Masters were but shadows beyond the horizon, too nebulous to factor into the emotional equation.

"That man took my son. My son. I don't recognize his claim. He did nothing but force me onto my back."

"Narriman?" Mowfik said, baffled.

"I want my son back."

"We can't do anything about that," Al Jahez said. "The shaghun is who he is, and we're who we are."

"No."

"Narriman?" Again Mowfik was puzzled.

"I thought about this all day, Father. I'm going after Misr."

Al Jahez said, "But you're a child. And a woman."

"I've grown up the past few years. I'm small, but I'm no child. As to my sex, say what you will. It won't change my mind."

"Narriman!"

"Father, will you stop saying that? You stood by me when I begged you not to. You drowned me in love I did not deserve. Stand by me now. Give me what I need to get Misr back. Teach me what I need to know."

Al Jahez shook his head. "Mowfik, you were right. She is remarkable."

"Little Fox. ... It would take so long. And I'm not rich. I can't afford weapons and mounts and ..."

"We have a horse. We have a sword. You were a soldier. I can survive in the wilderness. I was of the al Muburak."

Mowfik sighed. "The sword is too heavy, girl."

Narriman glanced at Al Jahez. The captain tried to disappear among his cushions.

"Little Fox, I don't want to lose you too. I couldn't bear that." Mowfik's voice cracked. Narriman glimpsed a tear in the corner of one eye. This would cost him dearly from his beggared emotional purse.

He did not want to see her ride away. His heart said he would not see her again.

That dark rider had stolen her from him as surely as he had stolen Misr. She threw her arms around Mowfik. "Father, I have to do this. Wouldn't you come after me?"

"Yes. Yes, I would. I understand that."

Al Jahez said, "This isn't wise. The impossibility of dealing with the shaghun and the Jebal

aside, what would happen to a young woman alone? Even honest men would consider her fair for a moment's sport. Not to mention slavers and bandits. The Disciple instituted a rule of law, little one, but the Evil One, as ever, rules most of the land."

"Those are problems to face when they arise." What he said was true. She could not deny that. Women had no legal status or protection. When the shaghun forced her onto her back he injured her father, not her. An unattached woman was not a person. Her resolve was not shaken. Damned be the problems, and anyone who stood in her way.

X

When she wanted something badly Narriman got her way. Mowfik surrendered in the end. Once he gave in, Al Jahez grudgingly endorsed her training.

Narriman pursued it with a dogged determination that, in time, compelled the respect of Al Jahez's men. She arrived early and left late, and worked harder than any boy.

She was hard. She ignored bruises and aches. Her instructors called her Vixen and backed away when the deadly fire rose in her eyes.

One day she browbeat Mowfik into taking her to the captain. She told Al Jahez, "I'm ready. I leave tomorrow."

Al Jahez addressed her father. "Will you permit this, Mowfik? A woman under arms. It's against nature."

Mowfik shrugged.

Narriman said, "Don't stall me. Father's done that for weeks. I'll go with or without your blessing."

"Mowfik, forbid this madness."

"Captain, you heard her. Shall I put her in irons?"

Al Jahez looked at her as if he would cage her for her own protection. "Then marry her to me, Mowfik."

Though struck speechless, Narriman understood. Al Jahez wanted the legal rights of marriage. So he could forbid, she could call upon the law if she persisted. If she rebelled they could hunt her like a runaway slave.

Pure terror gripped her. She stared at her father, saw him tempted.

"Captain, heart and soul cry for me to accept. But I can't. A stronger voice bids me let her go. No matter how it hurts me."

Al Jahez sighed, defeated. "As you will. Child. Bring your father no sorrow or shame." He scowled at her expression. No sorrow or shame of your own doing. That which is done by a shaghun isn't of your doing. They're like the great storms in the erg. A man—or woman—can but bow his head till they pass. Come. The priests will bless your quest."

They waited in their fine ceremonial raiment. Al Jahez's eyes twinkled. "You see? Even the old captain begins to know you."

"Perhaps." She wondered if she was too predictable.

The ceremony was less important to her than to Mowfik and Al Jahez. She endured it for their sakes. She would ride with Karkur.

"Now then," Al Jahez said. "One more thing and I'll harass you no more. Gamel. The box."

A priest presented a sandalwood box. Al Jahez opened it. Within, on white silk, lay a pendant. It was a small, pale green stone not unlike many she had seen on the ground. Al Jahez said, "Perhaps this will be gift enough to repay you, Mowfik." And to Narriman, "Child, the Disciple teaches that even the acquiescence to sorcery is a sin, but men have to be practical. The Disciple himself has shaghun advisers.

"The stone is an amulet. It will warn you if you are near one with the Power. It will begin to grow cooler when you're a mile away. When you're very near it will shed a green light. It's the best weapon I can give you."

Narriman tried to control the shakes. She failed. Tears broke loose. She hugged the captain. He was so startled he jumped away, but his face betrayed his pleasure.

"Go with the Lord, Little Fox. And Karkur if it pleases you."

"Thank you," she said. "For everything. Especially for being Father's friend."

Al Jahez snorted. "Ah, child. What are we without friends? Just severed heads rolling across the sands."

XI

Narriman looked back just before Al Jahez's fortress passed out of sight. "That's yesterday." She

looked southward, toward the great erg. "There lies tomorrow. Eight hundred miles." She gripped her reins, touched the amulet between her breasts, her weapons, the bag that Mowfik had filled with war booty when he thought she was not looking. He had done everything to dissuade her, and everything to help her.

She looked back again, wondering if their concepts of manhood and womanhood would compel them to send guardians.

"Go, Faithful," she told her mare. The fortress disappeared. Her heart fluttered. She was going. Alone. A severed head, rolling across the sand, cut off from her body—with a little help from the rider.

She pictured him as he had been the day he had taken Misr. She got that warm, moist feeling, but not as powerfully. Hatred had begun to quench that fire.

She wished there was a way a woman could do to a man what he had done to her.

The wilderness was all that she had been warned. It was bitter, unforgiving, and those who dwelt there reflected its harshness. Twice she encountered men who thought her a gift from heaven.

The first time she outrode them. The second, cornered, she fought. And was surprised to find herself the victor.

Though she had told herself she was the equal of any man, she'd never believed it in her heart.

Could the wisdom of centuries be wrong? She rode away more mature, more confident.

The great erg was more vast than she remembered. It was hotter and more harrowing. She had no one and nothing to distract her.

"The severed head has to roll without its body." She put her thoughts into words often. Who was to hear?

She had no choice but to enter Wadi el Kuf. They were shocked to see her, a woman in man's wear, hung about with weapons, talking as tough as any wandering freesword. Even the whores were scandalized. Nobody knew what to make of her. She bought water, asked questions, and rode on before they regained their balance.

Someone came after her, but one arrow altered his ambitions.

She rode with dust devils as companions. The al Muburak believed dust devils were ifrits dancing.

She called out, but they did not respond. After a few days she began to think oddly, to suspect them of being spies for the Masters. She mocked and taunted them. They ignored her.

Finally, she checked the amulet. Not only did it not shed light, it was not cool. "So much for old stories."

She rode out of the erg and paused at the oasis she had visited coming north. There, as at Wadi el Kuf, she asked about a man in black traveling with a child. There, too, no one had seen such a traveler.

"Of course," she muttered. "And maybe they're telling the truth. But he's human. He had to stop at Wadi el Kuf." But he need not have appeared as a shaghun out of the Jebal, need he?

No matter. She knew his destination.

Fourteen days passed. She rode into Wadi al Hamamah.

The al Muburak were not there. It was the wrong time of year. They were farther west, stalking wild camels in hopes of adding to their herd.

She camped in the usual place, and when night fell she went to Karkur.

After the proper greetings and obeisances, she told her story in case Mowfik was wrong about his being able to follow an al Muburak anywhere. Karkur sat and listened, firelight sending shadows dancing across his ugly face.

She said, "Father says you aren't as great as I thought. That others are more powerful so sometimes you don't dare help. But if there's a way you can, help do what I have to do."

She stared at the image. The image stared back. Time passed. The fire died. The moon rose, filled the Circle with shifting shadows.

"Karkur, there's a man named Al Jahez. He follows the Disciple, but he's a good man. Could you reward him? Could you tell Father I've come here safely?"

She thought, I'm talking to a lump of rock as though it really could do something. "Tell Al Jahez the severed head goes daft after it's separated."

The moon was great, full thing that inundated the wadi with silver light. She leaned back and stared.

Something startled her. Fool, she thought. You fell asleep. Her dagger filled her hand. She searched the shadows, saw nothing. She listened. Nothing. She sniffed the air. Again nothing. She shivered. It was getting cold. Colder than she remembered the nights this time of year. She pulled her cloak tighter.

And realized that the cold radiated from one point. The amulet!

She snatched it out. Green! Glowing green. She searched the shadows. Had the shaghun come out to meet her?

The stone flared. It crackled. An emerald snake writhed between it and Karkur. A cold wind swirled around the Circle. Dead leaves pattered against her. She glanced up. No. The sky was clear. Stars winked in their myriads. The moon shone benevolently.

The emerald snake turned amber shot with veins of blood. Narriman gasped. That was the combination they mentioned when they talked about the Great Death.

The snake died. The stone grew less cold, became just a small, pale green piece of rock lying in her hand. She stared at Karkur.

"What have you done? What have you given me? Not the power of the Great Death?"

The image stared back, as silent as ever. She was tempted to rant. But Karkur gave short shift to ingrates. He was more a punitive than a helpful god. "But loyal to his people," she said. "Thank you, Karkur."

She hurried through the parting rituals and returned to camp. She fell asleep still astonished that Karkur had responded.

There were dreams. Vivid dreams. She rode into the Jebal, moving with an absolute certainty of her way. She knew exactly when to expect the first challenge.

The dream ended. The sun had wakened her. She felt fit and rested. She recalled every detail of the dream. She looked down the wadi. A dumb stone god? She examined Al Jahez's stone. It looked no less ordinary this morning.

XII

The trails were faint, but she followed them confidently. Once she noted an overturned stone, darker on the exposed side. Someone had been this way recently. She shrugged. The amulet would warn her.

The mountains were silent. All the world was silent when you rode alone. The great erg had been filled with a stillness as vast as that of death. Here it seemed there should be some sound, if only the call of the red-tailed hawk on the wing. But the only sounds were those of a breeze in scrubby oaks, of water chuckling in one small stream.

She moved higher and higher. Sometimes she looked back across the hills where the wadi lay, to the plain beyond, a distance frosted with haze. The al Muburak might profit from such a view.

Night fell. She made a fireless camp. She drank water, ate smoked meat, turned in as the stars came out.

She wakened once, frightened, but her stone betrayed no danger. The mountains remained still, though the wind made an unfamiliar southing through nearby pines. She counted more than a dozen meteors before drifting off.

Her dreams were vivid. In one her father told Al Jahez he was sure she had reached Wadi al Hamamah safely.

The mountains continued their rise. She rested more often. Come midday she entered terrain scoured by fire. That stark, black expanse was an alien landscape.

The trees changed. Oaks became scarcer, pines more numerous. The mountains became like nothing in her experience. Great looms of rock thrust out of their hips, the layering on end instead of horizontal. Even where soil and grass covered them she could discern the striations. Distant mountainsides looked zebra-striped in the right light.

Higher still. The oaks vanished. And then, in the bottom of one canyon, she encountered trees so huge a half dozen men could not have joined hands around their trunks. Narriman felt insignificant in their shadows.

She spent her fourth day riding up that canyon. Evening came early. She almost missed the landmarks warning her she was

approaching the first guardian. She considered the failing light. This was no time to hurry. She retreated and camped.

Something wakened her. She listened, sniffed, realized the alarming agent was no external. She had dreamed that she should circle the watchpost.

"Come, Faithful," she whispered. She wrapped the reins in her hand and led away.

She knew exactly where to go, and still it was bad. That mountainside was not meant for climbing.

The brush was dense and the slope was steep. She advanced a few yards and listened.

The brush gave way to a barren area. The soil was loose and dry. She slipped several times. Then her mare went down, screaming and sliding. She held on stubbornly.

The slide ended. "Easy, girl. Easy. Stay still."

A glow appeared below. She was surprised. She had climbed higher than she had thought. The glow

drifted along the canyon.

"I can't fail now. Not at the first hurdle."

Her heart hammered. She felt like screaming against clumsiness, stupidity, and the whim of fate. The glow drifted down the canyon, climbed the far slope, came back. It crossed to Narriman's side and went down again. It repeated the patrol but never climbed far from the canyon floor. It never came close enough to make her amulet glow. It finally gave up. But Narriman did not trust it because it had disappeared. She waited fifteen minutes.

The sky was lightening before she felt comfortably past. She was exhausted. "Good girl, Faithful. Let's camp."

XIII

A horse's whinny wakened her. She darted to Faithful, clamped her hands over the mare's nostrils. The sound of hooves on brookside stone came nearer. The amulet became a lump of ice. She saw flickers of black rider through the trees.

This one was stockier than her shagun.

Her shagun? Had he touched her that deeply? She looked inward, seeking the hatred of rider and love of son that had brought her to the Jebal. And it was there, the hatred untarnished by any positive feeling.

Then the rider was gone, headed down the canyon. Was he going to the guardian?

She had no dream memories of the canyon above the guardian. Why not? Couldn't Karkur reach into the realm of the Masters?

The uncertainty became too much. She dismounted and walked. No need to rush into trouble.

Minutes later she heard a rhythmic thumping ahead. Something rumbled and crashed and sent echoes tumbling down the canyon. She advanced more carefully, sliding from cover to cover.

She did not know where they came from. Suddenly, they were there, across the brook. They walked like men but were shaggy and dark and tall. There were four of them. The biggest growled.

"Damn!" She strung her bow as one giant bellowed and charged.

Her arrow split its breastbone. It halted, plucked at the dart. The others boomed and rushed. She sped two quick arrows, missed once, then drew her saber and scampered toward a boulder. If she got on top. . . .

Neither wounded monster went down. Both went for the mare. The others came for her.

Faithful tried to run, stumbled, screamed. The beasts piled on her.

Narriman drew her razor-edged blade across a wide belly. The brute stumbled a few steps, looked down at its wound, began tucking entrails back inside.

Narriman glanced at the mare as she dodged the other beast. The wounded creatures were pounding her with huge stones.

A fist slammed into Narriman's side. She staggered, gasped. Her attacker bellowed and closed in. She tried to raise her saber. It slipped from her hand. She hadn't the strength to grip it.

The thing shook her half senseless. Then it sniffed her and grunted.

It was something out of nightmare. The thing settled with Narriman in its lap, pawed between her thighs. She felt its sex swell against her back.

Was the whole Jebal rape-crazy? "Karkur!"

The thing ripped her clothing. Another grunted and tried to touch. The beast holding Narriman swung at it.

She was free for an instant. She scrambled away. The beast roared and dove after her.

She closed her hands on her amulet. "Karkur, give me the strength to survive this."

The beast snorted weirdly, uttered an odd shriek that tortured the canyon walls. It stumbled away, enveloped by an amber light laced with bloody threads.

Another beast came for her. Its cries joined those of the other.

Narriman scrambled after her saber. The last beast, with an arrow in its chest, watched her with glazed eyes, backed away. She arranged her clothing, ran to Faithful.

"Poor Faithful." What would she do now? How would she escape the Jebal without a horse for Misr? The beasts in amber kept screaming. The Great Death was a hard death. It twisted their muscles till bones broke.

The screaming finally stopped.

She heard distant voices.

Hurriedly, she made a pack of her possessions, then climbed the canyon wall. She found an outcrop from which she could watch the mess she had fled.

Those things! She recalled their size and smell and was sick.

The investigators were ordinary men armed with tools. They became excited and cautious when they found the beasts. Narriman heard the word shaghun several times. "Keep thinking that," she murmured. "Don't get the idea there's a stranger in the Jebal." Her shakes faded. She offered thanks to Karkur and started across the mountainside. What were those beasts? Those men feared them. She moved with saber in hand. The investigators had come from a lumbering camp. She watched men drag a log up a road, toward the head of the canyon. Why? She shrugged. The Masters must want it done. She took to that road once she passed the camp. That afternoon she heard hoofbeats. She slipped into the underbrush. "Oh, damn!" The horseman carried two of her arrows and Faithful's saddle. She strung her bow, jumped into the road, shouted, "Hey! Wait a minute!" The rider reined in, looked back. She waved. He turned. Her arrow flew true. He sagged backward. His horse surged forward. Narriman caught it as it passed. She dragged the body into the brush, mounted up wondering how soon he would be missed. The canyon walls closed in. The brook faded away. She reached the summit. The road wound downhill, toward a far haze of smoke. There were a lot of hearthfires down there.

XIV

She traveled for two days. The only people she saw were men working logs down the road. She avoided them. She topped a piney ridge the second evening and saw a city. Thoughts of Misr nagged her. Should she go down now? She was ahead of news from the logging camp. But he might not be there. And she was tired. She was incapable of acting efficiently in a desperate situation. Her judgment might be clouded, too. She settled down off the road. She would have loved a fire. The mountain nights were chilly. Gnawing dried meat, she grumbled, "I'd sell my soul for a decent meal." Sleep brought dreams. They showed her the town, including a place where children were kept. She also saw a place where shaghuns lived, and beyond the city a tower that was an emptiness fraught with dark promise. She wakened knowing exactly what to do. Come nightfall she would slip into the city, break into the nursery, and take Misr. Then she would flee, set an ambush down the trail and hope her shaghun was the one who came. Her plan died immediately. Her mount had broken its tether. Its trail led toward the city. What would they think? Would they investigate? Of course. She'd best move elsewhere. She trudged southward, circling the city. Time and again she went out of her way to avoid farmsteads. By nightfall she was exhausted again. It had to be tonight, though. There was no more time. What would she do for a mount? Her hope of escape hinged on her being able to lead the pursuit to ground of her own choosing. She settled down near the city's edge. "Karkur, wake me when it's time." It was a dark night. There was no moon. Clouds obscured half the stars. Narriman arose shaking. Her nerves got no better for a long time. The streets were strange for a girl who'd never walked pavement. Her bootheels kept clicking. Echoes came back off the walls. "Too quiet," she muttered. "Where are the dogs?" Not a howl went up. Not one dog came to investigate. Her nerves only tautened. She began to imagine something watching her, the town as a box trap waiting for her to trip its trigger. She dried her hands on her hips repeatedly. The moths in her stomach refused to lie still. She kept looking over her shoulder. She gave the place of the shaghuns a wide berth, closed in on the nursery. Why were the youngsters segregated? Was it a place for children like Misr? The city made no sense. She didn't try to make it do so. The only warning was a rustle of fabric. Narriman whirled, saber spearing out. It was an automatic move, made without thought. She found herself face to face with a mortally wounded shaghun. He raised a gloved hand as he sank toward the pavement. His fingers wobbled. Sorcery! She hacked the offending hand, came back with a neck stroke. She cut him again and again, venting nervous energy and fear. "What do I do with him?" she wondered. She examined him. He was no older than she. She felt a touch of remorse. She glanced around. The street remained quiet. A convenient alleyway lay just a few steps beyond the body.

She wondered what he had been doing. Her dreams had suggested that no one wandered the streets after dark, save a night watchman with a special dispensation. Had the horse alerted them? Were there more shaghuns to be faced? Her stomach cramped. Maybe her father and Al Jahez were right. Maybe a woman couldn't do this sort of thing. "And maybe men feel as ragged as I do," she muttered. She dropped the body into shadow. "Give me an hour, Karkur." She went on to the nursery. Anticipation partially overcame her reaction to the killing. She tried a door. It was barred from within. A second door proved as impenetrable. There was a third on the far side, but she assumed it would be sealed too. Above, barely visible, were second-story windows, some with open shutters. If she could. . . . She spun into shadow and balled up, blade ready. A shape loomed out of the night, headed her way. Shaghun! Were they all on patrol? He passed just ten feet away. Narriman held her breath. What were they doing? Looking for her? Or was her fear wholly egotistical? There was a six-foot-wide breezeway between the nursery and building to its left. A stairway climbed the neighbor. A landing hung opposite a nursery window. Narriman secreted her possessions beneath the stair and crept upward. The stair creaked. She scarcely noticed. She could think of nothing but Misr. The window was open. It was but a short step from the landing. She straddled the railing. Someone opened the door to which the stair led. Light flooded the landing. A fat man asked, "Here, you. What's?" Narriman slashed at him. He grabbed her blade. Off balance, she almost fell. She clung to the railing. It creaked. She jumped for the window. The fat man staggered, reached for her, ploughed through the railing. Narriman clung to the window's frame and looked down. The man lay twitching below. "Karkur, don't let him raise the alarm." The room before her was dark. A child mumbled something. Behind Narriman, a woman called a question. Narriman eased into the room. The child was not Misr. Someone shrieked. Narriman glanced outside. A woman stood on the landing, looking down. Narriman slipped into a hallway running past other bedrooms. Which one? Might as well start with the nearest. She found her son in the fifth she checked. He was sleeping peacefully. His face looked angelic. He seemed healthy. She threw herself on him, weeping, and remained lost within herself till she realized he was awake. "Mama! What're you doing here?" Misr hugged her with painful ferocity. He cried too. She was glad. Her most secret fear had been that he would have forgotten her. "I came to take you home." "Where's Granpa?" "Home. Waiting for us. Come on." "The man, Mama. The dark man. He won't let us." He started shaking. His body was hale, but they had done something to his mind. "He won't stop us, Misr. I won't let him. Get dressed. Hurry." People were talking in the hall. Misr did as he was told. Slowly. Someone shoved through the doorway. "What's going on?" Narriman's saber pricked his throat. "Over there." "A woman? Who are you?" She pressed the sword's tip a quarter inch into his chest. "I'll ask. You answer." He shut up and moved. Small children watched from the doorway. "How many shaghuns in this town?" He looked strange. He did not want to answer. Narriman pricked him. "Four! But one went to the lumber camp three weeks ago. He hasn't come back. You're the boy's sister?" "Misr, will you hurry?" Four shaghuns. But one was out of town and another was dead. A third roamed the streets. Was hers the fourth? "You can't take the boy out of here, woman." She pricked him again. "You talk too much. Misr!" "He belongs to the Old Ones." Misr finished and looked at her expectantly. Now what? Go the way she had come? She stepped behind her prisoner and hit him with her pommel. He sagged. Misr's eyes got big. She dragged him toward the fall way. He told the others, "I'm going home with my mother." He sounded proud. She was amazed at how he had grown. He acted older, too. No time for that. "Come here." She tossed

him across to the landing, jumped, hurried him downstairs. She recovered her belongings. The fat man's woman howled all the while. "Shut up!" The woman retreated, whimpering. Narriman looked into the street. People were gathering. "Misr. This way." She retreated into the breezeway. "A horse," she muttered. "Where do I find a horse?" She was about to leave the breezeway when she heard someone running. "Get back, Misr. And be quiet." She crouched. The runner turned into the breezeway. Shaghun! He tried to stop. Narriman drove her blade into his chest. He staggered back. She struck again. This was the shaghun who had missed her earlier. She smiled grimly. Succeed or fail, they would remember her. "Come on, Misr." People were shouting to her right. She headed left, though that was not the direction she preferred. Misr ran beside her. She searched her dream memories for a stable. She did not find one. Hope of escape came out of a walking dream that hit like a fist, made her stumble. Karkur wanted her to go eastward. There was a road through the mountains. They would not expect her to flee that way. If she reached the seacoast she could go north and recross the mountains at Sebil el Selib, where the Masters held no sway. But this end of that road ran around the dread tower of her dreams. Who knew what the Masters would do? If their shaghuns were but shadows of themselves, how terrible might they be? She was afraid but she did not stop moving. Karkur had not failed her yet. And Karkur was right. It was the best way. She saw no one, and no one saw her. And the dark tower greeted her with an indifference she found almost disheartening. Was she that far beneath their notice? She had slain two of their shaghuns. "Keep walking, Misr. We're going to get tired, but we have to keep walking. Otherwise the dark men will catch us." His face puckered in determination. He stayed with her. The sun was high before she decided to rest.

XV

"Narriman!" The voice boomed through the forest, rang off the mountains. "Narriman!" There was an edge of anger to it, like hers when she was impatient with Misr. It was him. He had not been deceived. Misr snuggled closer. "Don't let him take me, Mama." "I won't," she promised, disentangling herself. "I won't." She gave Misr some dried meat. "Eat this. I'll be back in a little while." "Don't go away, Mama." "I have to. You stay put. Just remember what happened last time you didn't do what I said." Damn! That was unfair. He would think the whole thing was his fault. She spat, strung her bow, selected three good arrows, made sure her weapons were ready. Then she went to hunt. "Narriman!" He was closer. Why act as if he couldn't find her? Karkur, of course. That old lump did not dare smash things up in the Jebal. He would not want his hand seen. But he could confuse his enemies. Brush crackled. Narriman froze. He was close. She sank into a patch of shade, arrow on bowstring. "Narriman!" His voice boomed. More softly, he talked to himself. "Damned crazy woman. I'll use her hide to bind books." His anger was hard but controlled. Fear wriggled through Narriman's hatred. Memories flashed. His ride down Wadi al Hamamah. Her rape. The day he had come for Misr. Her knees weakened. He was a shaghun. He had conquered her easily. She was a fool to challenge him. Brush crackled ever closer. She saw something white moving among the trees. His horse. That was him. Coming right to her. There he was. Black rider. Nightmare lover. Misr's father. She pictured Mowfik and Al Jahez. "You!" she breathed. "For what you did to my father." A twig snapped as she drew her bow. The horse's head snapped up, ears pricking. Her arrow slammed into its throat. It should have struck the shaghun's heart. The animal kept rising into a screaming rear, hooves pounding air. The rider went over backward. Narriman heard his breath explode when he hit ground. Up she sprang. She let fly again. Her shaft passed through his djellaba as he rolled, pinned him for a second. In that second Narriman loosed her last arrow. It glanced off his hip bone, leaving a bloody gash across his right buttock. He stumbled a step, fell, regained his feet with a groan. Narriman drew her saber, stalked forward. Her mind boiled with all she wanted to say before she killed him.

He regained control, drew his own blade. A strained smile crossed his lips. Narriman moved in carefully. I'll attack to his right, she thought. Make him put more strain on his wound. He's battered and bleeding. He'll be slow. I can wear him down. "Little Fox. Little fool. Why did you come here? Outsiders don't come to the Jebal. Not and leave again."

There'll be a first, then, she thought. But she did not speak. Things she wanted to say rattled through her mind, but not one reached her lips. Her approach was as silent and implacable as his preceding her rapes.

She threw three hard, quick strokes. He turned them, but looked disturbed. She was not supposed to do this, was she? She was supposed to fall under his spell.

"Narriman! Look at me!"

She was caught by the command. She met his eye. The fire ran through her. She ached for him. And to her surprise, she ignored it. She struck while his guard was loose, opened a gash on his cheek.

He went pale. His eyes grew larger. He could not believe it. She struck again. He blocked her, thrust back, nearly reached her. He knew she was not dealing with a little girl anymore.

He beat her back, then retreated. A weird keening came from him, though his lips did not move. Leaves stirred. A cold wind rose. The tip of Narriman's saber drooped like a candle in the sun. She shifted it to her left hand, pulled her dagger and threw it. Mowfik had taught her that. The dagger struck the shaghun in the left shoulder, spun him. The cold wind died. Narriman moved in with her odd-looking saber. Fear filled the shaghun's eyes.

He plucked the dagger from his wound and made those sounds again. His wounds began to close. Surprise had been Narriman's best weapon. Fate had stolen that. She feared she had more than she could handle now.

She launched a furious attack. He retreated, stumbled, fell. She cut him several times before he rose.

But he had his confidence back. She could not kill him. He smiled. Arrow, saber, and dagger. She had exhausted her options. She did have poison. Would he step up and take it? She had a garrotte given her by one of Al Jahez's men, half a love offering and half a well-wish. But would he hold still while she used it? Brush crackled. She whirled. "Misr! I told you. . . ."

The shaghun smashed into her, knocked her saber away. His fingers closed around her chin and forced her to turn toward him.

XVI

Lost! she wailed inside. She should have listened to Al Jahez and Mowfik. The fire was in her again, and she could not stop him. He stripped her slowly, taking pleasure in her humiliation. He pressed her down on the stones and pine needles and stood over her, smiling. He disrobed slowly. And Misr stood there watching, too terrified to move.

Tears streaming, Narriman forced her eyes shut. She had been so close! One broken twig short. She felt him lower himself, felt him probe, felt him enter. Felt herself respond. Damn, she hated him!

She found enough hatred to shove against his chest. But only for an instant. Then he was down upon her again, forcing her hands back against her breasts. "Karkur," she wept.

The shaghun moaned softly, stopped bucking. His body stiffened. He pulled away. The spell binding Narriman diminished.

"The Great Death!" she breathed.

It had him, but he was fighting it, Amber wriggled over him, flickering. There were few bloody veins in it. His mouth was open as though to scream, but he was gurgling a form of his earlier keening.

Narriman could not watch.

It did not occur to her that a mere shaghun, even a shaghun of the jebal, could overcome Karkur's Great Death. He was but stalling the inevitable. She crawled to her discarded clothing.

Misr said something. She could not look at him. Her shame was too great.

"Mama. Do something."

She finally looked. Misr pointed.

The shaghun's face was twisted. The muscles of his left arm were knotted. The bone was broken. But there was just one patch of amber left, flickering toward extinction.

He had bested the Great Death!

A silent wail of fear filled her. There was no stopping him! Raging at the injustice, she seized a dead limb and clubbed him.

Misr grabbed a stick and started swinging too.

"Misr. Stop that."

"Mama, he hurt you."

"You stop. I can do it but you can't." Did that make sense? How could she explain? He's your father, Misr? I can murder him but you can't? No. Some things could not be explained. "Get away." She swung again. The shaghun tried to block with his injured arm. He failed. The impact sent him sprawling. The Great Death crept over him. She hit him again.

He looked at her with the eyes of the damned. He did not beg, but he did not want to die. He stared. There was no enchantment in his eyes. They contained nothing but fear, despair, and, maybe, regret. He was no shaghun now. He was just a man dying before his time.

The club slipped from her fingers. She turned back, collected her clothes. "Misr, let's get our things." For no reason she could appreciate, she recalled Al Jahez's words about severed heads. She collected the shaghun's sword, considered momentarily, then gave him the mercy he had denied her.

"You killed him, Mama. You really killed him." Misr was delighted.

"Shut up!"

She could have closed her eyes to his screams, but his dying face would have haunted her forever. It might anyway.

When all else was stripped away, he had been a man. And once a mother had wept for him while a dark rider had carried him toward the rising sun.